FARM POLICY REQUIREMENTS AS SEEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GOVERNMENT

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For many years my interest in farm policy was focused on the substance of the issues we confronted. What were the alternative means by which the current questions could be answered? What were the consequences of the alternative solutions? But recently I have found myself focusing on a different set of questions. These questions have to do, not with the substance of the items that happen to be on the agenda, but with the makeup of the agenda itself. How did the present questions get on the agenda? Who is intent on keeping them there? What other questions are there, questions not on the agenda? Who wants to put them on? In short, are we asking the right questions? Many years of teaching have convinced me that it is very difficult to get the right answer if we ask the wrong questions.

The older I get, the more important the agenda seems to me. A person wise in public policy would rather have the opportunity to prepare the agenda than to have decisive power over items put on the agenda by someone else.

For many years there has been an agenda committee for agricultural policy. There have been four members - - the farm bloc in the Congress, the farm organizations, the Department of Agriculture, and the land grant colleges. These four have often quarreled among themselves, as committee members do. But on one thing they were agreed: they were the agenda committee. Few agricultural issues got before the public without the approval of the committee.

For almost four decades now, the number one agenda item for farm policy has been commodity programs: price supports, production controls, and payment programs for the major farm crops. This item has taken much of the time, intellect, and financial resources devoted to public programs for agriculture. If you pick up almost any book on farm policy written during the last three decades, you will find perhaps three-fourths of the pages devoted to this one item. All of this to the exclusion of those many farmers who produce unsupported products, to the exclusion of those farmers who produce only small quantities of crops or livestock, and to the exclusion of those rural residents who have little if anything to gain from commodity programs.

I have been in the Department of Agriculture almost a year. What are some of the farm policy issues with which we have had to deal? And how did they get on the agenda? It is an interesting list:

1. *Limitations on the amount of payments going to any one farmer.* This was put on the agenda, not by the old agenda committee, but by a number of urban Congressmen and Senators.

2. *Expanded food programs for the poor.* This was put on the agenda by a citizens committee, a CBS documentary, and a Select Committee of the Senate.

3. *Collective bargaining for hired farm labor.* This can attribute to Cesar Chavez, who had assistance from hired labor, student activists, and organized church groups.

4. *Meat inspection.* This came, in large part, from efforts of Ralph Nader.

5. *Civil rights in the administration of agricultural programs.* This came from the Civil Rights Commission, with help from the Reverend Ralph Abernathy.

6. *Pollution of the environment, through DDT and other things.* This came from the conservationists.

7. *Limitations on the amount of fat in hot dogs.* This was put on the agenda by the medical profession, concerned as they are about cholesterol.

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8. *The effect of tobacco on human health.* This also came from the medical profession.

9. *Rural poverty.* This item was lifted up by a Presidential study commission and amplified by the Poor People's March.

Virtually all of these items got on the agenda without the approval of the agenda committee, or the agricultural establishment, to use today's term. Meanwhile, the agenda committee has been trying with limited success to see how it can get the Congress to act favorably on the perennial farm policy issue, commodity programs. We must conclude that the agricultural establishment has, to a considerable extent, lost control of the farm policy agenda. The agenda committee has lost the initiative and is reacting to the initiative of others. This is a very serious matter. I noted one thing during the holidays watching all those football games. You don't score any points unless you have the ball.

We need to get the ball back. We have plenty of difficult problems in agriculture and in the rural areas, plenty of problems that call for the intelligent help of an understanding government. If a vocational group wishes to have help from the government it must have either strong political power or a large stock of good will. We have been losing out on both counts. The loss of political power is easily explained and quantified. Farmers now constitute 5 percent of the population. When I was a boy, farmers made up one fourth of our people. The loss of political power has been proportionate. The loss of good will is hard to quantify or to document, but no one can doubt that there has been a loss.

The agenda committee gave commodity programs top billing for too long a time. There is a limit to the public's attention span regarding policy items. Forty years at the head of the farm policy agenda, with no solution yet produced - - this may be long enough. What answers have escaped forty years of diligent search on the part of so many able people?

We cannot recapture the agenda-making role by reviving or recasting or reformulating the old price and income issue. The non-farm Congressmen, who are vastly in the majority, once thought that farm programs were for the poor and the downtrodden, and voted for them. They no longer feel this way, and vote against them.

Agriculture is now a minority, and will have to adopt the strategy appropriate to a minority. We will have to propose issues that have appeal to the producers of many farm products rather than a few to small farmers as well as to big ones, to rural people as well as to farmers. And we shall have to select issues that, while important to us, will also enlist the support of non-farm people. We will have to make friends, which a minority must always do. We shall have to give support to legitimate urban interests, as Under Secretary Campbell has repeatedly said, if we are to except reciprocal help. The time is past when we could sharply delineate agricultural interests from urban interests, supporting the one and opposing the other. That strategy might be valid for a majority, and we are no longer a majority. There must be a broadening of the base of public concern for matters of importance in rural areas.

