

FAMILY FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

A FARMING MANIFESTO

SUMMARY

People need the countryside **and** food. Without food we die. A diverse and well farmed countryside makes life worth living.

The best way to care for the countryside is to farm it, i.e. to use it to produce food and other useful products of the soil, such as timber, wool and flowers among other things.

We can buy food from other countries, but how secure – or healthy – is that food? At the moment we can buy foreign food easily, but most of that food is not produced to our standards.

The cost of producing food in Britain is high. British farmers are regulated by many environmental and welfare rules which are not applied in the countries seeking to sell us cheap food. We also have to pay fair wages. Any cheap food coming from the third world can only be produced with social and environmental costs that should make us ashamed.

These factors make our farmers hopelessly uncompetitive with those in many other countries. If food production – and thus care for the countryside – is to survive in Britain, either cheap imported food must be limited, or some form of support must be given to our farmers to enable them to make a living from producing food.

If farmers cannot sell the food they produce for a profit, many will just give up and much of the country will become a wilderness. Others will try to produce food in an intensive, industrialised way hoping thus to compete with imported food by producing large quantities at minimum cost and minimum wages. But this will leave no margin for caring for the countryside

BACKGROUND

We have been encouraged to write this paper by the reaction of the participants at the conference we held at Westminster on February 1st. Many of those present seemed to share our thoughts on the farming situation. Most of the official policy quoted in this paper is taken from the combined Treasury and Defra “Vision for the Common Agriculture Policy” (December, 2005). The “vision” was that we should be “internationally competitive without reliance on subsidy or protection.” We in this Association have long held that to be competitive (i.e. to produce food cheaply?) conflicts with all the desirable aspects of farming.

The Defra Parliamentary Committee recently made a study of Defra’s “vision”. For this they invited comments from many individuals and organisations. On examining both the representations sent in and the Committee’s conclusions we were surprised to find that most of the individual and organisational comments were to our way of thinking. But the committee’s conclusion supported government thinking, indeed went beyond it.

The Committee chairman, Michael Jack MP, said in a press release “The only long term justification for future expenditure of taxpayers’ money in the agricultural sector is the provision of public benefits.” Fair enough, but he went on “Payments should represent

the most efficient means by which society can purchase the public “goods” – environmental, rural, social – it wishes to enjoy.” No mention of food! Does he mean that food is not merely inessential, it is not even enjoyable?

This is the absolute antithesis of the Family Farmers’ belief that producing food in a civilised way is an activity that must not be allowed to die. So we resolved to state our beliefs specifically.

ESSENTIAL TRUTHS

Farming can, and should, be one of the most worth while activities possible. Farmers produce something everyone needs. In an ideal world they are working in a healthy environment. Nurturing plants and animals is a most satisfying activity and can be very enjoyable. So there is no difficulty in finding people willing, indeed happy, to work at producing food.

The problem is: **how can the producers of food** – that essential product of labour – **be rewarded?** Rewarded that is in the face of apparently large supplies of food which other countries are keen to sell us more cheaply than we can produce it.

Until relatively recently the government assumed responsibility for organising food production in Britain. Older people remember well “dig for victory”. When the world was in turmoil during the last war it became very difficult to import food and many sailors risked, and some lost, their lives in the attempt. The food that was grown in Britain was absolutely vital to our survival and government did everything possible to encourage its growing, to the extent that some of those who were not willing to co-operate had their land confiscated.

Is the world really such a peaceful place now that we can guarantee there will never be any difficulty in obtaining as much food as we need from abroad? One contributor to the inquiry asked, “If the world is guaranteed to remain peaceful, why do we need Trident?” Climate change may well make supplies erratic, and also mean that we have to produce fuel, as well as food, as we used to produce hay and oats for our working horses.

It is estimated that UK self-sufficiency in indigenous crops, which was well over 80% 20 years ago has fallen to less than 70% now, and is still falling. We believe this steady reduction should be reversed; and that, government opinion notwithstanding, **food production should be encouraged in the UK.**

THE MANIFESTO

We deplore the way much farming has become a soulless activity.

Livestock, land and labour are often simply regarded as the means of providing raw materials for the “food industry”, which wants cheap raw materials in order to put food on the market at the lowest possible price. This pleases every one (but the farmers), as consumers then have plenty of money left to spend on other things.

