

Shropshire-based dairy farmer and award-winning columnist Roger Evans shares his views on why farm-gate milk prices are still at least 2ppl below where they should be and weighs up the odds of skylark and dairy farmer survival.

Divide and rule

Time alone on a tractor puts me in a reflective mood. Today I'm rolling some winter wheat. I don't normally roll this crop in the spring but the frosts have lifted the soil. The tractor, as you all know, provides something of a mobile hide, enabling you to watch nature at work. As far as I can tell there are five pairs of skylarks in this field.

I write about things like this in another newspaper, sharing what I see from the tractor with a more urban audience. There are also five pairs of crows in this crop, busily scouring the ground looking for food. What are the chances of rearing a decent family of skylarks with 10 of them about? There's also a pair of buzzards sitting on the fence posts, ready to pounce if the crows should find a big prize.

Inside the tractor the radio talks of nothing but the next election. I suppose I shouldn't talk about politics here, but at the moment there's no escaping it. There was a general election in the year I first came to live here. Back then the politics in this area were very 'blue'.

What I would like doesn't come under the heading of politics. What I would really like is more money for my milk but politicians have been telling me for years that 'it's up to the market'.

So I look at the market and I discover it's gone up. In the autumn the market for powder and butter started to improve and prices have increased to the extent that 2ppl could be added to farmers' milk cheques. Prices continue to firm in Europe, to the extent that by the time you read this my 2ppl could be off the pace. So, if it's up to the market and the market has improved, where's the money gone?

Look no further than the milk price league tables. They tell you the whole story. The columns on the right tell you the farm-gate prices. You get 0.5ppl more than me and he gets 0.5ppl more than you, so that's all right then. I know for a fact that a lot of farmers don't actually receive the prices that appear there in the league table, because there's a bit of creativity in some milk contracts – why else would they be six or seven pages long?

But what we are looking for is the missing 2ppl and that's in the left-hand column. That's where the names of the milk buyers are. They've had the 2ppl. And the reason they have had it? The clue is in the length of the column – there are so many of them. Each has its supplying farmers and they've divided them up. Divide and rule is alive and well and bringing dairy farming to its knees. What will it take for dairy farmers to work together? Obviously not 2ppl.

As I turn at the headland and go back across the field I'm looking into Wales. Under funded on a per-capita basis, the Welsh have free prescriptions, better roads and better schools. They also have a politician who should be appointed as the agriculture minister for the whole of the UK. She'd easily win the election if it were up to farmers. She's the only politician that's had the guts to do something about TB.

This tractor has what the manufacturers' call an 'air seat', but the compressor doesn't work. All the bumps are absorbed by the cartilage in my spine. I'll be six inches shorter when I get off.

