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THE FARM POLICY AGENDA

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The biggest issue of agricultural policy is: Who is going to control the farm policy agenda and what subjects will be on it?

As always, whether in the faculty senate at the university or in the halls of Congress, the most important role of leadership is to be able to control the agenda, to bring up certain issues for resolution, and to keep other issues from coming up. This is the way effective policy control has been maintained from the earliest times, in virtually every forum. Those who control the agenda may not be the most visible policy people, but they are the most potent. The public is concerned with alternative solutions to the issues that are on the agenda; the more important question is how the agenda itself comes into being.

There is an old farm policy agenda and a new one. The old agenda is the one that has long been before us. Here are some of the issues:

How do we improve agricultural efficiency? This one is a hundred years old.

How do we control production and support prices of farm products? This one is forty years old.

The old agenda is concerned primarily with commodities and specifically with influencing supplies and prices in the farmer's interest. It has long been the agenda of what might be called the agricultural establishment: the farm organizations, the agricultural committees of the Congress, the Department of Agriculture, and the land-grant universities. While these groups do not see all issues alike, they have long been agreed on one thing—that they should be the farm policy decision makers.

The new agenda differs radically from the old one, as this listing will clearly show:

Food prices and specifically how to hold them down, an issue placed on the agenda by the consumers.

The various food programs, which now take up two-thirds of the USDA budget, so that we are more a Ministry of Food than

a Department of Agriculture. This issue was placed on the agenda by what has become known as the hunger lobby.

Ecological questions, placed on the agenda by the environmentalists.

Rural development, primarily a program of the 80 percent of the rural people who are nonfarmers.

Land use questions, raised by those who oppose the long-held idea that farmers have first claim on the use of the land.

Civil rights, advocated by those who challenge the white male tradition that has long characterized agriculture.

Collective bargaining for hired farm labor, placed on the agenda by organized labor.

Most of these issues have been placed on the agenda over the protests of the agricultural establishment. The agricultural establishment has, in large measure, lost control of the farm policy agenda. During the past six years I have spent more time on the new agenda than on the old one.

I like to watch football on television. The first question I ask myself when I switch on the set is, who's got the ball?

The agricultural establishment had the ball for a hundred years, but sometime during the last ten years there was a turnover. It was not rapid, or clean-cut, or dramatic, as in a football game. In fact, it has been so gradual that we have not fully realized it. But the initiative has changed hands nonetheless.

We could spend a lot of time on postmortems, trying to figure out why the farm policy agenda has been changed. Some will say the change comes from the loss of political power, traceable to the decline in the number of farmers. Others contend that it reflects a change in the fundamental mood of the country. Still others believe that pro-farmer programs are only temporarily superseded, that large supplies and low farm prices will reappear, and that the old agenda will be back with us in a year or two.

In this paper I intend to deal with this very broad strategic question: How should we who are of the agricultural establishment deal with the new agenda?

To make clear the set of value judgments with which I address this question, I indicate here this overall objective: A free and prosperous agriculture and a food industry that is open and competitive, with assistance for the least fortunate and least able of our

citizens. With a different objective, no doubt a different analysis would emerge.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES

I see four different possible strategies, as follows: hallucination, confrontation, capitulation, and cooperation.

Hallucination

We might deceive ourselves into thinking that nothing has changed. Or if things have changed, they will soon return to the status quo ante. Consumerism will fade away, the ecology movement is a fad, and the welfare state will lose its drive.

This strategy requires less thinking than any of the others I shall discuss, and so has its attractions. It is akin to the attitude of the loyal subjects in the fable, who professed to be unaware that the emperor was without clothes.

I mentioned earlier that the establishment had lost the farm policy ball. There is one thing worse than losing the ball—that is to lose the ball and think you still have it.

Confrontation

One way to deal with the new agenda is to challenge, head on, those who put it forward. We would continue to be the advocates of our long-time constituents, to defend the old ground, to repeat the honored rhetoric, and to take direct issue with those who have wrested the farm policy agenda out of our hands. We would recognize that the ball had gone over to the other team, and would consciously play defense.

There is nothing wrong with playing defense; with a good defense you perhaps can protect a lead, and you may be able to recover a fumble.

