



MARK CARWARDINE WILD THOUGHTS

Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg must have been living on Mars for the past 30 years. Speaking about badgers and bovine TB to farmers in the South-west recently, he said, “I think now the time has come that, irrespective of what scientists say, irrespective of what ministers say, in this part of the country, let’s at least try out a pilot cull.”

Conservative leader David Cameron, visiting the Royal Bath and West Show, then entered the fray by confirming that he, too, would sanction a badger cull.

Whatever the farmers might have told them during their day trips to the countryside, the two leaders seem oblivious to the staggering lack of progress on the long-standing dispute over badgers infecting cattle with bTB. After decades of errors, incompetence and cover-ups, we are nowhere nearer a practical solution.

I sympathise with farmers – they’ve lost 200,000 cattle in the past 11 years and must be utterly sick of the whole thing. But the rest of us are just as exasperated. The Government has killed more than 30,000 badgers and it’s made absolutely no long-term impact on the incidence of TB. In fact, the problem is now spiralling out of control.

Killing badgers (which are supposed to be protected) may be what farmers want to hear, but it doesn’t do anyone any favours in the long term. A more holistic approach is essential. Better and more frequent TB testing in cattle – especially before they are moved from one farm to another – has to be top priority. Vaccines for both badgers and cattle may also provide a long-term solution, though they won’t be available for several years.

The reason Clegg and Cameron are getting involved is simple: when the General Election takes place, they want farmers to allow them to put up placards in roadside fields all over the country. No badger cull means no placards.

As for Clegg’s determination to win farming votes and kill badgers “irrespective of what scientists say” – it leaves me speechless. How naïve can you possibly be?



Call for a cull: David Cameron says it’s a black and white issue.

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Watch Mark and Stephen Fry in *Last Chance to See* on BBC1 this autumn and read all about it in *BBC Wildlife Magazine*.