

The Origins and Early Development of the National Farmers' Union

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Abstract

The early history of the National Farmers' Union (NFU) has hitherto been comparatively neglected. The associations of agricultural interest which preceded it and the circumstances of its formation in 1908 are outlined. Whereas agricultural interests had often been divided and weak, the union, particularly under Colin Campbell's leadership, established both its credibility and a sound organizational structure. The period of the Great War consolidated and extended its ability to speak authoritatively for the needs of agriculture and the significance of the War Agricultural Executive Committees is considered. Emerging NFU positions on the issue of protection and its moves towards a more positive and constructive role in policy formulation are examined. Circumstances at the outset of the Second World War forced a recognition of the need for a working partnership between farmers and the state: a development of corporatist relations made possible by the prior emergence of a representative farmers' organization with the necessary organizational capability and political acumen. This paper shows how those competences were acquired.

THE National Farmers' Union of England and Wales was formed in 1908 and rapidly rose to prominence as the major representative organization for farmers. By the 1920s its membership had reached more than 100,000. It peaked at 210,000 in 1953 and is currently around 120,000. Remarkably, there is no readily available published account of the origins of the National Farmers' Union (NFU), although it would be hard to underestimate its importance to the twentieth-century development of agricultural policy in England and Wales. Its role in the immediate post Second World War period did, of course, receive scholarly attention in the seminal study by Self and Storing, but that work provides only a brief outline of the origins of the Union.¹ This paper seeks to go some way towards remedying this deficiency in our understanding of twentieth-century agricultural politics.

In accounting for the Union's rapid success, Self and Storing emphasize its partisan dedication to the needs of tenant

farmers in contrast to earlier and unsuccessful agricultural organizations which had attempted to represent all three branches of agriculture – workers, farmers and landowners. Newby claims, rather more explicitly, that the Union was formed in direct response to growing trade union activity among farm workers and the undue political influence of landlords, especially in Lincolnshire where the first Union branch was formed.² He cites as evidence the high incidence of union activity in that county and the formation of the Central Land Association (the forerunner of the County Landowners' Association) in Lincoln in 1907. However, his claim that the NFU was a direct response to the landowners' organization is somewhat misplaced, since the Lincolnshire branch was formed in 1904 and not 1908 as he claims. 1908 was the year in which the *national* union was launched, and by that time other factors had come strongly into play.

This paper examines the formation of the Union and argues that whilst it did indeed

¹ P Self and H Storing, *The State and the Farmer*, 1962.

² H Newby, *Country Life: A Social History of Rural England*, 1987, p 163.

champion the interests of tenant farmers in their relations with workers and landlords, its impetus and success was even more dependent upon the assertion of farmers' interests in the market-place and to government. Conflict between farmers and workers, and farmers and landowners was, after all, a long established feature of agrarian politics. But henceforth its importance was to be increasingly overshadowed by the growing salience of relations between farmers and the government, food processors, and suppliers. This added dimension, which has yet to find a place in standard accounts of the origins of the NFU, emerges clearly from the detailed examination of the formation of the Union. Indeed we would argue that the Union effectively turned its back on the preoccupation with tenurial issues which had characterized earlier organizations and instead focused on agricultural production at a time when such issues were assuming national political priority in debates on tariff reform and protectionism.

I

It is important, therefore, to pay some attention to the characteristics of the ill-fated organizations which preceded the NFU. Although the agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century gave rise, in the creation of the Board of Agriculture in 1889, to a separate, if rudimentary, central administrative structure responsible for agricultural questions, the British government eschewed protectionism. This was in sharp contrast to other West European nations. Moreover, its reluctance to intervene in the agricultural sector or even to develop a coherent policy was reflected in the confusions and uncertainties which beset the various farming organizations. Not only were there political differences between tenant farmers, farm workers and landlords, but even within these groupings there was little lasting agreement on the causes of, or solutions to, the problems besetting

agriculture. The period was thus characterized by a number of political initiatives, mostly short-lived and incapable of providing the basis for sustained policy developments. Such ill-fated efforts did, however, mark a change in that their aims and objectives were overtly political. Previously national and regional agricultural societies and local farmers' clubs, which had existed from the end of the eighteenth century, had devoted themselves primarily to the promotion of technical advancement.³ For example the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE), launched in 1839 at a time of great controversy over the Corn Laws, resolutely avoided involvement in political debate despite pressure from some farmers that it should be used to defend the Corn Laws.⁴ The Farmers' Central Society of Great Britain and Ireland, a rival organization founded in the same year, was overtly political but it lapsed with the repeal of the Corn Laws.⁵

The next serious attempt to unite agriculture politically was made through the formation in 1865 of the Central Chamber of Agriculture (CCA). Initially tenant farmers used the Chamber and its affiliated county chambers to further the argument for greater tenant rights, particularly a legal right to reimbursement for the permanent improvements, such as buildings, fencing and drainage, carried out on farms by tenants. But landlord opposition within the chambers proved strong and ultimately they became the preserve of landlords, with few farmers or workers remaining as members.⁶

³ See: K Fitzgerald, *Ahead of their Time: A Short History of the Farmers' Club 1842-1967*, 1968; N Goddard, 'Agricultural Societies', in G E Mingay ed, *The Victorian Countryside*, 1981; N Goddard, *Harvests of Change: The Royal Agricultural Society of England 1838-1988*, 1988; K Hudson, 1972, *Patriotism with Profit: British Agricultural Societies in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, 1972.

⁴ J A Scott Watson, *The History of the Royal Agricultural Society of England 1839-1939*, 1939.

⁵ J R McQuiston, 'Tenant Right: Farmer against Landlord in Victorian England 1847-1883', *Ag Hist*, 47, 1973, pp 95-113.

⁶ T W H Brooking, 'Agrarian Businessmen Organise: A Comparative Study of the Origins and Early Phase of Development of the National Farmers' Union of England and Wales and the New Zealand Farmers' Union, ca 1880-1929', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Otago, New Zealand, 1977. Chapter 4, *passim*.

