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DOMESTIC FOOD AND FARM POLICY

A Reaction

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The underlying question for the conference is, what does this discussion mean for a public policy education program within the individual states represented? The two previous speakers recognize that there are other participants in the development of farm and food policy and that to varying degrees these new participants may dictate the items that will be considered, as well as the methods used and the direction in which decisions are made. Luther Tweeten falls back on the traditional economic analyst's role of evaluating means of achieving equilibrium in prices and supply for farmers. Don Paarlberg reverts to the bureaucratic approach that agricultural interests have traditionally developed policy and that they are still responsible for it. Using the analogy comparing the farm policy agenda to a football game, I would suggest that the agricultural establishment has not awakened to the fact that the game has been moved to another location and the other participants have simply not told us where the game is going to be played.

Most, if not all, future food and farm policy is going to be developed outside the traditional agricultural establishment. Most food policy will be initiated by the Department of State and other agencies that are concerned with the use of food as a political tool or those agencies and institutions that are concerned with food for humanitarian purposes. Farm policy, on the other hand, is going to be determined substantially by such agencies as the Environmental Protection Agency, which in terms of administering and enforcing various rules and regulations has a much more effective way of making supply management a reality in the agricultural production sector.

On the assumption that this is the framework in which farm and food policy will be developed and decided, it seems to me some basic issues need to be considered. The underlying question may well be how to deal with a situation in which many of the decision makers consider economic logic irrelevant or not capable of being understood, or more seriously, consider economic efficiency as a completely irrelevant goal that should be replaced by other goals and objectives.

I would offer two hypotheses for your critical evaluation. The first hypothesis is that many, if not most, of the spokesmen, whether consumer representatives or otherwise, simply do not accept our conventional wisdom that an efficient and equitable policy program to benefit farmers will eventually benefit consumers. Many of those, probably a political majority, no longer believe this transfer of wealth or benefits results from public policy programs in food and fiber. The second hypothesis is that these same external observers of the agricultural situation have learned, or at least believe, that economic disaster experienced by individual farmers does not materially or significantly reduce the continued supply of food and fiber, but rather only shifts the cost base and determines who will bear a substantial part of that cost. They seem to feel that no matter what sort of farm and food policy program might be undertaken, ample food will continue to be produced by agriculture, and that we should, therefore, direct food and farm policies to an entirely different objective than that traditionally held by the agricultural establishment.

If we accept these two hypotheses, then the following conclusions apply: Luther Tweeten recognizes what is occurring in terms of those participating in policy development and decision making, but feels much more comfortable in his traditional role as an economic analyst. Therefore, he suggests the approach is to integrate consumers into the policy development arena. The real problem in public policy education for the traditional agricultural audience is how they can again become a part of that particular process rather than integrating others into it. I have no quarrel with Don Paarlberg's analysis except that it is perceived from a traditionalist's viewpoint and tends to ignore the realities of the political world. The U.S. Department of Agriculture may have to find a method of playing some role in food and farm policy development now occurring in other departments of government not related to agriculture.

Many in this audience may be perceived as members of the agricultural establishment. But, in fact, we are members of that establishment only by having been associated with traditionally agriculture-oriented institutions. What this really suggests is that many of us may simply be guilty by association.

In conclusion, we have a basic responsibility to recognize that we have at least two distinct and different audiences and probably two distinct and different programs. The first audience is that amorphous group labeled "consumers," although it is obviously much broader; it is not particularly concerned with the traditional

alternatives analysis we have prepared and presented to farm audiences. The task may simply be a matter of increasing their economic literacy.

The second audience is the traditional food producers, who are going to have to make adjustments on an individual and collective basis to a set of farm and food policy programs that may be economically unattractive and may not be designed to achieve the type of equilibrium that agricultural economists have traditionally argued is the ultimate goal.

We have to view these audiences from their own perspective in trying to conduct educational programs. We have learned this well over the years, but for some reason, when we get outside of the traditional agricultural audience, we fail to recognize that we must conduct programs from their point of view rather than ours.

As social scientists we must be consistently and continually aware of our perspective and the perspective of others. A cartoon strip by Gus Ariolo appeared in newspapers some six or eight years ago in a series called "Gordo." In the first frame Gordo was making tortillas and made the sounds of slapping tortillas from one hand to another. As the sound carried throughout the house, Gordo's animals appeared—the dog, the rooster, the cat, the pig, etc. Gordo commented that Pavlov had only a drooling dog, but he, Gordo, had a whole houseful of animals. Gordo gave each animal a tortilla and, as they were leaving, the pig turned to the dog and asked, "By the way, who is this Pavlov?" The dog said rather loftily, "Some nutty scientist who developed conditioned reflex! Every time he heard a bell ring, he had this irresistible urge to feed a dog."

PART V

*Public Policy Education in
Perspective*

