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AGRICULTURAL POLICY CAN'T ACCOMMODATE ALL WHO WANT IN

by William P. Browne

THE RENEWABLE FARM BILL PROCESS HAS TAKEN ON ITS own four phase life cycle. During the first phase, the year following the bill's passage, policy participants alternately "interpret" the bill's dictates or tinker with its content. Then, gratefully, a one-year timeout occurs while we defer to other agricultural policy problems, perhaps still tinkering with the old bill. But, even during that brief recess, reflection and planning about future changes in the legislation goes on. Then, the third year and especially the fourth year become a swirl of data collection, analysis, program design, conferences, and strategy sessions, much of which is soon neglected or ignored in the name of political expe-

> It's true that agriculture has long had a need to win support through an expanded constituency. But there is too little room, too few dollars, and too many competing values for everyone to get what they want from agricultural policy. With few exceptions, the farm bill process has already been opened to about as many organized interests as it can logistically—and financially—afford.

diency. Finally, sometime during the fourth year, agriculture's collective attention turns to what might be loosely termed policy debate during this final stage. In reality, the debate is now about only one thing: how to amass enough political support for a winning majority coalition in Congress.

To a very great extent, the difficulties of putting a winning coalition together have become apparent to almost all agricultural interests, not just their representatives in Congress. While it is a plus that agriculture understands the need for compromise after turning a blind eye for years to the real policy needs of outsiders, there exists an unnerving downside to this "let's negotiate" mentality. Specifically, agriculture is in danger of worrying more about accommodating everyone than it is about the substance of eventual policy decisions. The reason why is relatively simple. Agriculture's policymakers, as much as possible, would rather satisfy every squeaking wheel rather than provoke controversy by rejecting inappropriate demands.

Away From The Beginning

As an agrarian nation, there was a time when agricultural and rural interests were largely indistinct from the public interest. Even as late as 1940, 23 percent of the U.S. population was on farms, 84 of 96 U.S. senators represented states with farm populations of at least 20 percent of their total citizenry, and over half of the U.S. Congress represented such farm districts. Loss of this

numerical advantage has been rapid, however, and farmers now make up only two percent of the total U.S. population. Only one House district may still have 20 percent of its population as farmers. As a consequence, as long as policymakers equate agriculture only with farmers, agriculture has next to no status as a swing vote in electoral contests. The extension of this logic is that production agriculture has an incredibly diminished capacity to elect likeminded members of Congress and send them to Washington.

Consequently, farming, apart from its aesthetic appeal to social values, has taken on economic rather than electoral importance. Policymakers increasingly think of farmers as only one of several links in the country's food and fiber system. And it is that system—rather than farmers themselves—that has real importance. The reasons are clear. By 1984, about 20 percent of U.S. jobs were involved with some facet of food and fiber production, distribution, or service. These workers and their industries contributed 18 percent of the gross national product. Seen from the perspective of practical politics, social values of the family farm aside, those people who remain in farming are acceptable only as long as they do their part to sustain the other components of the country's food and fiber system and its consumers.

Thinking About Alliances

Alliances are nothing new in policymaking. Different sectors of the agricultural system have long worked to maintain their relationships to secure government support. Beginning in the 1950s, however, new types of alliances emerged. Representatives of specific commodities met and compromised their policy demands to agree on specific provisions and price support levels for basic crops. Without such cooperation, the pursuit of self-interest by each commodity group most probably would have brought an impasse in farm bill legislation.

A benchmark year for accommodation of previously ignored interests was 1973, beginning a continuing escalation of what

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earlier would have been unthinkable farm bill provisions and tradeoffs. Since that time, Congress has put together winning urban-rural majorities, first with labor support and later with the backing of consumer groups. Farm state legislators traded votes on both the minimum wage bill and the Consumer Protection Agency. Food stamps, food aid, and consumer provisions have been included in farm bills on a recurring basis in order to communicate the message that the farm bill is more than a farmer's bill. In 1985, as agricultural policymakers found themselves under even more pressure to broaden the farm bill's appeal, con-

William P. Browne is Professor of Political Science, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan.

servation provisions served the same useful purpose.