About 60 per cent of the CCA's chairmen between 1865 and 1915 held titles and over half were MPs.⁷ As Brooking argues, the National Farmers' Union, formed in 1908, was not so much an organization based on the experience of the Chamber as one which actually emerged in opposition to it.

In 1879 a separate tenants' group, the Farmers' Alliance, was formed. But after much vaunted initial success around the time of the Liberal election victory of 1880 it slumped in the mid-1880s and was disbanded in 1888.⁸ The problems faced by the Alliance are instructive, even if at first glance somewhat contradictory. On the one hand its claim to represent all tenant farmers was compromised by too close an identification with the Liberal Party, particularly its radical wing, and the claim that the Alliance had links with Irish tenant-farmers' organizations.⁹ On the other, its aims were rather modest. It distanced itself from criticisms of the landlord-tenant system as such, and its views on the need for rent as an incentive for good agricultural practice put it at odds with emergent radical thinking on the benefits of peasant proprietorship. In short, its pragmatic and capitalistic outlook limited the breadth of its appeal both within farming circles and amongst radicals who were increasingly concerned with the plight of farm workers and the limited opportunities for small farmers.

In 1892 a National Federation of Tenant Farmers' Clubs was formed, based in Lancashire, Cheshire, Cumberland and North Wales.¹⁰ As with the Farmers' Alliance, the Federation concentrated its activities on establishing security of tenure

and tenant rights.¹¹ One other political initiative which deserves mention was the formation, also in 1892, of the National Agricultural Union (NAU) which was instigated at a conference organized by the CCA and the Lancashire Federation of Farmers' Associations. Largely inspired by one man, Lord Winchelsea, it aimed, like the CCA, to represent landowners, farmers, and workers. But whilst its insistence on equal representation of the three groups on its executive clearly implied criticism of the landlord domination of the CCA, the two organizations essentially worked in tandem, with the NAU committed to a greater emphasis on local activity. It did not improve tripartite relations, however. Indeed, Brooking suggests that it prompted more distrust. Nonetheless the union grew rapidly to 50,000 members by 1895, the majority being farm workers, although after the death of Lord Winchelsea in 1898 it languished as a national agricultural pressure group and was taken over by propagandists for agricultural co-operation, becoming in 1901 the Agricultural Organisation Society.¹²

The emphasis of groups other than the CCA and NAU on tenurial matters served to divert attention from other likely subjects for would-be agricultural reformers. In particular the cause of protectionism was slow to attract support. Tracy adduces seven main reasons why the UK, alone among the major European powers, failed to adopt protectionist policies for agriculture during the late nineteenth century:¹³

- 1 Britain's lead in industrial production favoured free trade;
- 2 The influence of economic theorists such as Ricardo and Adam Smith;
- 3 The political legacy of the anti Corn Laws agitation;

⁷ *Ibid*, p 103.

⁸ J R Fisher, 'The Farmers' Alliance: and Agricultural Protest Movement of the 1880s', *Ag Hist Rev*, 26, 1978, pp 15-25.

⁹ *Ibid*, p 16.

¹⁰ P Horn, *The Changing Countryside in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales*, 1984, p 86.

¹¹ A Mutch, 'Farmers' Organizations and Agricultural Depression in Lancashire 1890-1900', *Ag Hist Rev* 31, 1983, pp 26-36.

¹² A H H Matthews, *Fifty Years of Agricultural Politics, Being a History of the Central Chamber of Agriculture, 1865-1915*, 1915, *passim*.

¹³ M Tracy, *Agriculture in Western Europe: Challenge and Response 1880-1980*, 1982, *passim*.

- 4 The strength of the British navy;
- 5 The food production of British colonies;
- 6 The relative political weakness of the landowners as a result of democratic reforms;
- 7 The absence of a coherent and united agricultural pressure group as a result of divisions between landlord and tenant and between arable and livestock farmers.

Tariff reform did become a major issue at the turn of the century and for a while, after pressures for tenurial reform had been appeased by the 1906 Agricultural Holdings Act, it was the dominant topic of agricultural politics and, indeed, national politics. The division and weakness of the agricultural interests is nowhere more apparent than in their limited and contradictory contribution to this wider debate which was fuelled mainly by resentment towards the foreign tariffs erected against British manufactures and a concern to preserve the unity of the Empire.¹⁴ In 1881 the Farmers' Alliance had denounced protectionism in *The Times* as a 'delusion and a snare'. By the end of the century support for protectionism was, nevertheless, gathering amongst farmers. But few either saw agricultural tariffs as politically feasible or engaged in political activity to secure protectionist policies.¹⁵ Moreover there were still opposing voices. Increasingly, many livestock farmers were becoming dependent upon cheap imported corn and other fodder crops as a feeding-stuff. Opposition to protectionism from other farmers, moreover, arose from fears that proposals for imperial preference would be likely to increase rather than decrease the volume of food imports.¹⁶

The Liberals' electoral triumph of 1906, on a free trade ticket, forced an intense debate within the Unionist party on the nature of the protectionist policies which

might be pursued.¹⁷ But its increasing complexity did little to win the support of organized opinion within agriculture. Thus, when the Unionist Party dropped the policy of taxes on food imports in 1913 it feared local opposition from farmers far more than any concerted national opposition from the newly formed National Farmers' Union.¹⁸ H W Palmer, the secretary of the Lincolnshire Farmers' Union, immediately informed Bonar Law of his opposition. The NFU, meanwhile, must have been well aware by this stage that tariff reform promised little for the farmers. In its attempts to prevent a re-run of the electoral débâcle of 1906, Unionist tariff reformers had strenuously repudiated any notion that increased food prices would result from a policy of imperial preference:

Tariff reform in fact, far from being expected to raise food prices in the eyes of its advocates, was expected to reduce them by stimulating the production of food in the colonies. The thinking behind this was urban, to proclaim that tariff reform would 'enable our working classes to obtain the necessaries of life at their lowest prices', but it left the farmers high and dry.¹⁹

This change of emphasis may not have been fully appreciated by traditional Conservative voters in the shire counties, who still felt betrayed by the volte-face of 1913. The importance of such local feeling cannot be entirely discounted. It clearly caused much concern to Unionist party organizers. Marrison, for instance, suggests that Tracy overlooks the divergence between local and national agricultural opinion and as a result makes too much of the landlord/tenant and livestock/arable divisions in explaining the lack of a consistently articulated protectionism from Britain's farming leaders. He

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

¹⁵ A J Marrison, 'The Tariff Commission, Agricultural Protection and Food Taxes, 1903-13', *Ag Hist Rev*, 34, 1986, pp 171-187.

