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JONATHON PORRITT: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am delighted to join your deliberations this morning in amongst your plenitude of politicians, all of whom have been telling you how much they care about farmers and farming and land use -- which must come as a bit of a surprise to some of you but extraordinarily welcome [laughter] -- and indeed lay contributions to some of the key policy debates that we are facing today. That is where I have been invited to go this morning in terms of my 20-25 minutes. I do not want to apologise for this but I hope my approach to this, which will be predominantly a global approach, will still be useful to all of you here today in the UK.

Coming up on the train this morning, reading my Guardian -- I just want to confirm the stereotype -- you will see in the press an article about an agreement that has just been struck between the iron ore producers of Brazil and five of the very large steel companies all around the world agreeing on a 65 per cent increase in the costs of iron ore for the next two years -- 65 per cent increase, What has that got to the centenary conference of the NFU? Everything, because you will not be surprised to know that the principal driver behind that massive increase, which of course will feed into every bit of our economy because steel touches every bit of our lives, is the increased demand in China and increased demand elsewhere in India and South East Asia, many of you will already have seen that manifested in terms of increases in wheat prices and other commodity prices around the world today.

In October 2007 wheat prices in the US hit \$9 a bushel, precisely twice where they were in October 2006, and since October 2007 those prices have gone even higher, We must anticipate substantial increases in the price of most globally traded food commodities over the course of the next few years.

Basically that is good news for a large number of farmers, particularly those farmers involved in the production of arable commodities because those markets look extremely buoyant for the indefinite future. I do not believe this is a temporary spike in prices which will somehow come back down to a more normal level, simply because of the increase in world population, the increase in demand, the increase in spend. There are 250 million middle class consumers in China now and that figure increases year on year.

All of these things mean, as I think Peter said in his speech yesterday, boom times for some farmers but not, of course, all because these benefits are not evenly distributed. That is leading, I am happy to say, to a growing awareness of, and focus on, the concept of food security. I was reflecting on this and thinking to myself if the NFU had been 100 years old five years ago in 2003 there would not be a single mention of the concept of food security, not one. I am told on good evidence, obviously relying on the theme of my talk here, that the Prime Minister referred to food security at least twice in his speech last night.

This is almost unprecedented. When the amazing John Gossop brought out his book headed Famine in the West -- nothing like getting a good arresting title -- in 2006, most of the cognoscenti in the policy-making community were only too keen to dismiss it as the arrant

drivel of someone who does not understand the realities of global food trade today. If you have not read it, do; it is interesting. It goes a little further than I am going to go in my talk but nonetheless the fact we are beginning to focus very hard indeed on food security is important. I am delighted.

My blog on food security only came out three days ago and the Prime Minister puts it in his speech last night. That has to be a hit for the Sustainable Development Commission. Increased food demand and increased food production are only one of the factors that touch on the lives of food producers in the world today. I do not want to understate this because I believe we are entering into an unprecedentedly difficult, extraordinary decade.

I will come on to climate change in a moment but obviously one of the most important conclusions that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change invites you think about, invites the world to understand, is that we do not have generations to put in place the foundations of a low carbon economy. Indeed, they tell us we have at the most ten to 15 years. I honestly do not know how many people in government today, in the farming community today, have internalised the reality of what that transition to a low carbon economy, and a low carbon food economy, really looks like.

I mentioned the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an extraordinary scientific initiative, an utterly unique science process and wholly appropriate that it should have won half of the Nobel Peace Prize last year with Al Gore, equally appropriately in my opinion, taking the other half. I mention that because without the science that the IPCC has brought forward there would be many people today who would still be using uncertainty about some of the science around climate change as an excuse for procrastination, for delay, for failing to introduce the policies that are now so desperately needed.

I am glad to hear from Jeff Rooker that Defra is still very focused on ensuring that the research base for UK farming is secure. There are many in this audience, and many who care about the future of farming in the UK, who do not feel quite so confident about that level of funding in R&D. When I look at the implications of what low carbon farming really means we need to see that research budget massively ramped up. There are some who still believe we have all sorts of get out of the carbon goal free card available to us. Many of those are unapologetically proponents of an increased move towards GM farming. Indeed, there are many who think that GM is the answer to practically all of our problems.

I do want briefly to explore this as someone who can, I think, happily be described as a GM sceptic -- not a GM fundamentalist but a GM sceptic -- someone who believes it is appropriate for there to be more research, and more transparently shared research, into the potential benefits that GM might bring the world as we enter into this incredibly difficult decade. I say might. I think GM might have a role to play in terms of addressing some of these big challenges, might be able to support the world around issues like drought resistance or increased CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration or improved productivity in biomass for biofuel production.

For me personally at the moment the evidence is not very convincing on any of those scores but I am delighted that the research is going on. I welcome that and I think it is really important that it should continue to go on. I do at the moment despair at the quality of debate around the issue of GM. I despair of the GM fundamentalists on both sides of this debate. I despair of those who choose not to take a scientific line at all around GM but default

effortlessly and very happily to a moral position in which GM is characterised as 'inherently wicked'; a deeply unhelpful and foolish approach to take.

I despair also at the GM evangelists who believe that this is the single most important thing that the world should be doing to answer these combined problems in climate change, water use, soil use and so on. These evangelists -- and I use the word deliberately because they are seeking salvation, there is a religious intensity to their arguments -- in my opinion do far more damage to the GM cause than the anti-GM lobby has ever done.

Unfortunately even Chief Scientists have been known to forego their scientific credentials in espousing this form of GM religious extremism. I noticed in Sir David King's farewell speech to the world at the end of last year -- Peter Kendall, your President, commented on it -- that David King was "at last bringing common sense to the issue." Possibly. It is also true to say that he bought an amazing load of rubbish to the issue, including really extraordinary claims that the UK economy and UK farmers had suffered the loss of billions of pounds, this a quote, as a consequence of our lack of enthusiasm for biotech and GM in particular. As you know, that claim had to be subsequently withdrawn.