The more cheaply food can be produced, the less important it becomes because it contributes such a small part of our total GDP. An anomaly if ever there was one!

This necessity to produce cheap food has made life a misery for many farmers. Because they receive so little money for their produce, they attempt to make up the resultant cash

deficit by producing greater quantities. This then becomes a vicious circle: because produce is plentiful, and mostly perishable, the growers are not able to insist on fair prices and traders gather it in at prices that leave minimum or no reward for the hard work of producing it.

Meanwhile a plethora of economists, experts and consultants are telling farmers how to produce more for less expenditure. Farmers are encouraged to acquire more land, more livestock, bigger machinery, more effective chemicals and generally intensify.

This can work fine for those who are both very clever and very determined. They need also to be naturally tough, optimistic, and not too scrupulous about their methods. Government then holds the successful ones up as examples of how everybody should farm. The number of bankruptcies, nervous breakdowns, and suicides among those who cannot stand the pace is not well publicised. It is extremely difficult to quantify the damage to the landscape. The suffering of the animals involved in this mass production has been noticed and the worst aspects have been made illegal in Britain, though not in all of Europe.

We call on the government to recognise what the cheap food policy is doing to Britain. It is destroying what was a good life for the country people who produced the nation's food. It is also destroying the landscape in large areas now reduced to boring monoculture, and it sometimes causes pollution and erosion problems. We now have to employ people to maintain the fabric of the countryside in the way farmers did naturally when they had leisure and incentive to take pride in their land. Managers employed to make profits for limited companies are not likely to be as interested in the social and ethical aspects of farming as farmers living on the farm, among the community where they may have been born.

Make no mistake, if industrial farming is not discouraged in some practical way, it will become the predominant system here, as it already is in some of the most highly developed parts of the world. (Unfortunately, it is also well established in some less sophisticated countries.) Once established, it becomes very hard to control, as the commercial, and sometimes multinational, interests involved are powerful and well versed in evading regulations intended to protect communities threatened by their activities.

All is not yet lost in Britain. Much of our land is still farmed in a humane and civilised way, although many farmers feel desperate about their lack of profitability. We must find some means of taking farming back to a way of business which takes pride in producing happiness as well as money. Happiness in the farmers producing excellent food and in those who eat it, and happiness in those who visit the countryside for spiritual refreshment and for the pure enjoyment of it.

Government must recognise that our farming needs either protection or direct financial support where it is in competition with the rest of the world. Without it, a large part of farming will die. If it is allowed to go the way of coal mining and ship building, the consequences will be severe on both our countryside and our food supply.

THE FAMILY FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

The Family Farmers' Association was started in 1979 (originally as the Small Farmers' Association), with the intention of alerting the public and the government to the fact that

small farms were disappearing fast. Although it was then possible to make a living from a small farm, most usually by dairying (40 cows being a good sized herd), it was almost impossible for young people to acquire a farm on which to start. As some farmers fell by the wayside or retired, many of the successful ones invested their profits into buying more land to enlarge their farms. They were in a strong position to outbid would be starters. Tenancies also tended to be awarded to established farmers.

Farming economics became increasingly complicated after Britain joined the EU and the CAP (Common Agriculture Policy) took control of us. Through the years FFA has campaigned for a fair deal for smaller/family farmers – those who live on their farms and do a lot of the work themselves. (Sometimes known as “muddy boots farmers”)

There has been incredibly little support or sympathy from Government. Indeed many farmers are convinced that the government positively wishes they would quietly disappear. But we do seem to have quite a lot of support and sympathy from the general public. Especially, of course, from those who live in the country and understand how important farmers are to the landscape and the community.

If you agree with us that ordinary, working farmers are important and need encouragement, please sign our Manifesto. If enough people do, the government might even notice. We need people to join us in discussions as to what measures we should advocate for helping people who farm in a civilised way on a human scale.

Will those who wish to endorse our Manifesto please sign here;

Printed name and address of person or organisation.

Position in organisation (if any) _____

I would like to come to a discussion meeting to debate useful measures we might advocate. Tick here _____

Please post to: Family Farmers’ Association For further information
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Comments?

We welcome new members. Your annual subscription of £25 will help to fund our activities, as we have no sponsors. We also have no obligations to anyone but the farming community and the British countryside. Please tick here ____ if you would like an enrolment form and send this page to the address on the previous page, filling in the form given there.