All this has not been truly "bad" for agriculture, of course. It helped pass legislation that might not have otherwise survived and created the widespread impression of a broader social purpose for agriculture policy. In addition, specific farm policy objectives benefitted: food became more widely available, consumer confidence in food safety and supply was restored, and, in 1985, the burgeoning costs of the Food Security Act were contained somewhat through acreage reduction.

Sixteen years past the benchmark plan of 1973, as the deficit and a no-growth budget clouds the future with even more uncertainty, there are few in agriculture who have not learned the political and economic rewards from accommodating new interests and farming alliances with nonagriculturalists and even nontraditional agriculturists. Quite correctly, "coalition-building" and "outreach" have become buzz-words in the search for new constituents and support.

But too many talk as though an infinite number of interests can be accommodated in ever-expanding alliances. As planning for the 1990 Farm Bill begins to peak, policymakers are struggling with this politics of accommodation that now threatens to overload farm bill deliberations.

The list of possible provisions for the next farm bill is extensive and every item is taken seriously by their proponents. By way of example, congressional agriculturalists are reportedly troubled by several biotechnology issues that seem likely to become part of the 1990 or 1991 farm bill. Biotechnology, as a mechanism for boosting production, has become an issue for the dairy program. Yet from other perspectives, biotechnology is part of revenue and growth strategies for agricultural research institutions; and the potential for increased production makes it an issue to consider in terms of economic development, international trade, and an endless variety of other matters. Then, in another corner, with the "continued" decline of many rural communities, rural revitalization is finding new status as a farm bill related issue. Competitive agricultural research grants, the viability of extension, low-input agriculture, groundwater contamination, farm worker protection, expanded market loans, and international agricultural agreements also promise to be issues hard for Congress to ignore in 1990.

The most troublesome thing about these issues is that they'll soon be followed by more, and for every issue several different proponents will make policy claims.

A tediously long list of farm bill provisions already exists and will be nearly impossible to shorten; programs currently represented provide popular benefits to both long-term and more recent supporters of agricultural policy. These established backers will be hard to disappoint.

As the pressure to accommodate intensifies, and as the legislation itself becomes further removed from its original purpose to serve production agriculture, the more difficult it will be to pass a farm bill. At the end of each legislative cycle, some pundit notes that political difficulties may well make the recent omnibus bill the last. Because big puzzles are harder to piece together than small ones, this often repeated prediction may yet prove correct. The fact that the puzzle's picture is increasingly hazy and unclear only intensifies the problem of successfully putting it together, let alone forging a desirable bill.

Danger Signs

The dangers of accommodation are not as obvious as the heady allure of a farm bill that appeases everyone. Yet several danger signs must be pointed out before production agriculture willfully stumbles through them. While there are undoubtedly other reasons to be cautious, four particularly acute problems should be kept in mind: too many interested claimants, the inappropriate nature of some demands, compromises that promote bad policy, and compromises that could sever traditional linkages among components of the production agriculture system.

Too Many Interests. Conventional wisdom about the agricultural lobby has always emphasized one feature, its relatively small size. Admittedly, interests in farming, agribusiness, and allied institutions have been fragmented. However, into the 1980s, most of the policy claimants were routine players. The interests of lobbyists from specific environmental, consumer, and world food organizations soon became recognized. And their interests and concerns could be accommodated or ignored so long as the agricultural lobby was a small community within the big city of official Washington. Competing new demands could be brokered on a personal basis with minimal description of major agriculture objectives.

