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Smallfarming and the Rural Community

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Opening address to the Conference

J D Hunter-Smith

It is my pleasure, as Chairman of the SFA, to welcome you to our second annual Conference. The theme is 'The role of small farms in rural communities'. Before introducing the speakers, I wish to thank Mrs Pippa Woods who, on behalf of the SFA, has been the Conference organiser. She managed to do this as well as running a dairy farm of 62 ha. I also want to thank Miss Angela Hoxey, who has done the organising at this end and Professor Colin Spedding, Head of the Department of Agriculture and Horticulture at Reading and who recently became Director of the CAS; without his backing we would not have been able to hold the conference. And then in conclusion our thanks are due to the SFA Honorary Secretary, John Humphry, who acted in a backup role and I also want to acknowledge the assistance we have received during the year from Professor John Bowman and Mr Richard Tranter of the CAS. They published the Proceedings of our last Conference and this really has put our new Association on the map.

On a personal note I would like to say how much I like the relationship we are building up with Reading, for some 40 years ago I took a degree in Agriculture here and in my final year was Chairman of the Agricultural Club. Since then I have seen many changes in British agriculture, most of them associated with higher yields, more mechanisation and specialisation, larger units of production, fewer farms, farm workers and farmers. For the future I would like to see an efficient and progressive agriculture but one which involves more people. I hope the formation of the SFA and our link with Reading will mark the turning point towards an alternative agriculture which will better meet national needs in the latter part of this century.

The objectives of the SFA are as follows:

- (i) To promote the family farm, or its equivalent in enterprise size.
- (ii) To make farming more accessible to new entrants.
- (iii) To prevent the decay of rural societies.

Since the SFA was formed 2 years ago, one of our big problems has been to explain what we mean by 'small' in the term smallfarmers. The concept is easy enough, the definition is difficult. What we have in mind is the family-worked farm or the yeoman farm. The trouble with 'yeoman' is that it has connotations more with England than with the rest of the UK, and we try to put the case for the whole UK. The title Family Farmers' Association would not be entirely satisfactory because 'family farm' is sometimes used by people who don't work on a farm but merely own it. Even 'family-worked farm' presents difficulties, because a farmer with 1000 ha working occasionally on the combine could call himself a working farmer. On the other hand, 1000 ha under the *hafod hendre* system in Wales, with a mountain run and lowland homestead, could qualify for the term 'small farm'. But more important than fine definition is acceptance that the cornerstone of our agricultural policy should be the smallfarmer or family farmer or working farmer or yeoman farmer, call him what you will. His enterprise size will depend on what is required under the production system followed to enable an efficient family unit, plus some outside labour, to make a reasonable living using acceptable modern techniques for the production of wholesome food or other products on a sustainable basis. Now anybody supporting those objectives, in the context of the smallfarmer as I have tried to explain, is very welcome to become a member of the SFA.

I am often asked why have a separate organisation, for most UK farmers are working farmers already well represented by the farm unions. Whilst I don't wish to decry the wide-ranging work that the farm unions carry out for farmers, it is a fact that the farm lobby is dominated by large-scale farmers. Working farmers are more tied to their farms, particularly their livestock, and therefore find it difficult to play a significant role on committees. The preponderance of large-scale farmers on the important Councils is of itself unimportant, for they are public-spirited men who devote much time, unpaid, to their industry. However, the overall results are of great concern, for large farms get larger and the small and medium farms continue to disappear. There are incontrovertable statistics to show this and somewhat perversely this trend has arisen because of the maxim adopted in this country that all farmers should have equal treatment. Other European countries recognise that in order to maintain a satisfactory equilibrium in farm sizes, policies have to be adopted which favour those on the lower rungs of the farming ladder. Here we allow economic forces to develop megafarms and chains of farms while there are many with the necessary skills who can't start in farming.

I accept that it is never going to be easy to break into farming but this does not mean that we shouldn't seek policies which would improve the present position of near impossibility unless one is presented with a going farm. Because of vested interest or lack of vision, the present farm lobby seems to find it impossible to promote, or support, a strategy geared to the survival of the family-worked farm, let alone its revival. Instead, we see acquiescence to the ratchet-like process of enlargement necessary for economic survival, be it increase in number of animals to be milked or area to be planted. When I was a boy a good living could be made from 20 cows, whereas you need at least 60 now to make a living and that is typical of what is happening in all sectors. Given more vision it would be recognised that more farmers and growers mean more power to the farm lobby and that ever fewer farmers and growers will not be in the overall interest of agriculture or the nation in the latter part of this century. Therefore, given the circumstances of the current farm lobby, there can be no doubt that the SFA is needed because measures needed to achieve its objectives are unlikely to be generated within the existing framework. Can you imagine yourself sitting in the NFU Council, for example, propounding such measures as: lower cut-off points for capital grants; tapering commodity prices and headage payments; differential application of the 'super' levies to favour young farmers with small herds, whilst curbing the development of large herds. If you are pressing these measures in any of the farm union Councils I don't think you would be very successful or popular, but the important thing is that you wouldn't get them adopted. And yet these measures are necessary for a healthy agriculture in the latter part of this century. Now before leaving this question, I should like to make the point that if the family-worked farm was adopted as the cornerstone of agricultural policy, it could provide the focal point for many other organisations concerned with the well-being of the countryside. They could then have more cohesion, more clarity of purpose and greater prospects of success. For example, nature conservation, animal welfare, rural industries and countryside recreation would benefit by having such a basic objective in relation to farm structure. Accordingly I hope such bodies, and many are represented here today, will support the SFA for we need this.

Despite the disparities between UK farm size and our European partners, I think a common structural policy should be possible provided the family-worked farm (or its equivalent in enterprise size), constitutes the cornerstone of that policy. Acceptance of this concept would have a fundamental effect on most programmes, not excluding production support applications. Clearly the Mansholt approach of feeding labour-hungry industries with surplus farm labour has been overtaken by events for although in this country, at any rate, the flow would have to be the other way, the SFA regards small-scale farming as no panacea for

neurotic factory workers or disillusioned executives. We also recognise that small-scale starter farms can often be the gateway to struggle and failure. Nevertheless, more viable small farms are needed to sustain a larger rural population. More small farms mean that the growth of big farms must be curtailed. As the UK leads in the development of megafarms and factory farms, I think we have a moral obligation and the opportunity to lead in the involvement of EC policies to curtail them. Programmes resulting in the sub-division of in-hand estates are needed. Given appropriate fiscal inducements, their owners and rural communities could benefit considerably from such a change. Furthermore, EC funds should be available for it will be expensive in terms of fixed costs requirements, particularly on buildings. Therefore, governmental concern that a small farm policy would place a disproportionate financial burden on the UK because there are more small farms in Europe than here, need not be valid. To divide over-big farms into viable small farms is just as meritorious and equally expensive as to amalgamate small units to make them viable.

In conclusion, an MP talking recently in the context of Rural Voice (a new forum for several countryside organisations), said 'we must sustain the eight 'P's in the community – the Parson, Policeman, Postman, Physician, Pharmacist, Publican, Primary School Teacher and Petrol Pump Attendant'. However, he didn't mention the farmer and as far as I'm concerned I don't mind being spelt with a 'Ph' as long as it is recognised that farmers in reasonable numbers are indispensable in rural communities. But that is what our conference is all about and therefore it is my great pleasure to introduce our first speaker.