One issue on which we could focus more sharply is rural development. Rural development is concerned with creating job opportunities in the rural areas, checking the depopulation of the countryside, improving the levels of education, developing our rural resources, and improving the social services to rural people. Surely these are important matters to rural people, whatever their income level. All the statistics show rural areas to be at a disadvantage in terms of education, job opportunities, social services, and living levels. Parity of opportunity might be a better goal than parity of prices.

It may be said that there is not a sufficient political power base to support an expanded rural development effort, but there is a large and growing political power base for this kind of effort, and it would be a tragedy if those who have responsibility for shaping the farm policy agenda were to be unaware of the change. The Land Grant Colleges are expanding their work in this area. They have found a power base of some kind for this extra effort. The farm organizations are showing increased concern; the Farm Bureau has a bill that supports non-farm job training for rural people of low income. The Department of Agriculture has expanded its rural development work, and the Congress has provided increased funds for this purpose. The last four Presidents, beginning with President Eisenhower, have supported an expanded effort at rural development. President Nixon has appointed a Rural Affairs Council, at Cabinet level, and has set up a Task Force on Rural Development. He spoke strongly on this subject in his State of the Union Message. He said nothing about corn, wheat or cotton.

Perhaps, most surprising, many city Congressmen support rural development. They have become convinced that a number of the urban problems, so much in the public eye, have their roots at least partly in the rural areas. The enormous farm-to-city migration of the last 30 years brought to our non-farm communities and cities some 28 million rural people, small farmers and farm laborers, many of whom were ill equipped in education and in life-style, for urban living. The result was a problem both in the area they left and

the place to which they came. They depopulated the countryside and generated an urban crush. How much better it would have been to have created job opportunities in the rural areas, and to have provided the social services that would have made life rewarding where these people really wanted to live!

The city Congressmen have been interested enough in rural development to have generated programs with an important rural thrust, sponsored by Health, Education and Welfare, Housing and Urban Development, and other federal agencies. In combination, these programs, which we think of as urban-based, have a larger rural component than agriculture's own rural development program.

We can't rewrite history, but we can still make changes, which we must do if we are to escape being almost totally an urban society. I have spoken of rural development as an agenda issue that could be promoted to reduce the intensity of concern long conferred on commodity problems. Rural development is but one example. I could have suggested other issues: food programs, resource development, and environmental questions. Any and all of these merit advancement toward the top of the agenda.

What I am suggesting is a re-ordering of priorities, a new emphasis on opportunities for rural people. I am not recommending that we take commodity problems off the agenda; we can't do that. Our dependence on these programs is so great that we can't quickly phase them out, and the opposition to them is so great that they probably can't be expanded. Neither the proponents of big commodity programs nor the opponents thereof can win the battle in the terms that victory has long been stated. We need an accommodation that would somewhat abate the argument over the commodity programs so that we can get on with other things. This should be done in low key. Public processes being what they are, the redefining of goals is best accomplished by emphasizing what is elevated, rather than by calling attention to what is being de-emphasized. There must be some way of developing markets and expanding outlets to increase that share of farm income derived from the market relative to that share which comes from the commodity programs.

There is some penitence in my plea for de-escalating the controversy over commodity programs; I have in the past contributed more than my share to keeping the issue alive. What we need now is the opportunity for people like myself and others to achieve some degree of disengagement so we can get on with other matters.

The desire to impose unconditional surrender on one's rival is a very costly form of self-indulgence.

If neither side can win the campaign on the terms in which the issue is joined, what do you do? You reformulate the issue or you move it a notch or two down on the agenda. You talk less about it. This is what is in fact going on, not as part of a conscious effort, but as the intelligent outcome of the process of representative government. We shall get better answers to the very real problems of corn, wheat and cotton, I believe, if we lower our voices on commodity programs by a few decibels, drop this old issue a notch or two on the agenda, and turn our attention to policy issues that have the twin attributes of being really important to a broad sector of rural America and having some appeal to urban people.

This change is already far advanced. Note what has happened with respect to food programs, rural development, housing, water resources, and the rural environment. What a tragedy it would be if, while this constructive change is underway, those who have responsibility for shaping the farm policy agenda, would continue, out of inertia, to harangue one another on the same old issues!

We are now in the nineteen-seventies, and the statute of limitations is about to run out on the issues that absorbed so much of our time and treasure during the 'thirties, 'forties, 'fifties, and 'sixties. We need to take the initiative and formulate issues that will help agriculture strengthen its role in shaping the farm policy agenda. The number one criterion for farm policy is that it be sufficiently in tune with the times so as to receive an appropriate measure of public support.