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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Food production and our rural environment – The way ahead

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9

R Grove-White

PRESERVATION INTERESTS

It seems more sensible to speak of 'conservation' than of 'preservation'. We all want a healthy, working countryside, but it is important also to maintain and safeguard countryside values in addition to food production.

In my view, opinion outside the farming community will exert an increasing influence on agricultural policy options. Much of this opinion is still at an early stage in finding coherent expression. The Options presented in papers 4, 5 and 6 (by Carter, Raymond and Hunter-Smith, respectively) need to be evaluated against this background.

Spedding (paper 1) is excessively sanguine in suggesting that there are no inherent conflicts between food production priorities and environmental concerns. The reality, that such conflicts do exist, needs to be acknowledged fully, before it can be treated appropriately. Not all the Options proposed stand up equally well to the implications of such an acknowledgement.

The range of non-food production influences likely to bear on agriculture in future will include: increasingly effective public (and public authority) concern about the cultural importance of landscapes and wildlife habitats; increasing animal welfare and recreational concerns; controversies about pollution side-effects of intensive production (pesticides, nitrates, soil erosion); pressures for more rural employment opportunities.

Carter's 'Intensive Systems' option (paper 4) does not reflect this adequately. It implies that the only significant factors in shaping land-holders' responses will properly be economic pressures and voluntary decisions by landholders themselves

to adopt conservation measures. That is less than the full picture. The other factors I have identified above will tend to constrain both agricultural production patterns and landholders' attitudes. Thus, while Carter's picture is apparently that of an economic 'realist', such realism provides a less than adequate guide to the future.

The Options by Raymond and Hunter-Smith (papers 5 and 6) imply greater modifications of both policy and thinking than Carter's. Moves towards lower input systems (Raymond) and a wider spread of farm sizes (Hunter-Smith) would sit better with a number of (though not all) the factors I have identified. The strength of these two Options in the foreseeable new circumstances is that they could build conservation criteria into farm planning on a more integrated basis than would the 'Intensive Systems' model.

Recent months have seen burgeoning political acknowledgement of the importance of non-food production interests in the countryside. The shifting pattern of public concern makes the present a difficult time for those who work the land, a problem which is compounded by the fact that agricultural policy makers have not yet understood the nature of the concerns well enough to be able to adjust the policy machine appropriately. Issues like the recent controversy over the new EEC Agricultural Structures Regulations, the House of Commons' review of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, the recent House of Lords' reports criticising MAFF's (and DOE's) performance on both conservation and Research and Development, etc, show how far there is to go.

The cultural significance of the countryside and activities in it will not recede. We should evaluate the three Options offered against that background.