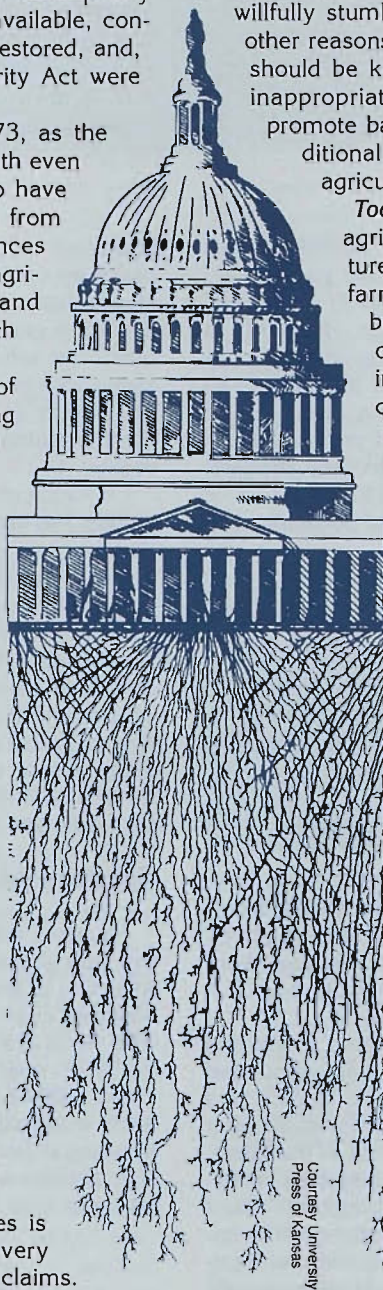
Such a manageable structure no longer exists. In the final stages of the 1985 farm bill, at least 215 organized interests had articulated policy positions and over 100 sent representatives to lobby Congress. About 30 grassroots organizations had activists working Capitol Hill. Lobbyist consultants for individual firms and specialty crop producers quietly added many more players, and Congress still faced contacts from numerous interests back home. What was once a confusing but recognizable set of policy demands had become an endless and impossible list.

Inappropriate Ideas. This proliferation is due in part to the increasing complexity of agriculture and the greater role of private sector interests. The farm financial crisis and the drought of 1988 have also contributed. But a third reason is no less important. Today, a greater number of organized interests see the farm bill process as a very open one, one no longer dominated by a select clientele.

As a result, some genuinely bad ideas are now being advocated both within and beyond the Washington beltway: overly zealous credit terms and tax breaks, special export subsidies that selectively profit individual firms, parity, the absolute rights of rocks and trees, and insistence on zero risk for new technologies. While each of these issues doubtless has some degree of popular support, they cannot all be accommodated in a sound national agricultural policy.

Other proposals are less easily dismissed but still may not be appropriate for inclusion in the farm bill. Rural revitalization is one popular example. Though USDA has a rural mission and maintains rural policy leadership, the many problems of rural America cannot be solved in one or more farm bill provisions. Unless the goal is to redistribute a few dollars to add a little more appeal to the farm bill, separate legislation is called for.

An array of other policy advocates also have demands that



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have a dubious place in the cyclic legislation but need attention elsewhere. While there exist legitimate concerns for protecting gene pools of plants, lowering groundwater contamination, retraining those who leave farming as well as a myriad of other things, it is questionable whether any of these issues could be thoroughly addressed in a farm bill. Any plans to accommodate environmentalists, conservationists, and small farm advocates in order to gain their support for an omnibus bill should probably not focus on these problems.

Bad Compromises. By definition, competing parties compromise by splitting their differences. But, because compromise usually means no one gets what they most need, it can bring forth policies that are far from the best alternative. In a sense, a compromised public policy is often like an arrow deflected from its target. One need look no further for an example than the 1985 decision to lower loan rates, keep target prices relatively high, and further increase an already huge budget deficit. And that was a compromise for just the farm segment in an agricultural policy that also encompasses food, trade, environment, and, arguably, welfare issues!

Unworkable and off-target policy agreements increase dramatically if established agricultural interests compromise—voluntarily or involuntarily—with groups that show absolutely no tolerance for ongoing agricultural practices. Both extreme and moderate viewpoints can be found among environmentalists, conservationists, consumers, animal rights supporters, moralist organizations such as churches, and grassroots farm protest groups. Even though these movement-style activists tend to stick together, agriculture and Congress must keep that lack of uniformity in mind when dealing with their concerns. Too often agriculturalists think they only need to “sit down with the other side.” In reality, the other side has several faces. To avoid bad compromises, agriculture must identify those with reasonable policy positions and work with them apart from the extremists.

