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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Public perception of the countryside

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7 Perception of the countryside: the views of a farmer

Hew Watt

INTRODUCTION

There will never be a majority public view of the countryside except in one-party states.

Minority views are what real democracy is all about and this is borne out by the fact that all governments here since the war have only represented a minority of those voting.

To enable one's views to be heard about the countryside in our democracy, we have created a large number of organisations, some financed by government, like the Countryside Commission and Nature Conservancy Council, others by their members like the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Ramblers' Association. In various ways they feed government their particular perception of the countryside and its needs.

This system works fairly well, usually avoiding violence and revolution and then, when government is faced with strong dissent, it sets up a committee, drawing its members from the great and the good and endeavouring to cover the views of all recognised organisations.

After a few months, or sometimes years, the committee issues its report which gains a few paragraphs in the national press and a summary in countryside publications. If by this time the government's original problem has gone away then everything is pigeon-holed, but if concern is still being expressed about the problem, then a Green Paper is issued stating government's thoughts on the matter and asking for views of other

interested parties and individuals. After considering replies, a White Paper is published followed by a Bill in Parliament. If this is passed then it becomes an Act, enforceable by law.

This system has the great advantage of letting a large number of people have their say and hopefully deflating the situation, but whether it presents the public's perception of the countryside is open to question.

Both government and countryside organisations tend to be run by people who overstate their case: unfortunately this is the only way to be noticed in a democracy.

Diversity of view is not limited to countryside perception. My 34 years as a magistrate in industrial Thameside taught me that the simplest careless driving case can almost bring witnesses to blows with their diversity of view. How often do YOU find that the passengers in your car know much more about what is happening on the road than you do as the driver?

My opinion of the public perception of the countryside can only be my own, coloured by serving on many rural organisations and listening to many opinions, plus farming the land all my life. Let us look then at who the users of the countryside are.

USERS OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

Walkers

Free access to all the countryside is a popular platform today, some claiming it as an inalienable right from the days when we lived in the trees. But rights and privileges can only exist in a democracy as long as individuals understand their duties and obligations.

Many of our statutory footpaths cross diagonally what were once grass fields, giving the shortest distance to cottage, work, pub and church. Today, saving time is no longer the object of the exercise but rather amenity walking for enjoyment at a time and place suitable to the user.

Rationalisation of our statutory paths is long overdue. For example, it would be far better to exchange the shortest distance between two points for the most attractive routes along unploughed headlands and hedgerows, often in a circular form.

My experience here is not encouraging. Ten years' negotiation with my local authority ending in an expensive public inquiry to divert one footpath out of our farmyard, to discourage vandalism, and along a hedgerow, the headland of which is never ploughed.

Our next effort at change followed the fragmentation of both our farming and footpaths by new trunk road construction. Following negotiations with our local authority, who co-opt user organisations to their Open Space Committee, agreement was reached where no path would cross our 70mph

trunk road and no path would be ploughed. Unfortunately, objectors came from far and wide, being against any alterations to existing paths, even where they cross dual trunk roads with crash barriers in the centre.

Due to the prohibitive cost of a public inquiry the whole scheme has been dropped.

My most successful paths today are courtesy ones which we signpost giving circular routes from our villages for residents to walk their dogs. These people do not belong to any user organisations but the paths are our most used. They are not marked on any map but could be claimed as statutory after 20 years use.

The needs of local people and national user organisations' views are poles apart and a chat with parish council, Women's Institute, senior citizens' club, plus a chat in the village pub gives you the real public perception of the countryside.

Riders

Statutory bridleways were created to join communities often miles apart in the straightest possible line. The need today is for circular amenity routes keeping riders off hard roads for their own safety and that of others.

Again, co-operation between groups of riders, local riding clubs and landowners produces far more perception of the need than local authorities whose views are often split along party lines although the 'haves' and 'have-nots' division is rather blurred today.

Motorcyclists

Green lanes are suffering much from motorcycles particularly with their overtaking of horse-riders and walkers at frightening speeds. What do you do with parents who buy their children motorbikes before they are of legal age to use them on the highway? Farmers' fields and recreation grounds are the only places they can ride, causing tremendous aggravation.

The provision locally of an excavated gravel pit, away from residential areas, can give some riders a place to exhaust themselves. Unfortunately, experience has taught me that if a legal facility is provided the need seems to gradually disappear.

Obviously it is the mixing of people on foot, horse and motorbike that causes the greatest aggravation and should be avoided at all costs.

Motorists

Farming on the urban fringe, I find town folk disenchanted with their urban planned environment and longing to get away from it on summer evenings and at weekends. The open countryside has its obvious attractions.

The danger is that well-known attractive beauty spots can soon be worn out by the sheer weight of numbers. My experience as a member of the Nature Conservancy Council for many years is that car parks should be a fair distance away from the most fragile spots so that only the enthusiastic can reach them by walking. A research project some years ago found that people visiting Epping Forest, walked, on average, 100 yards from their cars and often then only to dump their rubbish. This is why farmers are so on the defensive about access to the countryside; it is the minority who spoil it for the many.

Access to the countryside by car usually has an object, hence the provision of country and wildlife parks plus open farms with all the necessary facilities, is the way forward rather than indiscriminate access.

