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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Crisis on the family farm: ethics or economics?

Edited by S P Carruthers & F A Miller

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Symposium Statement¹

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THE CRISIS

There is a substantial number of farm businesses under acute financial pressure, the greater proportion of which are smaller independent family farms. The economic pressure is compounded by a declining sense of personal value and self-esteem as farmers encounter social and physical isolation, cultural alienation, and the lack of any sense of purpose. There is also the feeling that much policy decision-making pays little regard to ethical concerns. Aspects of the latter include the need to maintain family life and values, community cohesion, employment and creative work and a sense of personal worth and purpose.

THE CASE FOR SMALL FAMILY FARMS

The need for a balanced farming structure with a wide diversity of farm size, type and tenure is recognised. But it is also recognised that present economic and agricultural policies disfavour the most economically and socially vulnerable groups. Not only are such discriminatory policies unjust, they also fail to recognise the actual and potential positive contributions made by smaller family farms to the wider society. There is a broad consensus that such farms provide higher per ha levels of employment, maintain rural society and communities, provide more recreational and tourism opportunities, and promote a more intimate and diverse landscape. It is also felt that such farmers maintain a high standard of animal welfare and good stewardship of the rural environment. Further, family businesses, and

family farms in particular, represent an integration of economic and personal relationships which is lacking from much of our society.

THE NEED FOR POLICY CHANGES

Policy formulation must take account of both people and production, and there is a need to correct the balance in favour of the former. Regulatory arrangements under present agricultural policies are having a serious depersonalising and depressing effect on many farmers, with the burden being heaviest on the smaller farmer. In fact, all regulations, whether about PAYE, food and hygiene in the B & B kitchen, health and safety, effluent disposal, and animal health, impose a much greater burden on smaller farm businesses than large ones unless they are specifically designed not to do so. The growth of larger businesses at the expense of smaller ones is inherent in the economic process. Therefore, to maintain a diversity of businesses, specific measures are needed to mitigate this effect.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There was broad consensus that policy must be formulated with much greater regard to ethical consideration - considerations that firstly reflect the needs of all sections of rural society and of future generations and that secondly take account of environmental concerns. Further, agricultural policies, and indeed all policies that affect farming and rural communities, must be guided by a greater appreciation of the moral and spiritual importance to the wider society of traditional rural communities and rural values. Economic goals are, of course, also essential, but should be pursued within a moral framework.

Policy must be formulated for the future which seeks to identify the level and intensity within a defined farm structure. And this must be part of a wider integrated rural policy which aims to maximise rural employment. In order to do this a degree of modulation in grants/support is vital if we are to maintain the essential diversity of farm structure. Past and present policy, whilst not directly discriminating against smaller farms, has positively encouraged the large to grow very much larger and stronger.

There are moral and ethical judgements to be made here as to whether this is right or fair. It is essential to reduce the regulatory burden which falls heaviest on the smallest farm, where there is little delegation.

Certain specific issues were identified at the Symposium as needing policy change. For example, diversification on the farm and part-time local off-farm employment represent two important opportunities for small farmers and their families, which are often constrained by

present planning procedures. Such planning procedures need, therefore, to be re-evaluated. A number also felt that free advisory services should be reinstated, and that advice should be proactive and not only for those whose situation had become desperate. The need to carry out further study to understand agricultural ethics and define criteria for ethical agriculture was also noted.

NOTE

¹ This statement is from the workshop discussion groups which met on the first day of the Symposium. It was prepared by James Morford of the then Small Farmers' Association and Dr Peter Carruthers of the Centre for Agricultural Strategy in consultation with the discussion group chairmen, and seeks to reflect views expressed by Symposium participants. However, it does not claim to either comprehensive or to express views shared by all. The statement was delivered, in an expanded form, by James Morford.