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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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Response to Symposium Statement

John Gummer, MP

Well, thank you very much for allowing me to change the time of this, but I felt you would prefer to have me not somnambulant as I would have been earlier on today, because one of the problems of being in Government is, if you do have to stay up all night, others are able to keep you there but do not actually have to be there themselves which is always very convenient. I felt that it would be very great sadness if I was unable to come.

I do not want to spend too much time replying to details of the statement, simply because I think questions and answers will elicit more information, but I would like first of all to congratulate you on this statement. I recognise that it is not one to which everybody can sign up totally and there are many items in it which I would have questions about, but the attitude and the atmosphere that it produces are, it seems to me, important. I want to underline some of those points and to express some of the ways in which I think we can try to make a better reality of them.

The first is, I do believe that we have to be extremely careful in talking about keeping the countryside alive. If what we mean by that is not recognising that you don't have a lively countryside without farmers - and that does not mean to say just that you have to have farmers farming the land, but you also have to have a sufficient number of people to make this work. Therefore, one of the fears that you have, a fear we all ought to have, is that you could emerge into a situation in which farm units were so large that the numbers of people involved would not be sufficient to create and to continue that village and country life that we are seeking to retain. I do believe what this

statement says is true, that the urban majority need the opportunities which a living countryside gives them and not merely the kind of landscape opportunity which is sometimes confused with that living countryside.

I would therefore like to start by picking out something that comes much later on in the statement, it is the quick reference to planning. I do think we have to start by winning a battle which is that the countryside is a workplace and not a leisure park. If it is to be a workplace, then it has to provide jobs and jobs which by their nature are dirty, messy or untidy in a way which doesn't necessarily appeal to those who have only recently come into the countryside but who find themselves on planning committees. I notice that there is a kind of connection sometimes between the length of time lived in an area and the likelihood of being elected Chairman of the Planning Committee. If you are short on the one, you are more likely to win the other vote and many of the people who are involved in these matters have not themselves earned their money in the countryside. They have brought their money from outside the countryside into it and, therefore, the importance of a living countryside, although sometimes acknowledged, is often not understood. I can think of a particular case of the willingness to consider the planning permission in many areas but not being prepared to allow a local family to build a cottage between two cottages in order that the son could remain there and look after the sheep. That did not count because the system makes it very difficult for exceptions to be made which meet local needs. I do think we are improving this, but we need to continue that improvement and that is one of the reasons why we have got this very large number of meetings with local planning authorities, discussing with them how best we can meet the needs of the rural workplace. We shall go on with those meetings. If you have not had one in your area, I hope you soon will have it. We invite not only the planning committee members but also the officials, trying all the time to get over this matter of the workplace which is the countryside. Now if that is part of what we have to do, the second part of what we have to do is to try to meet whenever possible, what you have referred to as a kind of policy skewing towards the smaller farm. Now, I am not sure that is the way I would put it. I think it is a recognition of the particular problems of the smaller family farm. That means that you may not skew the policy but you may meet those problems in a different way to that with which you would meet those of the larger unit. I am very conscious, right the way through this document, of the feeling that there are certain things that larger enterprises can take in their stride and the small farm can't because the chap or the woman who is running a smaller enterprise is doing everything. There isn't somebody else who fills in the form or deals with the particularly difficult local authority inspector while someone is