¹⁶ Tracy, *op cit.*, *passim*.

¹⁷ N Blewett, 'Free Fooders, Balfourites, Whole Hoggers. Factionalism within the Unionist Party, 1906-1910', *Historical Journal*, XI, 1968, pp 95-124; A Sykes, *Tariff Reform in British Politics 1903-1913*, Oxford, 1979.

¹⁸ Sykes, *op cit.*

¹⁹ *Ibid* p 273.

emphasizes instead the wider political constraints facing the national farming organizations. In particular, and notwithstanding the existence of keen Unionist advocates of agricultural protection, such as Viscount Alfred Milner and Henry Chaplin, Marrison points to the continuing disregard for protectionist arguments by many politicians and senior civil servants:

Tariff reform was a difficult debate, a chaos of complex and often baffling economic arguments in which it was easy to be made a fool of. Furthermore, the sixty years since 1846 had led to an ethos in which the Cobden Club and Free Trade League did not hesitate to question the morality, even the sanity, of the protectionist. Given that the poor spent a high proportion of their income on food, agricultural protectionists were particularly vulnerable to such propaganda. Agricultural protectionism flourished more easily in the 'Farmers' Parliaments', the inn-keepers' rooms of Hodge's masters, than it did in the lofty debating halls and electrically-lit committee rooms of Westminster.²⁰

Tracy also fails to give sufficient attention to the extraordinary state of party politics during the twenty years up to the Liberal landslide victory of 1906. It was not only farmers who were unable to find a means of establishing new policies. The question of Irish home rule effectively divided British politics in a manner which transcended other political cleavages, of which agriculture was only one. Social reformers influenced by collectivist thinking found themselves as significant groupings within both main parties. Leaders of both parties during this period found difficulties in devising programmes sufficient to command party loyalty or even, on occasion, to form a government. It is scarcely surprising that a subject as inherently complex as agricultural protection failed to find its way into party programmes, even though many members in both Houses of Parliament had some agricultural interests. In the light of this party political confusion the lobbying by farming organizations which did take place

was designed to influence politicians in both main parties. The NAU attempted to canvass prospective parliamentary candidates to urge them to support an agricultural programme, a policy that was later taken up by the NFU. Frustration with the ineffectiveness of the CCA's parliamentary activities led a number of its local associations to promote the idea of a separate agricultural party. The initiative ultimately failed to win full CCA support, however, in spite of the enthusiasm of its secretary A H H Matthews. Indeed, given the lack of success of various attempts to forge a new Centre Party around this time the failure of the CCA is hardly surprising. The incident provided one more opportunity which the emergent NFU could exploit, as well as a lesson regarding its own parliamentary tactics.²¹

II

In developing an account of the origins of the NFU we have drawn upon some little known local studies as well as unpublished and archival sources.²² The Union has its roots in the failure of the various tenant farming organizations of the latter years of the nineteenth century and in the conservatism of the only organization which did survive, the CCA. It would be unfair to suggest that the CCA devoted itself entirely to the preservation of landlord privileges. Indeed, it even endorsed modest policy changes in favour of tenant rights. Nonetheless its political initiatives over a fifty-year period were somewhat limited. It could

²¹ On the complex politics of this period and the emergence of the tariff reform question see: B H Brown, *The Tariff Reform Movement in Great Britain 1881-1895*, New York, 1943; D A Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery. A Study in Leadership and Policy*, Oxford, 1972; H C G Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists. The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Elite*, Oxford, 1973; B Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform. English Social and Imperial Thought*, London, 1960; P Stansky, *Ambitions and Strategies. The Struggle for the Leadership of the Liberal Party in the 1890s*, Oxford, 1964.

²² In particular we are indebted to Thomas Brooking for permission to quote from his thesis, a copy of which is held at the NFU Library in Knightsbridge. Brooking, *op cit*.

²⁰ Marrison, *loc cit*, p 185.

claim some credit for the passage of a number of Diseases of Animals Acts which helped to advance disease eradication. It campaigned on local taxation and freight charges on the railways, and it played a part in the establishment of the Board of Agriculture.²³ Beyond that it acted mainly as a forum for the discussion of agricultural matters, more often than not with a bias towards the concerns of landowners.

A number of Farmers' Protection Associations whose insistence on farmer-only membership and concern with the provision of legal assistance anticipated the NFU were established around 1900.²⁴ In 1905 several of these local organizations united to form the North Eastern Agricultural Federation.²⁵ Other regional groupings in the Midlands, Lancashire and Worcester followed. But attempts to amalgamate into a national body were resisted by the North Eastern Federation.²⁶ In contrast, the Lincolnshire Farmers' Union (LFU) founded in 1904, the immediate forerunner to the NFU, was quite prepared to lead moves towards national organization.²⁷ The LFU was similar to the Farmers' Protection Associations, but significantly different in that it engaged in a much wider range of activities than the provision of local aid.²⁸ Its first chairman and instigator was Edward W Howard, who first floated the idea in 1900.²⁹ A number of issues prompted his actions. He was particularly angry that farmers should have to pay taxes for the upkeep of roads 'that were carrying an increasing burden of farm produce from abroad'. Howard was soon eclipsed by Colin Campbell who became Chairman of the Lincolnshire Union six months later and was subsequently

President of the NFU from its formation in 1908 until 1918. In 1906 Campbell addressed a meeting to launch the second county farmers' union in the country in Cornwall. Ironically Cornwall subsequently delayed affiliating to the NFU until 1918. Two other county branches successfully launched prior to 1908 were Devon and Kent.

