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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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## Talking point

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You are already well aware of the crisis facing the small family farm, you have the facts and figures at your finger tips. You are also aware of the unique role the farmer and his family play in ensuring the continuity of the traditions of rural Britain.

I have not researched any facts and I have no figures to offer you. My remarks are drawn from my experiences gained from living and working in the countryside, from working within the farming industry and as a dairy farmer's wife and mother of three children, and from the anxiety I feel in my heart for the future of our farms and our families.

Fifty years ago this summer I was given a starring role in a short film made by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). It was made to promote the Dig for Britain Campaign. Recently I and my family were invited to watch that film again. We were particularly struck by the commitment and dignity of the people involved, many of them farmers.

Today we have to tackle exactly the reverse situation. I believe our commitment is just as strong as it was then, but our dignity is rapidly being undermined.

The small family farm does not carry the same responsibility for the dramatic overproduction of foodstuffs in Europe as does the large industrial agricultural holding, many of which do not derive their sole income from agriculture.

The family farmer cannot cut staff to reduce costs, he or she cannot find capital to diversify, or reinvest to maintain income and reduce production. There is no doubt that without some relief the blanket restrictions imposed by EC policies will hasten the extinction of the small family farm.

We hear and read much nowadays about the need for conservation and preservation. We are reminded daily of the drastic decline in the numbers of endangered species. We must stop now and take a careful look at the small farmer and his family. We must take stock of their overall contribution to the agricultural and social history of this country. Are they the true custodians of the countryside? I believe they are, and I see no long-term benefit whatsoever in driving them from their land.

The British farmer is by nature and breeding a passive creature, his despair seldom turns to anger. He has no burning desire to turn over the tables of the money lenders, nor, as happened more recently in France, to break up the market place. Instead he usually turns inward upon himself and his family, often blaming himself for the predicament in which he and his family find themselves. There is talk of setting up a help-line for farmers whose debts and despair have brought them to breaking point. But help must come sooner rather than later.

We have all received our glossy copies of the Citizens' Charter, *Commitment to Service*, from MAFF. In the opening paragraph it states "This is where the schemes and rules agreed in Brussels or Whitehall meet the real world of agriculture". Realistically then this is the point where MAFF must be prepared to search for some flexibility in these schemes and rules, and try to bring relief to family farms under threat.

My family has called on MAFF twice over the past year and on both occasions the Officer has arrived with a ready-prepared set of questions pertaining to the subject of concern. We were told we only had to answer the questions put to us. In other words, anything that we had to say would *not* be written down and used as evidence.

It is more than likely that a farming family at the point of despair knows best how they could be helped to survive a period of crisis. It may be the waiving of a crushing regulation, or support for a planning application. If only there were someone to talk to, someone prepared to listen, someone prepared to talk to them.

Fifty years ago when the 'Man from the Ministry' visited a small Oxfordshire Village to address a group of anxious country folk he began with the words "I have come here tonight to talk to you". If this approach were adopted today, if the man or woman from the Ministry arrived with a clean sheet of paper ready to listen and make notes of what the farmer needed to say, if they were prepared to talk to the farmer and his family, able to assure them that the Ministry of Agriculture is still on their side, and is setting out to do all in its power to help, I believe an atmosphere of mutual respect would develop. Confidence and dignity would be restored and we would have taken the first step on the way towards overcoming the crisis faced by the family farm today.