doing the actual farming. They are doing all that at once and I hope, therefore, that we will increasingly recognise that. You will all soon be having your IACS forms, these terrifying in prospect forms to try and arrange the direct payment of taxpayers' money to the farmer. Now in preparing those forms, we have had specifically in mind the smaller farm. It looks frightening when you see it and there is a thick booklet with it. The form is very similar to those which are being put out in every country of the European Community including those where all the farms are smaller than what we call a small farm. What is different is that booklet. We have taken tremendous care to write it in such a way that anyone, and I mean anyone, if they follow it paragraph by paragraph with the other thumb on the actual form itself will be able to fill in the form without having to find somebody who is good at it. Now I am not suggesting that there won't be some who feel that some professional advice or a talk with the regional office will not be very helpful, and I hope they will do that, but we have done everything possible to produce it in a way which the smaller farmer, the person who has actually got to do it all themselves, where there's no-one else to talk about it to will be able to do so and that is specifically with your kind of problem in mind. We have also taken on, or rather moved, a whole range of people into our offices, the Regional Service Centres, so that right up to the point at which the forms have to be sent back, there will be people there to give advice and I do hope that people take advantage of that. The earlier the forms are sent back, the more the chances that people will find that there is something wrong in time to put them right. All the forms have to be in by 15 May, that is a European requirement, everybody is doing that throughout Europe, including as I say the small farms. I have compared our documentation with the documentation which, for example, the French are sending out, it has to be the French, it is the only other language I speak fluently enough to read all the stuff. I can say that I have been through it very carefully and I have no doubt at all that what we have given is much easier for the small farmer than that which the French have done for their small farmer. So I hope you will see that we have tried that.

There is a whole series of other areas where I think we must seek to carry out that same policy. Regulations in general are more difficult for small farmers than they are for others. So, I am announcing today, for example, three major changes which will make it easier for small slaughterhouses upon which many small farms depend because of the particularity of their product, for those small slaughterhouses to meet the hygiene regulations at the lowest possible cost consistent with safety. Now, nobody here who knows anything about slaughterhouses would deny that some are better than others and nobody here would want the public to feel in any way unprotected, but what we must do is to do it at a level, at a price which makes it possible for us to maintain

the large network of slaughterhouses, particularly those that provide a specialist service. It is because I want to do that that the announcements that I shall be making today are such. Now the rules of the House of Commons are such that it would be absolutely disgraceful if I were to tell you precisely what they are before the House of Commons knows at 3.30. I am sorry about that but people are perfectly rightly very proud of the fact that I announce first to the House of Commons and then to others. I hope you will look out for those changes - they are very specific, they are designed to help the smaller slaughterhouse in particular.

I am sending out over next weekend, I am afraid, another form, but it is a form to get money or in this case, more opportunity to get premium. It is designed to help the smaller farm which has a dairy quota and also runs suckler cows. We have sought to give in the Community as a whole a specifically better entitlement to premium for those smaller farms than they had before. That is another example of what can be done to help the smaller operator. Of course, it was true when we delivered the milk quotas in the beginning that there was a skewing of the system towards the smaller producer, but it also means that the smaller producer has an interest today in the policy which I have made quite clear, which is that we do not want a reduction in the milk quotas that we have. A one percent reduction for a small producer is significantly more difficult than a one percent reduction for a large producer. People who are big can reorganise things, can move them around, can alter things in a way in which the smaller producer can't. So that is another example where we can, by our policies, help the smaller producer specifically.

I want just to look at two other areas before I open myself to questions. The first is the emphasis throughout this document on ethics. I am pleased about that and I hope it will be felt that a series of changes which have recently been made and which are to be made will fit in very much with what you said. Of course, ethics comprises many different things. One of the things that I think is essential is to ensure that there is a respect both for the land and for livestock which sometimes we don't find in agriculture. Respect, first of all for the land: I was lucky enough to be the member of parliament for a constituency in which Lady Eve Balfour lived and where indeed some of the earliest work of the Soil Association was carried out so it has always left me with a particular interest in organic farming. I have always been of the belief that it is not for the Ministry of Agriculture to decide that one sort of farming is better than another sort of farming. That is not a role which we ought to have, but that works both ways. So when I first became Minister of State and more since I have been Minister, I have insisted that it does mean evenhandedness. In the past, it tended to mean that one was in favour of conventional farming and was not in

favour of organic farming. I don't want to turn that around and say that I am in favour of organic farming and not of conventional farming, but I am in favour of both and I am in favour of people making choices. So you will see in the new agri-environment package there is a specific sum of money, £1 million; it is, some say not enough, but it is a start, to help the organic movement both in terms of conversion and in terms of present production. The more that we can provide a consistent supply of organic food in this country, the more we will be able to meet our national needs from home production and the more I think we can stabilise the situation and give opportunities, of course, to the smaller enterprise, for the personal involvement which organic farming demands is of course one of the things which can best be found in the smaller unit.