The spur to the formation of a national group came in August 1908 when a number of farmers in Shropshire opposed a move by the National Federation of Meat Traders' Associations requiring a warranty of health with all cattle sold. A vigorous 'no warranty' campaign was set in motion, culminating in two simultaneous meetings on 3 November. In London the CCA met with the National Federation of Meat Traders' Associations to seek a settlement. While addressing a packed inaugural meeting of the Shropshire Farmers' Union in Shrewsbury, Colin Campbell was interrupted to receive a telegram from London announcing the capitulation of the meat traders. The success of the CCA was seen not as a reason to re-think the notion of forming a new organization but rather as proof of the effectiveness of resolute campaigning. Indeed the chairman of the Shropshire branch claimed that success lay with the new organization which rapidly merged with the Lincolnshire union, and in December 1908, in London, took a formal decision to establish a national union.³⁰

A further boost to the union occurred at its first general meeting in the following June at the Gloucester show, when five hundred new members were added to the 10,000 who had already joined. By the summer of 1910 the figure had risen to 15,000; it reached 22,000 by early 1916; and by 1918 the figure at around 60,000 was nearly one third of the eligible membership.³¹ The spread of geographical coverage

²³ *Ibid* Chapter 4, *passim*.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p 121.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p 122.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p 124.

²⁷ Brooking dismisses a claim that the Yorkshire Agricultural Union, founded in 1891, was the first county branch of the Union on the grounds that it permitted non-farmer members, p 126.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p 127.

²⁹ Notebooks of E W Howard in the possession of Mr C Howard, Lincolnshire.

³⁰ L B Powell, *Full Harvest: The Story of the National Farmers' Union of England and Wales*, unpublished mss held at the NFU Library in Knightsbridge, p 69.

³¹ Brooking, *op cit*, *passim*.

was rapid: by 1918 only Cornwall, Caernarfonshire, Merioneth, Cumberland, Westmorland and Durham lacked affiliated groups.³² Membership reached 100,000 in the early 1920s, but declined for a period during the 1920s. Self and Storing suggest that membership began to climb again at the end of the 1920s.³³ Walters, looking at the Cheshire county branch, places the revival somewhat later.³⁴ He suggests that in a county dominated by dairying, the failures in dairy policy in the late 1920s prompted a fall in membership so that the county had only 2500 members in 1932, fewer than in 1918. But after the formation of the Milk Marketing Board, membership increased rapidly, reaching 4500 in 1937, 5000 in 1940 and 5700 in 1945.³⁵

Campbell, more than any other person, established the direction of the early NFU. With other leaders he turned his back on any suggestion that the union might include representatives of workers and landowners. It saw itself primarily as a tenant farmers' organization, though not clearly enough for some counties, which prompted the Devon Farmers' Union (DFU) to resolve in 1918 that the NFU Executive Committee should contain at least five tenant members. In its early days, also, it avoided alliances which might prejudice its objective solely to represent farmers. The union was aware that the power of landlords was on the wane and that public sympathies, not to mention those of the Liberal Party, were very much with the farmers and workers. Subsequently, once it had become well established, the union did seek to establish collaborative relations with landowner and worker organizations, under pressure from its county branches where cordial working relations with workers and landowners were seen as a practical necessity.

Thus in 1918 the Parliamentary Committee of the DFU held a series of meetings with the

Agricultural Workers Union (AWU), from which arose a resolution to form 'a National Agricultural Association to link farmers, landlords, workers and trades, to give legislative effect to the urgent requirements of agriculture'. The NFU launched a series of initiatives, although they did not go quite so far as the DFU proposal. For example in 1922 the executive agreed to hold meetings with the Central Landowners Association and the AWU to make recommendations for a Joint National Programme. Moreover the union was brought into close contact with other agricultural interests in its participation between 1919 and 1924 in the statutorily established Council of Agriculture for England.³⁶

Campbell strongly resisted the notion of an agricultural party. Above all, his vision was of a united farmers' body, and he bitterly opposed any factionalism that might diminish the influence of the Union. Moreover, he was one of the first agricultural leaders to recognize that, in an increasingly managed economy, agri-politics had to be fought, not only by seeking to convince politicians of 'moral' or 'national' arguments, but also by offering them the prospect of a unified body of agriculturalists committed to progressive policies. Thus in developing policy he directed his energies towards government as well as towards the membership, thereby ensuring that the Union avoided the error of single-issue politics to which the earlier tenant farmer organizations had succumbed. He attempted, additionally, to build support for a package of measures and avoided those which discriminated in favour of, or against, particular sections of the farming industry.

Thus at a time when the plight of small farmers excited much public comment he resisted any notion of special policies which might alienate larger farmers, on whom the Union's financial strength ultimately

³² *Ibid*, *passim*.

³³ Self and Storing, *op cit*, p 39.

³⁴ P Walters, 'Farming Politics in Cheshire: A Study of the Cheshire County Branch of the National Farmers' Union', unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 1970, p 65.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p 65.

³⁶ Self and Storing, *op cit*, pp 39-40.

depended, as in this letter to the Board of Agriculture, written in 1912:

I am all against small men being singled out for help, there is too much spoon feeding already. Land has been taken compulsorily for smallholders whose success even under normal conditions was open to grave doubt . . . Even if it could be done I doubt the wisdom of bolstering up insolvent farmers, whether large or small, and merely postponing the evil day.³⁷

The LFU had already effectively discouraged the smallest farmers from membership by setting a membership fee of half a penny per acre with a minimum of one shilling subscription.³⁸ It should, perhaps be remembered that Campbell himself was a substantial farmer.³⁹ Other policies, however, were designed either to attract the smaller farmers or, as has consistently happened since, to make political capital from sympathy for small farmers. It is often difficult to discriminate between the two sets of motives: they may not, indeed, be separable. For example, the Union presented its case concerning trading standards for fertilizer and animal foodstuffs as 'especially for the protection of the small farmer against fraud'.⁴⁰

In nurturing the support of the smaller farmers the adoption of specific reform policies was of far lesser importance than the manner in which the Union organized its own affairs. The significance of this factor has been neglected by most commentators who have tended to concentrate on the national political role of the Union in assessing the reasons for its successes. For Self and Storing, concentrating on state-industry relations, the Union's fortunes were set by the responsibilities thrust upon it during the First World War:

Almost accidentally, the Union found itself a major force in agricultural politics as it was called upon to play an important role in policy formulation and execution.⁴¹

³⁷ Quoted in Powell, *op cit*, p 33.