This is a serious thing when this country's Chief Scientist departs from the terrain of good science and enters into that kind of strident evangelical advocacy. Mind you, Peter may, of course, have been particularly well disposed to our former Chief Scientist on that day because he also simultaneously advocated that badgers the world over should be eradicated and did soon the equally unscientific contribution that he approached GM. [Dissent] I heard how you treated Hilary!

The purpose of my comments, and perhaps rather pointed maybe too personal comments, about that, is we are completely dependent on absolutely authoritative science in this area. I also said on transparent science. Far too much of the research that goes on around GM is deemed to be commercially confidential. It is held in the hands of the companies that obviously will benefit most from the widespread adoption and roll out of those crops. That is why the government has to be far more involved in the scrutiny of and research into the potential benefits of GM. On this and on other issues, on biofuels for instance, above all we need modestly. We do not want over-claiming of the kind that we have heard for certain finds of biofuels. Look at the backlash that has kicked in as a consequence of some of those excessively enthusiastic claims made by people and politicians who had not thought through the full sustainability implications of this huge potential strategic shift in land use for the world today.

We need to avoid false polarities: GM wonderful, organic awful; organic wonderful, GM awful. We live in a world where we are going to be embracing every potential solution that we possibly can. Interestingly this was the line taken recently by the Food and Agriculture Organisation in its new paper on the benefits of organic farming. I never thought I would live to see that paper I have to admit, We are really waking up to a very different reality. The biggest driver of that alternative approach is undoubtedly climate change. The fourth assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel is an extraordinary document. In it, it touches in great detail on the potential impacts of climate change around the world on agricultural productivity, particularly in Africa but also in China and India.

What is making China a far more constructive partner in the global debate about climate change today is not really the same kind of concerns that we have, but their growing awareness of the impact of climate change on China, and in particular on agricultural

productivity in China. The research, part-funded by DfID but taken forward by the Chinese government itself, has indicated a potential reduction in agricultural productivity of around 35 per cent between now and 2040. For the world, that one statistic is devastating.

If you then extrapolate out from that, in terms of impacts on India, Africa and elsewhere, you do begin to see a truly grim scenario opening up in front of you. I will not run through the whole climate change argument all over again; happily enough we do not have time for that. Equally, of course, you are probably reassured by the fact that our politicians now across all political parties here in the UK and across the world have become extraordinarily adept at saying the right things about climate change, about flagging the significance of this as an issue in our lives.

I am astonished by the linguistic virtuosity they bring to bear on that form of public discourse. I am equally astonished at their continuing refusal to internalise the reality of what those words really mean. They do not mean a few short-term extempore tweaks to the system; they mean a radical reconceptualisation of what wealth creation means in the world today. Add into that mix what I call the end of the area of cheap oil -- I prefer that to the much more populist notion of peak oil which is always a rather dodgy concept personally -- but the indisputable end of the area of cheap oil, as recognised now even by the oil companies themselves, and you can see just how difficult and dangerous a period we are heading into.

When the Sustainable Development Commission published its report last year on the impact of oil at \$100 a barrel some people thought we were already being mischievous. I realise now we should really have based that research on the impact of oil at \$200 a barrel on farming systems around the world. Many of the conventional insights that you will have into farming as a global trade system will, in my opinion, need to be revolutionised in the light of expensive oil and fossil fuels.

Let me bring all that together. You probably feel I am standing here as the usual Jeremiah in front of you: population growth, the rise of China and India, an end to the era of cheap oil, climate change, water shortages, continuing soil degradation at an astonishing level all around the world, an issue that far too few people choose to focus on, diminishing response to fertiliser use, competition for land all over the world.

Many people describe this as a perfect storm converging on rich and poor alike not in the lives of your children and your grandchildren -- which is the comfortable escape route that many of us choose to follow -- but in our lives. Should we panic? Should we just say, as Jim Lovelock and fellow scientists do, that it is already too late? Not in my book, no.

We should absolutely not panic. Indeed, there are four things very briefly we have to do. Firstly, we have to read these signals for what they tell us. Do not go on ignoring them, do not go on underestimating them; see them for what they are.

I have just finished reading this wonderful book by Lester Brown called Plan B, Version 3, I only mention this because Stuart Rose is coming along this afternoon to talk about Plan A [laughter]. He will tell you that M&S is pursuing Plan A because there is no Plan B. Lester Brown, as some of you know, is the man who first flagged the implications of China not being able to feed itself 20 years ago in a way that has substantially come true at that time, even though he was dismissed at the time as a scaremonger. This is an astonishing book full of the facts you need to know but full of the solutions that we can all embrace.

Secondly, avoid the evangelists -- I hope I have not come across as one today, maybe some of you think I have. Thirdly, re-centre food production at the heart of all land use strategies. Is it not amazing that only ten years ago people were sitting around questioning whether or not food production had anything to do with sustainable land use strategies for the UK, Europe and the world. What world were those people living in, I ask myself, including some of my close colleagues in the environment movement.

Lastly, get very good at climate change. Take the advice that is there. Work with those people who are already offering extraordinarily good advice into the sector. This little document, Part of the Solution, brought forward by the CLA, the NFU and AIC, is a very helpful way of approaching these issues. Forum for the Future is a partnership with the CLA and the NFU, bringing forward practical solutions for farmers about climate friendly farming systems. We are not short of advice. We are increasingly enriched by high quality research and knowledge. If we get good at this, the future for the UK and for its farmers could actually be an extraordinarily good one. Thank you.

[Applause]