There are other ethical issues - animal welfare is certainly one of them. I believe that the case for the small family farm on animal welfare is not necessarily 100%. There are some excellent examples of the very best welfare both on small farms and on big farms. Husbandry is the matter. Good husbandry is the most important part of any sensible welfare policy and programme and that can be found on small farms or large farms. I do recognise though that many who are concerned with small farms have a particular interest in animal welfare and I hope it will be felt that it is our determination to raise the standards for the whole of Europe and not have a nationalist view about animal welfare suggesting that we should have high standards here, but allow the public to import from elsewhere cheaper food which has been produced at standards which are below those here - that is not a sensible thing in a single market. I want all the standards to rise. It is not because I think Britain is best in everything. Indeed I wish we would learn from the Spanish how to look after our old people and our children and I would hope they would learn from us how to look after their animals. That would be the kind of Europe which we would really want. I am not sure which I have the greatest hope of as a matter of fact. But if we think of it in those terms, then we do have to fight for higher standards, particularly over the transport of farm animals and the question of how farm animals are kept. All these are, of course, trading questions. There is no place for subsidiarity in this because it matters tremendously to the price and the quality as to the standards of animal husbandry and the levels of welfare provision. So you can't have a deal which means that Britain has high standards and somebody else has lower standards because that will have a commercial objection and I don't mind using commercial objections in order to maintain my ethical views.

The third bit of the ethical issue that I want to raise with you is this. I am hoping very soon to announce a standing committee which will consider very carefully the ethical issues that are raised by genetic

manipulation in animals. I think there are many people who are concerned to distinguish between perfectly reasonable matters of genetic engineering in plant life and the rest of it and the fears that that which could not arise in the natural state can now be manipulated and created; there are some real ethical questions to be asked about that and I want them asked and I want them asked by people who do not start with what I would call a white-coated face-masked approach to these issues. I want them asked by people who start from the assumption that respect for animals and respect for the land is a matter of importance for the humanity not only of farmers but of the whole of the community.

Lastly, I would like just a quick word on the environment. We have done a great deal to ensure that the smaller farm gets the benefits which it ought to have for looking after the environment. The Less Favoured Areas (LFAs) policy is much enhanced, for example, by the way in which so many of our environmentally sensitive areas are situated there but there are many of them beyond. I have announced another six just recently. So something over 11% of the land area of England is now covered by ESAs, many of which enable smaller family farms to continue because of the money that is now provided for environmentally friendly farming. Similarly, the other environmental projects which we have both in the extensification schemes, the way in which we hope to deal with Set-aside, the way in which we hope to deal with woodlands and the like, will give another string to the bows of small family farms.

It is not all perfect - there is much in your document that I shall be wanting to look at carefully and I shall want to know more about. All I can assure you is, that in this difficult business of trying to keep the balance in the very many interests of agriculture, the concerns of the smaller units are ones which none of us should forget and none of us does forget. I will never deliver all the things that you want - I have started from that assumption. It is in fact at least an assumption which is true of every part of farming because no Agriculture Minister ever does deliver everything the farmer wants and indeed if he delivers what the farmer wants today, by tomorrow new things would have arisen. That is the nature of farming. All I want you to know is that your concerns, although not always shared, although not always agreed with, are always considered, and that in the way in which we make decisions, with all the difficulties of a Community Policy and indeed all its exciting opportunities, the issues that you have raised and the concerns for the smaller unit are always there, and we shall seek in future to make that clearer and more obvious both in the statements we make and the requirements which we place upon it.

**Session 5:
The European dimension**