³⁸ Brooking, *op cit*, *passim*.

³⁹ There is a discrepancy between Powell and Brooking with regard to the exact size of Campbell's farm. Powell gives a figure of 2,000 acres and Brooking 600 acres.

⁴⁰ NFU General Council, 1909, Institute of Agricultural History, University of Reading.

⁴¹ Self and Storing, *op cit*, p 39.

There can be little doubt that the food production campaign of the 1914-18 war greatly boosted the NFU's position, but it was not quite so 'accidentally' contrived as they suggest. The union was drawn into policy discussions at a national level and Walters highlights how at the local level the new responsibilities contributed to the strengthening of the union's branch structure.⁴²

The emphasis on the war period should not, therefore, detract attention from the progress the union had made prior to the war. It could only enter into new relations with central government and the county councils in wartime because it had already established both its credentials and a sound organizational structure. Highlighting the contacts the union had made with both Liberal and Unionist parties and with Whitehall, Brooking concludes that by 1914 'the NFU seemed to have won a place in the political scene as one of the more authoritative spokesmen on the needs of agriculture'.⁴³ The war consolidated and extended this position.

Its pre-war growth had been effectively organized. Colin Campbell was deeply aware of the need to build up a committed membership and to retain the loyalty and unity of the different sectors of a highly diverse industry. The message had been brought home to him early on through his experiences with the Cornish Farmers' Union, over whose inauguration he had presided but which had then persistently refused to affiliate to the national union until 1918. In his attention to organizational questions Campbell was ably assisted by the first national secretary, H W Palmer, and by the treasurer, W A May. The latter was a publisher and allowed the already well-known agricultural weekly, the *Mark Lane Express*, to carry the official imprimatur of the Union and to report on all Union

⁴² Walters, *op cit*, *passim*.

⁴³ Brooking, *op cit*, p 2.

activities.⁴⁴ Such publicity was invaluable. Palmer, who had previously worked in insurance, encouraged a professional approach and the provision of services for individual members. He was largely responsible for the idea of using attractive insurance premiums to entice members. The NFU Mutual Insurance Society was formed in 1921 but most county branches had adopted local schemes much earlier than that. Not only did the premiums provide the finance for salaried officers, but they also bound the members more strongly to the Union, thus countering the risks of fluctuations in membership as its involvement in different issues changed and of competing organizations emerging to poach members. During the inter-war years insurance and legal advice provided the most important day-to-day activity in the county branches, except perhaps, for those involved in the milk question.⁴⁵

It was also, perhaps, Campbell's Cornish experience that convinced him that the Union should not seek too great a degree of centralism or unanimity which might strain its internal unity. On a number of issues the union avoided taking a definitive stance. This was especially the case in the early years, for example, over tariff reform. In 1910 the following resolution was unanimously adopted:

That the Executive Committee of the NFU makes no pronouncement on the merits or demerits of tariff reform, but strongly urges the members and farmers generally to make their combination so powerful that if a definite scheme of tariff reform is promulgated, the industry of agriculture in all its branches shall receive an equal share of any benefits that may accrue to other industries.⁴⁶

The establishment of a strong county branch structure with close links with headquarters ultimately reaped tremendous advantages in forging a loyalty to the national organization

which could transcend strong regional and sectional divergences. Such a strategy was not without its problems for the national union however. Thus, in the case of milk marketing, Cheshire NFU was at the forefront of the campaign for a national scheme, but the Union was faced with considerable disquiet from non-milk producing counties.⁴⁷

Campbell also recognized the need for caution in party politics. When the Unionists dropped tariff reform in 1913, not only did NFU leaders learn something of the fickleness of party commitments, but also something of the reasoning behind policy reversals. In this case the lesson was indeed salutary, for Bonar Law's thinking was partly based on electoral considerations. In his view, a reversal of tariff reform policies would not deprive the Unionists of many farming votes because the farmers were, by now, even more hostile to the Liberal Party's proposals to establish an agricultural minimum wage.⁴⁸

The Union made no formal links with political parties, although it sought to develop influence within them. It encouraged county branches to promote farmer involvement at all levels: with the judiciary, local government, and in parliament. Its success in this should not be underestimated. Thus Hallam notes a significant increase in the proportion of farmers on Somerset County Council, from 15 per cent of the Council in 1912 to 25 per cent in 1930.⁴⁹ In Cheshire, NFU branch leaders ran candidates in the 1919 County Council elections and in the early 1920s the Union was instrumental in the formation of an Independent Party on the Council.⁵⁰ Nationally, the

⁴⁷ Powell, *op cit*, *passim*.

⁴⁸ A F Cooper 'Another Look at the "Great Betrayal": Agrarian Reformers and Agricultural Policy in Britain', *Ag Hist*, 60, pp 81-104. See also: A F Cooper, *British Agricultural Policy 1912-36: A Study in Conservative Politics*, Manchester, 1988.

⁴⁹ O Hallam, *The National Farmers' Union in Somerset. A History of the County Branch 1912 to 1962*, Somerset NFU, 1970, p 46.

⁵⁰ Walters, *op cit*, pp 147-9. See also: J M Lee, *Social Leaders and Public Persons: A Study of County Government in Cheshire since 1888*, Oxford, 1963.

⁴⁴ Powell, *op cit*, *passim*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, *passim*.

⁴⁶ NFU General Council, 1910, Institute of Agricultural History, University of Reading.

1922 general election saw four NFU-sponsored candidates elected and 74 MPs giving their complete support to the NFU programme.⁵¹ Direct sponsorship of MPs had been abandoned by the 1931 election in favour of close attention to lobbying and the cultivation of support from particular MPs. This shift was not appreciated by all farmers and the Union lost members in the 1930s partly as a result of the brief rise of the 'Agricultural Party'.