Unplugging the Connections Among Agriculturalists. Agriculture has traditionally been a series of closely linked institutions servicing one another and the consuming public. Commodity producers and processors alike prospered from agricultural research within the land grant system. Extension brought innovations to farms, farm homes, and, to a lesser extent, factories that used farm products. Grocers supported farmers because they depended on their crops, and of course, the public reaped the benefits of a relatively inexpensive and abundant food supply.

The onset of delinkage or the unplugging of old connections within the agricultural system is easy to see. Grocers and food manufacturers, because of abundant opportunities to substitute one food for another, have already demonstrated their desire to side with environmentalists rather than farm interests. The extension service, in a less notable shift, has developed an urban mission. State Experiment Stations are seeking advice on new research agendas from outside the agricultural establishment.

None of this is ominous unless carried to the extreme. But a protracted extension of this trend may well be the biggest long-term problem facing agricultural policymaking. Should too many dollars be diverted from traditional agricultural programs and no new money go to farm and agribusiness projects, the primary reason for having an agricultural policy will be misplaced. Extensive accommodation means that resources for agricultural research, marketing assistance, short-term stabilization of farmer income, and other assistance programs on which farmers depend will be woefully inadequate.

The high financial costs of farm bills have

long been justified by their contribution to long-term agricultural development within the wide-ranging food and fiber system. Even with food surpluses, continued development is important for the economy, and to ensure future food supplies, better nutrition, and food safety. Serious producer and food industry problems exist and could benefit from farm bill funding. For example, red meat industries are struggling to develop healthy products, domestic soybean growers face intensified international competition, and food processors and manufacturers hope to enhance exports through value-added technologies. These are agriculture's prime clients, the users of USDA programs and the dependents of the state agricultural experiment stations and Extension.

Three things can happen to these traditional clientele relationships that should be of great concern. They may stagnate and their vitality diminish. Or, the relationships could disappear as agricultural institutions appease new interests and give the appearance that they side with those who threaten producer and industry income. Even worse, if agriculture no longer looks like it has any common purpose, there eventually will be no momentum to pass farm bills. Congressional members who identify with agriculture may well decide that their loyalties are misplaced and, in the future, allow agriculture to be governed without their active involvement.


Future Cooperation

More than anything else, agriculture would best be served through comprehensive policy reform that restores a common sense of direction to government's support of the food and fiber system. Domestic needs, international conditions, and the externalities of production and commodity handling need systematic and comprehensive attention. Before every recent farm bill, numerous analysts and affected interest groups have made that point, and a plea for reform has become a worn refrain. Yet reform's high political costs prevent more than incremental change and marginal policy adjustment.

In the absence of reform, the trick for the future is careful and well-coordinated accommodation of the clients who are now well represented in the farm bill process and who can become cooperative supporters rather than maligning critics of U.S. agriculture. Agricultural policymakers can never, and should not, return to past practices of ignoring whoever was not considered a part of the traditional agricultural establishment. Agriculture must acknowledge and work with the Food and Drug Administration, the Senate Environmental Protection Subcommittee, and interest groups like the National Audubon Society.

The warnings articulated here should not be taken as a call to reject alliances with new clientele whose needs can be met in the context of enhancing agricultural development.

Rather the intent is to urge caution in fashioning farm bills that attempt too much and satisfy too many. Agriculture policy cannot be all things to all people and even pretend to address the development and maintenance of an internationally competitive U.S. agriculture. Politics, for reasons of bringing forth sound policy that best meets the public good, has always been about articulating competing ideas and choosing sides at least as much as it has been about the venerable art of compromising and negotiating away objectionable policy suggestions.

An emphasis on only one side of this political equation—the one that tries to keep everybody happy—will never bring about the desired end of a healthy agricultural system that serves the public interest. 

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