We would thus oppose the claims of the ecologists, challenge the burgeoning food stamp program, take issue with the consumer advocates, resist the civil rights movement, and declare the rural nonfarm people to be the constituents of some other agency. This alternative would be true to our honored past. It would evoke strong cheers from a diminishing number of throats.

But, weak as we are, it would probably result in very few victories. One should not choose confrontation as a strategy unless he has a reasonable chance of winning.

There is this trouble with confrontation strategy—it deepens

the controversy and makes it more difficult for either party to retreat with honor. Suppose the chief merit in the issue lies with the first party, and he directly confronts the second party. Then for the second party to agree to a meritorious resolution of the issue, he must accept ignominious personal defeat. In a strategy of confrontation, the two parties are driven to defend their positions with every power at their command.

I suggest two issues of agricultural policy in which confrontation strategy has worked contrary to the public purpose. One was the deadlock on farm policy of the 1950's, which in my opinion delayed constructive adjustments in commodity programs. Another was confrontation on the Common Agricultural Policy; European leaders have not been able to accede to our demands because to do so would be to cave in to the Americans, which is politically unacceptable to them. By a policy of confrontation, we have made it more difficult to achieve a good solution to the problem.

The chances of succeeding with confrontation strategy may not be very great. Our old constituents are fewer in number, despite their undoubted worthiness. And even for them, needs have changed so that the old agenda is less meritorious than it once was.

Capitulation

Another way to deal with the new agenda is to accept it, to surrender our traditional views. "If you can't lick them, join them." If more people are in favor of coyotes than of lambs, side with the coyotes. If the majority of people favor low food prices, go for a cheap food policy. Accept the recent past as the wave of the future. The bus is leaving the station, so get on board, as everyone else is doing. Never mind where it is going. Any new idea has to be better than an old idea.

There are some farm policy people (not many) who are ready to capitulate. As you can discern, I do not think this is a good alternative.

Cooperation

We establishment people are like a congressman who has been redistricted. Earlier he had a good safe district with constituents whose problems he knew and toward whom he felt sympathetic. Now he has new constituents, whom he did not seek. Their problems are new to him, and the things they want are different from the desires of his old constituents. What is he to do? Obviously, if

he is going to continue serving his old constituents, he is going to have to listen to his new ones.

So some kind of cooperation is called for. One type of "cooperation" was evident in the passage of the so-called emergency farm bill early this spring. The architects of the old agenda got together with the architects of the new one and worked out a deal. "You support our farm bill, and we'll support your food stamps."

So a coalition was formed. From the standpoint of the agricultural establishment, the deal did not work out so well. The new boys got their food stamps, but the old boys did not get their farm bill. One should beware of joining himself with an overpowerful ally; he may not have much influence on the joint undertakings.

Cooperation involves something more than trying to pool the current desires of people with conflicting interests. There is another, more constructive form of cooperation. It consists of listening to the other party and reaching out for some degree of consensus. It involves restraining the appetite to some degree. I will cite some examples.

This past July there was an agricultural research conference at Kansas City, the purpose of which was to plan research for the next decade or two. Present were not only members of the agricultural establishment but also consumers, ecologists, nutritionists, people from the labor unions, and civil rights advocates. The meeting was a bit unusual. It was constructive.

The Rural Development Program has reached out to solicit, welcome, and acknowledge the contributions of many groups in addition to those of the agricultural establishment. This has worked fairly well. The program is now probably in better shape than it ever has been. Listening to the rural nonfarm people has been very helpful.

Progress is being made in the civil rights area through cooperation with groups quite outside the agricultural establishment. Agricultural services are increasingly being broadened, providing assistance to those who have been inadequately served. Much remains to be done. But progress has occurred. In general, confrontation has been avoided.

It takes two to cooperate, as it does to tango. We should not assume that if we establishment people reach out with cooperative intent, the architects of the new agenda will automatically reach out in response. They may or they may not. But up to now I think

it is fair to say that when we have reached out with sincere intent, there has been a response.

Cooperation is difficult—and risky. Cooperative intent may be interpreted as a sign of weakness, an invitation to be overwhelmed. We cannot expect to dictate the conditions or the terms of the joint effort.