NFU scruples regarding any form of explicit allegiance to a particular political party did not extend to abstinence from some lobbying, especially at a local level, on issues which tended to place the Union on the right of the political spectrum. In particular it objected to the increased public expenditure associated with the rise of the modern state and of local government, and found sympathy among both old-fashioned laissez-faire Liberals and some Conservatives. Expenditure on roads was a common cause of complaint:

Farmers on horseback or in pony traps grudged their money being spent on tarred surfaces which they did not need and which were so slippery that they caused accidents to their horses.⁵²

Even publicly funded projects of benefit to agriculture were treated with deep suspicion. In education, for example, the Somerset Farmers' Union initially opposed the County Council's plans to found a farm institute.⁵³ In the light of such opinions it is not surprising that the national union felt the need to proceed cautiously on such issues as tariff reform and price support. Indeed, it is important to look in greater detail at the emerging NFU view on the issue of protection, especially in the light of the agricultural crisis of 1920-21.

III

As already indicated the food production campaign of the last years of the war brought the NFU into new relations with government. Much has been written on the production campaign itself and there is little need to dwell here on the main features of the changes in production and organization which occurred.⁵⁴

The findings and recommendations of two government committees, the Milner Committee and the Selborne Committee, are of particular importance. The Milner Committee was set up by the new Coalition government's President of the Board of Agriculture, Lord Selborne, in 1915. Significantly, Selborne was a Unionist sympathetic to tariff reform and agricultural support. The Unionist Party itself made a manifesto pledge in 1912 to introduce a guaranteed price for wheat in the event of war. Both the appointment of Selborne, and his choice of Viscount Alfred Milner as committee chairman, ensured that interventionist proposals would now be put. However, not all the cabinet were of like mind, for Asquith sought a balance between proponents of *laissez-faire* and state intervention.⁵⁵ Milner was a leading proponent of tariff reform, not merely as a fiscal policy but as part of a much wider programme of reconstruction which included agricultural support:

He wanted a wider programme of domestic and imperial reorganization, 'a policy of constructive

⁵⁴ On this period see: L M Barnett, *British Food Policy During the First World War*, 1985; P E Dewey, 'Food Production Policy in the United Kingdom, 1914-1918', *TRHS*, 30, 1980, pp 71-89; R R Enfield, *The Agricultural Crisis 1920-1923*, 1924; Lord Ernle, 'The Food Campaign of 1916-18', *JRASE*, LXXXII, 1921, pp 1-48; J Harris, 'Bureaucrats and Businessmen in British Food Control, 1916-19', in K Burk ed *War and the State: The Transformation of British Government, 1914-1919*, 1982, pp 135-156; T H Middleton, *Food Production in War*, 1923; Sheail, 1974, 'The role of the War Agricultural and Executive Committees in the food production campaign of 1915-1918 in England and Wales'; Sheail, 1976, 'Land improvement and reclamation: the experience of the first world war in England and Wales'. E H Whetham, 'The Agricultural Act 1920 and its Repeal - the "Great Betrayal"', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXII, 1972, pp 36-49; E H Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VIII 1914-1939, Cambridge, 1978.

⁵⁵ Barnett, *op cit*, Chapter 3, *passim*; See also: S Koss, *Asquith*, London, 1976.

⁵¹ Brooking, *op cit*, p 199.

⁵² Hallam, *op cit*, p 23.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p 24.

Imperialism, and of steady, consistent, unshaking and unrelenting Social Reform', and stressed more than anyone, including even Joseph Chamberlain in his first tariff reform campaign of 1903, the connection between the Empire and social reform in the interests of efficiency.⁵⁶

In a speech in Guildford as early as 1907 Milner spoke of the need for 'the resuscitation of agriculture', without specifying the means. Another tariff reformer, Theodore Angier, had proposed guaranteed prices for agriculture as early as 1903.⁵⁷ In 1914 a guaranteed price for wheat was recommended by an internal Agricultural Consultative Committee, which had been strongly influenced by reformers, and allies of Milner, Charles Bathurst and Christopher Turnor.⁵⁸ Bathurst revealed in parliament the failure of government to act on the committee's recommendations. But his hopes that this might prompt pressure from the country were dashed when a motion censuring the government was lost at the 1915 Annual General Meeting of the NFU. However, it would be a mistake to assume from this that the Union was not in favour of price support. Two members of the Agricultural Consultative Committee were appointees of the NFU, and the Union was clearly disappointed at the government's response to the committee's recommendations. However, as one delegate observed in the debate, during war it was 'their duty to be patriotic and not bother the Government'. Moreover the Union had welcomed Selborne's appointment and had no wish to harm his position.

In July 1915 the Milner Committee too recommended both a guaranteed price for wheat and that county councils should be invited to set up agricultural sub-committees to assist in increasing food production.⁵⁹ Although the pricing proposals were again

rejected by government – Selborne did not even receive the support of senior cabinet colleagues such as Bonar Law and Balfour – the Board of Agriculture was given leave to pursue the formation of county committees. The Board secured the agreement of the County Councils Association and in the autumn of 1915 the first County War Agricultural Committees were formed.

Many county councils had agricultural or agricultural education sub-committees which had been in existence for a number of years and it was these which invariably provided the nucleus of membership for the new committees. Thus nine of the twenty-six members of the Lancashire War Agricultural Committee had been members of the county council's agricultural education sub-committee.⁶⁰ In Devon, the County Council's Agricultural Committee provided twenty-five of the thirty-eight members of the new committee. The Board of Agriculture called for broad representation on the committees in the guidance it offered to the county councils:

Whatever be the method of formation adopted, the Committee should be fully representative of all the agricultural interests of the County, whether landowners, farmers, labourers, and others... it is important that the Committees should include representatives of the Chamber of Agriculture, the Farmers' Union, and other Agricultural Societies or Institutions in the County.⁶¹

The committees were also instructed to form representative district committees, the details of the representation being left to the discretion of each county committee. In Devon the following composition was adopted:

- 1 The County Aldermen and County Councillors resident in the district.
- 2 The Chairman of the Rural District Council.
- 3 One representative of the Farmers' Union.
- 4 One representative of a local Agricultural Society.
- 5 Any member of the County Committee resident in the area and not included in the foregoing.

