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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Public perception of the countryside

Edited by F A Miller & R B Tranter

STP
HD592.5
.P83x
1988

CAS Paper 18 January 1988

3 Perception of the countryside: the views of the Council for the Protection of Rural England

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INTRODUCTION

The Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) represents a distinctive strand of thinking within the voluntary conservation movement. Its history, membership and record of preoccupations over 60 years has resulted in a body whose main focus is the protection of the integrity of the English landscape, and whose skills and influence as a national lobby are widely recognised.

Public opinion polls and surveys suggest that it is this broad approach to 'landscape' conservation which is the most appealing to the public at large. although special interest groups eg RSPB and the Woodland Trust, have larger memberships than CPRE. It is also clear, for example from the *British Social Attitudes Survey*, that the majority of the public have fears about the future of the countryside (66%) and perceive its quality to have deteriorated in the last 20 years (50%).

THE ROLE OF THE CPRE IN REFLECTING PUBLIC OPINION

CPRE directly reflects the above concern, and uniquely among conservation organisations, is primarily concerned with the underlying forces that have shaped the English countryside in the past, and in those which will shape its future. Although clearly dependent upon, and responsive to, its direct membership, CPRE has never seen itself as solely a representative body for its own members. Its success in the past has derived from the way it has

been able to push policy frontiers forward in the interests of society as a whole.

CPRE was founded in 1926 as a coalition of existing organisations (including such diverse interests as the CLA, the AA and National Trust, etc), led by a group of visionary individuals to campaign against ribbon development and urban sprawl which threatened the integrity of the countryside.

This early evidence of passionate 'green' activism – springing from both rural and urban roots – was extraordinarily effective and led to the establishment of the single greatest protector of the countryside in modern times – the town and country planning system. This was achieved with the passing of the *Town and Country Planning Act, 1947*, which remains largely in force today.

CPRE's distinctive contribution was to legitimise the means for public intervention in private land-use decisions on behalf of the wider community. This stance has led to an involvement in an ever-widening range of issues over the years, including:

- (i) the passing of the *National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, 1949*;
- (ii) the establishment of the Green Belts, and the securing of legislation to prevent ribbon development and urban sprawl;
- (iii) throughout the 1950s and 1960s, campaigns to prevent or modify the major infrastructure projects which were taking place in the countryside, especially the National Grid, reservoirs and road developments;
- (iv) during the 1970s, CPRE led the awakening understanding of the damaging impact of agricultural change on the countryside since the war.

And, during the 1980s, a time when public interest in environmental issues has blossomed, CPRE's involvement has widened yet further, including:

- (i) playing a key role in attempting to secure more effective conservation policies in the *Wildlife and Countryside Bill, 1981* (later Act), and in its amendment in 1985;
- (ii) forcing the withdrawal of the Government's proposed relaxation of protection for Green Belts in 1983/4;
- (iii) helping to secure a new duty for the Minister of Agriculture to 'balance' conservation with his other statutory responsibilities under the *Agriculture Act, 1986*;
- (iv) early in 1987, forcing significant changes to the Government's draft Circular *Development involving agricultural land*, thereby achieving a new policy axiom for protecting the countryside 'for its own sake'.

CPRE's activities and achievements are widely recognised, and strike a chord with many members of the public. There are large numbers of MPs and Peers ready to articulate CPRE's concerns in Parliament, and press coverage – both nationally and locally – of its views and campaigns is excellent. Both are important indicators of broader public awareness and responsiveness to CPRE's case.

CPRE's STRUCTURE AND MEMBERSHIP

CPRE's particular reputation as a national lobbying organisation springs from its highly successful national organisation, which has been a feature since 1926. Its origin as a national federal organisation to which members of the public subscribed locally – to County Branches – has resulted in an extremely potent mix of interest groups in its membership which has interacted highly successfully, if not always without tension, with the national office high profile activity.

Since the 1930s, most of the 44 English counties have established a CPRE Branch or equivalent, initially independent of national office, but now closely integrated with it. Many of the leading Branch members reflect CPRE's historic links with landowning and influential 'county' personalities, although the membership base is now broadening.

As a result of major internal reorganisation during the last 5 years, CPRE's members are all now members of the central organisation, and also thereby of the relevant County Branch. This allows effective direct communication between CPRE nationally and its members (mainly via its journal *Countryside Campaigner*), while, as members of the local Branch, members continue to receive Branch newsletters, details of social events and information about current issues for which their support is needed. CPRE's County Branches remain an important source of information about members' views and perceptions. These are often drawn at conferences organised by, and general meetings of, the Branches.

CPRE's organisational processes provide for involvement in decision-making by its constituent organisations and branches, who each have elected Officers and a wide range of Committees at County and District level drawn from national members residing within the County. The Branches are drawn together in 10 regional groups which discuss policy issues of common concern throughout the region. CPRE's National Council meets biannually, its Executive Committee meets quarterly, and it has a number of specialised sub-committees. County Branches are represented directly at National Council and in the smaller committees by representatives of newly-formed Regional Fora composed of groups of Branches.

PERCEPTION OF CPRE's MEMBERS

Although CPRE has conducted few systematic surveys of its members' attitudes and beliefs, national public opinion polls and surveys have provided helpful guidance over many years.

However, in 1985, as part of its wider structural reorganisation, CPRE surveyed its members via a questionnaire in *Countryside Campaigner* (see Table 1). It provided both a welcome endorsement of CPRE's current activities, and pointed to ways in which its membership could be extended and further utilised.