Flyers

These are the latest group of people whose perception of the countryside we shall consider. Flying of light planes is increasing daily, hence over 30 crashes last year, with more than 50 fatalities, usually in someone's field.

Micro flying and hot-air ballooning are also becoming regular pastimes in the countryside, with rescue operations, especially for balloons in all sorts of peculiar places in the countryside. These overflyers perceive the countryside as an attractive and never-ending carpet of landscape with never a thought for the countryfolk and livestock frightened by their sudden approach.

CONCLUSION

Who are the people whose views of the countryside we are trying to perceive today?

Their views are certainly not just contained in those of government or other national organisations.

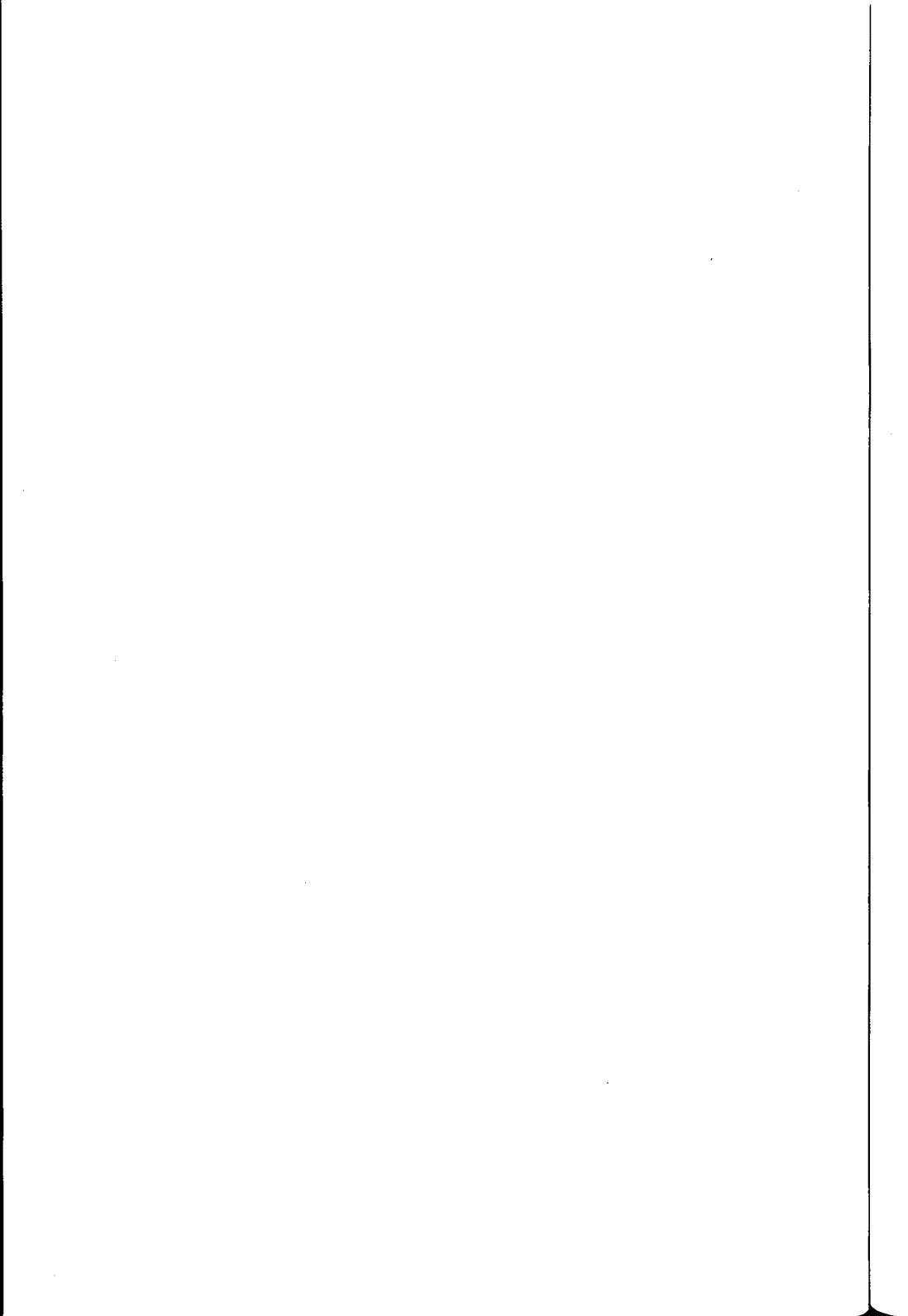
Real democracy lies in community living where self-planning has followed economic needs, creating accommodation for all social groups as occurred in years gone by.

The closer we get to the views of local people by consulting parish councils and local organisations of all sorts, the more likely we are to understand people's perception of the countryside rather than accepting the national view put forward by an executive that has never consulted, let alone visited, local communities.

Local community life has always been fluid with changing needs leading today to a greater interest in leisure pursuits.

One of the many things I learnt from China is that if you give anything free, except to the handicapped, you will never have enough of it. Nor will it be treated with tender loving care. Access to the countryside should be paid

for by users just the same as all other leisure activities. Having to pay your way encourages a sense of responsibility plus a caring for the resource. Remember the countryside is finite and just as fragile a resource as any other. Local country people know this, but their perception seldom reaches those with the power to do something about it.



Part III
**Perception of the countryside:
the impact of the media**