⁵⁶ Sykes, *op cit*, pp 137.

⁵⁷ Barnett, *op cit*, p 7

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p 24

⁵⁹ Board of Agriculture and Fisheries Departmental Committee on the Home Production of Food (England and Wales), *Interim Report*, Cmnd 8048, *Final Report*, Cmnd 8095, 1915.

⁶⁰ Brooking, *op cit*.

⁶¹ Devon Branch NFU Archive.

6 Power to co-opt five additional members, recommending that three should be women.

It was these committees which surveyed all farms during the autumn of 1915, primarily to assess labour needs as part of discharging their chief function which was to promote increased food production through education and advisory work. Two points of political importance emerge from the experience of the new committees. First, they provided an opportunity for NFU activists, many of whom were already county councillors in any case, further to extend their local political expertise. Secondly, those involved soon discovered the difficulty of performing a task of political control without formal regulatory powers. It was, therefore, pressure from the farmer dominated committees, rather than from government, which led to the demand for powers of compulsion.⁶² The call was taken up by Edward Strutt and Daniel Hall, who persuaded the President of the Board of Agriculture, R E Prothero, to secure the introduction, under the 1914 Defence of the Realm Act, of a new regulation which empowered the Board of Agriculture to make orders for the improvement of cultivation.

Thus in January 1917 new County War Agricultural Executive Committees (CWAECs) were appointed jointly by the Board and the County Councils, which were granted executive powers to make orders on behalf of the Board. These executive committees were smaller – a maximum of seven members – than the rather unwieldy county council committees, from which their membership was drawn. The larger committees were not disbanded. But, deprived of executive powers, they soon sank into obscurity. The district committees remained in being and exercised a crucial role in advising the CWAECs and carrying out their instructions and in this way the NFU found itself involved in an

interventionist policy initiative for the first time.

Relations between the CWAECs and the county NFU branches varied. In Cheshire, for example, the majority of CWAEC members were landowners and only a minority were working farmers.⁶³ But in Devon the chairman of the county council's agricultural committee from 1907 until 1919 was William Tremlett, a leading executive member of the DFU, who chaired the county branch from 1913 to 1918, as well as sitting on the national executive. The Union advised, and on occasions supported, individual members in dispute with committees.

The Union also pressed for guaranteed prices as a corollary to the stocking and cropping controls now vested in the Board of Agriculture and county committees and the Corn Production Act of 1917 was greeted as something of a triumph by the Union. As the NFU's journal, the *Mark Lane Express*, put it:

the Corn Production Act was a tardy recognition of the fact that farmers were entitled to some security, and that they ought not to be asked to undertake work of the highest national importance without some guarantee against loss.⁶⁴

However, the role of the Union in influencing the passage of legislation at this time should not be overestimated. It had little direct influence on its drafting, and in the case of state support for agriculture, pressure from Unionist Party activists was far more important. In 1916 Milner, Selborne, Prothero (who had replaced Selborne at the Board of Agriculture), Turnor, and Bathurst formed the British Agricultural Section of the British Empire Producers' Organisation, to which the NFU subsequently affiliated, to campaign for minimum guaranteed prices for grain and

⁶² Powell, *op cit*, *passim*.

⁶³ Walters, *op cit*, p 294.

⁶⁴ *Mark Lane Express*, 31 Dec, 1917; quoted in Barnett, *op cit*, p 196.

potatoes.⁶⁵ The disastrous harvest of 1916 and the renewed threat of a German submarine campaign prompted even free-traders such as Runciman at the Board of Trade to contemplate state intervention in agriculture.⁶⁶ Unionists long wedded to protection used this change of opinion to press for commitments for the post-war period.

The Selborne Committee, of 1916-17, was the main such initiative. The committee was set up to consider methods of 'increasing home-grown food supplies in the interest of national security'.⁶⁷ It was concerned primarily with the need to expand arable production, which it proposed to achieve through guaranteeing farmers minimum prices for the chief arable crops. As a response to such guarantees farmers were expected to provide a higher output of grain, this output to be regulated by assessors empowered not only to inspect and report on farming practice, but also ultimately to terminate tenancies and manage estates in the national interest.⁶⁸ The committee had an added concern to establish minimum agricultural wage rates and hours of work.

The recommendations of the Committee have been seen as an attempt to forge an active 'partnership' in agriculture, between the state and the farmers.⁶⁹ However it has to be said that the principle of 'partnership' was more implicit than explicit, with more emphasis being placed on the needs of the state and the nation rather than on the needs

of agriculture as such. Civic duty was what was expected of farmers rather than the fulfilment – as equal partners – of a bargain with the state, as the Committee itself explained:

The State must adopt such a policy and formulate it publicly as the future basis of British agriculture, and explain to the nation that it is founded on the highest consideration of the common weal. It must be explained to landowners, farmers and agricultural labourers alike that the experience of this War has shown that the methods and result of land management and of farming are matters involving the safety of the State, and are not of concern only to the interests of individuals. . . . The history of our country shows that, when once the path of duty has been pointed out to them and they understand how grave is the responsibility put upon them, neither landowners, nor farmers, nor agricultural labourers will fail to rise to the emergency. . . . The Government has no fairy touch which will enable it to produce instantaneous results. It must work through, and by means of, the men who are now holding and cultivating the land.⁷⁰

The mechanism advocated by the Selborne Committee for the realization of these aims was a continuation of the system of County Agricultural Committees. These committees, with County Council members and others 'with practical knowledge of agriculture or some other branch of rural economy, or representative of some special rural interest'⁷¹ were to perform duties delegated by the Board of Agriculture and Parliament. In addition, it was recommended that representatives from the county committees should serve on an English National Agricultural Council, composed of county members and nominees of the President of the Board of Agriculture.