There are two different ideas of government, just as there are two different types of cooperation. One idea is to group the people on the basis of some criterion, to get into one camp all those who have one particular attribute, say a liking for low prices. Put into another camp all those who have the opposite view. Then hammer out the solution. Obviously, this means clean-cut issues and a head-on slugging match at the highest levels.

Another idea is to work out some of these things at lower levels, so that the differences are not so great when final resolution takes place. Instead of having all the advocates of high prices in one group and all those who favor low prices in another, mix them together a bit, so that they have to work things out among themselves. Cooperation is made necessary, people are impelled to listen as well as to speak, and decision making takes place at the lower as well as the upper levels. This seems to me a far better system.

We have all watched the demagogue gather a tight little group of people and appeal to their narrow desires. All of the time, if he is honest, he realizes that he is helping to escalate desires that cannot be met, or can be met only by some great convulsion for which he has no desire to be responsible.

We have had some confrontation in agriculture, but not so much that a cooperative attitude is beyond reach. The cooperative attitude is beginning to permeate all members of the old agricultural establishment. The agricultural committees of the Congress are no longer the single-minded advocates of the old agenda which they once were. The cooperative intent is visible in their work on rural development, environmental programs, and other current issues. While these changes are perhaps more the result of necessity than of free will, they nevertheless have occurred.

The Department of Agriculture has changed its official stance on a number of issues. The big commodity programs are a case in point. This comes in part from having listened—having had to listen, perhaps—to our new constituents.

The land-grant universities, in their teaching, their research,

and their extension, have modified their offerings in the light of changing times. They are listening, and they are cooperating.

The farm organizations are also listening. For example, they are now willing to hear proposals which would extend collective bargaining rights to hired farm labor, a position that would have been impossible only a few years ago.

In some cases, the cooperative attitude is the operational one even though the old rhetoric continues. There is the possibility of holding the old constituency with the old rhetoric, and winning the new constituency with action favorable to their interests. This is a tactic familiar in political circles, and one that perhaps deserves acceptance on pragmatic grounds, even though it is indefensible on grounds of consistency. The point is that if the casual observer is carried away by the rhetoric, he may misinterpret what actually is going on.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I have been speaking of these various strategies as if they were mutually exclusive. This need not be so. It is possible to take an overall attitude of cooperation and still adopt elements of the other strategies in particular cases.

Some issues may best be handled by pretending they do not exist. For example, benign neglect may be the best way of dealing with perennial attacks on the middleman, a subject which is on both the old and the new agenda. There is no known solution to this "problem," which, objectively measured, is of minor importance. Maybe it can be finessed. The public attitude is that any issue on the agenda is a legitimate one, and that a solution can be found if men of good will will put their minds to it. One or both of these views may be untrue, in which case it may be best to pretend the issue does not exist.

Though the basic attitude may be cooperation, it is perhaps best sometimes to capitulate. For example, the Department of Agriculture had long defended huge commodity payments to a few large farming operations. These payments turned out to be indefensible either on political or economic grounds. So the Department capitulated.

Sometimes confrontation is an appropriate policy, even though the cooperative intent is, overall, the dominant one. President Ford confronted a farmer-labor-consumer coalition in vetoing the emergency farm bill this spring. In my opinion, this was a constructive act of public policy.

An element of unpredictability is an important ingredient of strategy in the area of public policy. But it should not be the sole element. To be either totally predictable or totally unpredictable would be a major strategic error.

CONCLUSION

I began this presentation with the question: Who is going to control the farm policy agenda and what subjects will be on it? My answer to this question is that only if the agricultural establishment takes a generally cooperative attitude can they expect to have much of a role in shaping the farm policy agenda and influencing the particular issues that appear thereon.

This says something to those of us concerned with research in the policy area. We, as well as the political strategists, will have to take a cooperative role (which many are already doing). Little good is to be accomplished by researching a subject that we are unable to put on the agenda. It is my belief that the marginal contribution to an understanding of the policy issues is greater if we address ourselves to the items on the new agenda than if we continue to focus on the old one.

In extension as well as in teaching, the new constituency will have to be served.

And now a final word about teaching. In 1973, I spoke on agricultural policy to this same group, at Brainerd, Minnesota. My concluding comment was that it would be well for those who teach agricultural policy to throw away their old lecture notes. That was good advice, and it bears repetition.