

A sense of public duty

Very early the other morning I took my dog, in the bracing April air, for a stroll around the market town where I live. Alarming, the fresh air was soon tainted by the smell of gas, which both dog and I found choking – a serious leak lay somewhere under our feet.

Returning home I looked up the emergency GAS number in the phonebook, dialled in and reported the problem. I was quizzed at length about where the escaping gas was coming from, had to give my full contact details and was read endless disclaimers about not switching on switches or lighting naked lights. No thanks for calling, no bunch of flowers or box of chocolates for my trouble, no discount on my gas bill...

And that is how it should be. I was merely being a good citizen, doing my public duty, though a thank-you would have been appreciated.

What a contrast then to the “public duty” of Bernard Matthews in culling his sick, dying and other turkeys in the Suffolk H5N1 avian flu outbreak of last February. This was a public duty for which the “Turkey Twizzler” received nearly £600,000 of taxpayers’ money - clearing up a mess of his own making.

The rationale for the payout – from both the company and Defra – is that such money “is provided under the Animal Health Act 1981 to encourage early reporting of bird flu, to minimise the spread of the disease”. The officials add – “If the disease is allowed to spread it would cost taxpayers much more”.

So there you have it, one man’s selfless public duty set against another man’s implied threat that if there’s no cash on the table there can be no promise of “doing the right thing”.

Beware though, the big issue with the Bernard Matthews case is not just the outrageous waste of public money. The UK Government currently has an agenda of pushing through cost-sharing for future serious livestock disease outbreaks here. It wants farmers to self insure.

When Jack Straw stands up in the House of Commons and voices his disquiet at this Suffolk payout, all reasonable folk would agree. But very soon this case will be used to whip up public and political support for slashing payments to all farmers.

Animal health policy deserves a greater level of thought and finesse than that. As we know from the tragedy of FMD in 2001, real victims of livestock epidemics deserve the full support of Government and of society.

Richard Sanders