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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Investing in rural harmony: a critique

Edited by A Korbey

CAS Paper 16 May 1984

Chairmans Opening Remarks

A major function of the Centre for Agricultural Strategy is to encourage informed debate on the major issues relating to Agriculture.

In the UK one of the most important of those issues is the use of the land. It is here that the interests of agriculturalists and non-agriculturalists overlap in the most intractable ways. It is not, of course, the only area in which interests overlap. They do so in relation to our food supply — its quality, safety, variety, stability and cost — and to matters of overproduction. Some of these areas represent intractable problems, too, often because of the difficulty of reconciling national interests within the EEC.

Land use policy interacts with these and presents additional difficulties because basic freedoms are involved.

Agriculture is the major user of land but there are other large-scale users — for forestry, roads, water-catchment, recreation and sport — and virtually all of us have an interest in the way land is used. We pass through it and are concerned with its appearance, we spend time relaxing in the countryside and some work in it. Our interests differ and it is no use pretending that, even deep down, we all feel the same about issues like conservation, never mind about how it should be achieved.

Some people wish to conserve every species of plant and animal in its natural state, others find their livelihoods eroded by excessive numbers of rabbits, pigeons, deer or geese.

Some prefer uncontrolled natural vegetation, while others want to preserve what they see as our traditional pattern of farmed fields. Historians tell us that it hasn't always looked like that, foresters point out that an avenue of trees cannot be preserved for ever, and ecologists tell us that our countryside would hardly include any of the grassland we like to see, if the growth of shrubs and trees was not controlled by grazing and/or cultivation.

Furthermore, most views change with the passage of time and it is to be expected that there will eventually be a society for the preservation of pylons. It is also perhaps as well that conservation was not a powerful issue in the days of dinosaurs: indeed, on a long time-scale the preservation of habitats may not even be possible.

This is not to mock the interests that most of us have in conservation, merely to point out that, even here, total agreement is unlikely.

Add to this the genuine needs to use land for the production of food, wool, timber, fuel, water and a host of other products, between which there is also competition and conflict, and it is easy to see that it is very unlikely that we shall all agree, in the sense of submerging our own interests in some larger view.

Quite apart from anything I have yet mentioned, there are strong views in some quarters that rural populations should be increased, that village life needs to be re-invigorated and the rural employment should be greatly increased. All this has implications for the use of the countryside.

In reminding you of these facts, I am not trying to suggest that the problems are insoluble. On the contrary, I am suggesting that solutions are more likely if we recognise at the outset that there are many different and legitimate interests involved, that there are conflicts to be resolved and competing attitudes to be reconciled.

That is why I find the title of Clive Potter's report attractive, because we need to seek a rural harmony that takes account of these different interests without trying to obliterate any of them.

Harmonising different interests, however, generally involves a cost and it is necessary to be clear how this is to be met. If we are, as a nation, to *invest* in rural harmony, then we have to consider how this is to be done and where the money is to come from. It is to precisely these issues that Clive Potter has addressed himself.

C R W Spedding