Table 1

A summary of the results of CPRE's national member survey in 1985

1	Is CPRE's more prominent campaigning profile over the last few years something you broadly welcome?	Yes	96.1%	No	1.6%
2	Where do you feel the main pressures on the countryside in your area are coming from? (respondents asked to tick 3 choices)				
	New housebuilding		57.3%		
	Removal of landscape features		51.2%		
	Changes to village life		43.3%		
	New motorways/roads		32.5%		
	Industrial development		29.1%		
	Mineral extraction		20.4%		
	Tipping of waste		13.6%		
	Footpath closures		13.0%		
	Energy developments		5.6%		
	Forestry planting		4.0%		
3	Are those broadly the issues you would expect CPRE as a national organisation to be concerned with?	Yes	95.4%	No	1.8%
4	Are there other issues not mentioned in which you feel CPRE should become more involved? eg:				
	Pollution		34.1%		
	Rural transport		21.8%		
5	How important do you think it is for CPRE to make its own positive proposals to local authorities to help plan and guide development?				
	Very important		83.8%		
	Quite important		11.9%		
	Not important		2.0%		

- 6 Assuming CPRE's County Branches are strengthened steadily to meet local challenges, which of the following do you think national office should concentrate on?

Parliamentary lobbying	82.0%
Evidence at major public inquiries	59.0%
Seeking greater publicity	57.3%
Influencing EC policies	48.2%
Practical conservation	28.6%
Commissioning expert research	20.1%

- 7 How long have you been a member of CPRE?

1-5 years	39.3%
6-10 years	22.5%
11-20 years	20.2%
20+ years	10.5%

- 8 Do you belong to any of the following other organisations?

National Trust	62.1%
RSPB	31.7%
County Naturalists' Trust	22.7%
World Wildlife Fund	16.7%
Ramblers' Association	12.4%
RSNC	12.1%
Woodland Trust	11.5%
Friends of the Earth	8.8%
Country Landowners' Association	6.6%
National Farmers' Union	4.4%
Greenpeace	3.7%

- 9 Which, if any, of the following newspapers do you read regularly?

Daily Telegraph	36.2%
Times	30.8%
Observer	21.6%
Sunday Times	21.0%
Sunday Telegraph	20.6%
Guardian	19.8%
Sunday Express	11.3%
Daily Mail	8.8%
Daily Express	3.3%
Mail on Sunday	3.1%

- 10 Would you like to help CPRE by becoming involved in any of the following activities?

Contacting MPs	21.7%
Becoming involved in Branch activities	17.2%
Writing to newspapers	13.6%
Lobbying local councillors	10.2%
Fundraising	9.4%
Giving talks	5.5%

Since 1985, considerable effort has been directed towards extending Branch capability, and on seeking more direct member involvement. This is reaping rewards in an expanding membership and growing Branch effectiveness in areas where it is most successful – although there are undoubted tensions in the process of change from volunteer capability traditionally focussed on policy activity, to a new emphasis on membership recruitment and involvement.

FUTURE MEMBERSHIP CHALLENGES

By comparison with many of the national voluntary conservation organisations, CPRE's national membership of 30 000 is small. Certainly this is so by comparison with CPRE's influence on events. It is a major challenge of the next decade to remedy this deficiency.

In an attempt to tap into the clear evidence of wider public concern about the countryside on a more systematic basis, CPRE has initiated a programme of integrated policy and membership campaigns, the object of which is to relate membership recruitment more precisely to policy campaigns.

Examples include the *Save the New Forest Campaign* (focussed on the proposed Lyndhurst bypass), other local development proposals (eg Wraysbury in Berkshire), and issue-oriented membership campaigns (eg CPRE's campaign for amendments to the draft Kent Structure Plan Review). Processes will include direct advertising and mailings, public meetings, press campaigns and opinion polls. The specific linkage between policy and membership recruitment is a new exercise for CPRE, and its results will shape our future activity.

Table 2

A summary of a Gallup Poll on the Channel Tunnel commissioned by the CPRE in February 1987

- 1 82% of people in the South East believe there has not been enough public discussion about the impact of the Channel Tunnel on the Environment.
- 2 62% believe the Tunnel will increase the concentration of development in the South East of Britain, against the rest of Britain.
- 3 66% believe the Government's decision not to hold a public inquiry into a project of this scale sets a worrying precedent for the future.
- 4 52% believe the concentration of vehicles in the Channel Tunnel will constitute a major hazard.
- 5 44% support the construction of the Tunnel.
- 6 40% in the South East support the construction of the Tunnel.

CPRE's overall message to the public is one which focusses on countryside threats, with an implied call to action. This message is borne out by a combination of national poll and survey results and our own knowledge of members' interests and concerns. (An example is provided by the CPRE's Gallup Poll on the Channel Tunnel – see Table 2.) It embraces the positive dimension (not to oppose something without offering a constructive alternative) to which our members attach importance, and confirms the value to CPRE of the distinctive, often hard, campaigning edge which it has used to good effect in recent years.

CONCLUSION

Although its direct membership is small, CPRE has good reason to believe its national policy stance and activities accurately represent not only its members' fears and beliefs, but those of a very large proportion of the wider public.

CPRE's challenge for the future is not that its message fails to reflect genuine public perceptions, but that it has not yet found the technique to convert such perceptions into membership and explicit support.