The NFU's role in the deliberations of the Selborne Committee was extremely modest. They continued to lobby and to produce policy statements but they were not formally consulted. When Lord Selborne addressed the Union Executive in July 1917, four months after the publication of the

⁶⁵ NFU Executive Minutes, July 10, 1917, Institute of Agricultural History, University of Reading. Two senior NFU members, H Padwick of Sussex, and G A Bellwood of Lincolnshire represented the Union on the Association and were clearly in very broad sympathy with its aims. See comments made at NFU AGM, Feb 27, 1918, Institute of Agricultural History, University of Reading.

⁶⁶ Barnett, *op cit*, Chapter 4, *passim*; See also: P B Johnson, *Land Fit for Heroes: The Planning of British Reconstruction 1916-1919*, Chicago, 1968.

⁶⁷ Selborne Committee, *Agricultural Policy Sub-committee Reconstruction Committee, Final Report*, 1916, Cmnd. 9079.

⁶⁸ Whetham, *op cit*.

⁶⁹ Whetham, *loc cit*, p 38; G Cox, P Lowe and M Winter, 'From State Direction to Self Regulation: The Historical Development of Corporatism in British Agriculture', *Policy and Politics*, XIV, 1986, pp 475-490.

⁷⁰ Selborne Committee, *op cit*, paras 17, 52.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* paras 107-110.

committee's report, the one question put to him after his address by the Union's Vice-President, Herbert Padwick, was why the NFU had not been asked to give evidence to the Committee. At the same meeting it also became apparent that union officers had not been consulted before the issue of government orders.

The Union had been devoting much of its energy to improving its internal efficiency.⁷² The changes included more permanent staff, a smaller executive committee, a central legal fund and a requirement for counties to establish small executive committees.⁷³ With these changes completed in 1918 the Union turned its attention to remedying the deficiencies in its influence in policy-making which had been so starkly displayed by its exclusion from the Selborne Committee's deliberations. Such efforts were rewarded when it succeeded in persuading the Board of Agriculture not to appoint paid assessors for supervisory work under the 1917 Corn Production Act, but to continue to rely on the farmers serving on the county agricultural committees. However, the Union was slow to develop a clear policy on agricultural support. Protectionism was not yet dominant in a union which retained something of a deferential posture in its approach to government. Thus at the 1919 annual general meeting a resolution calling for 'the formation of a Committee to approach the Prime Minister with a view to ascertaining the policy of the Government towards agriculture' was carried. An amending resolution, calling for guaranteed prices for meat, corn, potatoes, milk, and cheese was lost, but it did receive vocal support from delegates from Shropshire, Dorset, and Bedfordshire.

The debate must have excited much passion, for towards the close of the meeting another motion was proposed which clearly sought to placate the protectionists and improve upon the motion that had been passed. This motion was carried and put the Union on the road to a far more positive role in presenting national policy proposals. The AGM motion read as follows:

That the Executive Committee be instructed to formulate as soon as possible a clear and definite statement setting forth the difficulties and requirements, present and prospective, of agriculture, and the means best calculated to surmount the former and provide for the latter. That they be authorised to obtain any evidence and assistance they may deem necessary, and that their report be submitted to the Government and the Press as the considered recommendation of the National Farmers' Union, as practical representatives of the industry in order to assist the Ministers concerned in framing their agricultural policy.⁷⁴

This move towards a more positive and constructive role in policy formulation took the Union into a much closer co-operation with government; first in its contributions to the work of a Royal Commission on agricultural prices appointed in July 1919;⁷⁵ secondly in its involvement in the new political arrangements under the 1919 Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Act; and thirdly in the deliberations over the 1920 Agriculture Act.

The 1919 Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Act, as well as providing for the upgrading of the Board of Agriculture to Ministry status, also established a three-tier system of agricultural representation and regulation, comprising county committees, national councils and a central advisory committee. Soon after the passage of the Act the union scored a notable success by increasing from two to five its direct representation on the Agricultural Advisory

⁷² The organization of the Union, in particular the number of county and local branches, has been a continual source of concern throughout the Union's history and the subject of numerous reports and inquiries. There has been a tension between the desire of existing county and local branches to preserve their identity and the pressure from headquarters to save costs through amalgamations.

⁷³ Brooking, *op cit*, *passim*.

⁷⁴ NFU General Council, 1919, Institute of Agricultural History, University of Reading.

⁷⁵ Landowners were excluded from the Commission but farmers and representatives of agricultural labour were prominent: K O Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918-1922*, Oxford, 1979.

Committee for England and Wales,⁷⁶ a source of advice for the Ministry. It did this by successfully persuading the newly formed Ministry to utilize its right to alter the Committee's constitution by regulation. The other members were elected directly by the much larger Council of Agriculture for England and Council of Agriculture for Wales, which, in turn, drew their representation from nominations from the County Council Agricultural Committees and direct nominees of the Ministry.

Initially the executive powers of the county committees were considerable as they were responsible for enforcing standards of husbandry and estate management under the terms of the 1920 Agriculture Act. However, after the repeal of this legislation the committees' powers were greatly reduced. Through the inter-war years their major concerns were the management of county council small-holdings, agricultural education and the administration of various regulations affecting agriculture. But they were not afraid to advocate reforms of agricultural policy, as the following motion passed by the Devon County Council Agricultural Committee in 1930 indicates:

That this Council, viewing with grave concern the present condition of arable agriculture and the increase of agricultural unemployment, respectfully requests Parliament to frame a National Policy for agriculture capable of immediate application.

NFU activists continued to cut their political teeth in the work of the committees. In Devon, for example, the two longest serving chairmen of the County Committee were William Tremlett and John Metherell, who also held periods of office as county chairman of the DFU.

The 1920 Act, which provided for a continuation of war-time support for agriculture, was arguably the first piece of agricultural legislation in which the NFU negotiated with Government as the sole

representative of the agricultural industry. Having received support from Milnerite Unionists in the past, the NFU for a time seemed now more to identify with the Liberal Party and Lloyd George's onslaught on landlordism. Indeed, the 1920 Act was amended in the Lords by Unionist landowners critical of the NFU.⁷⁷ The repeal of the Act, the 'great betrayal' in 1921, did not immediately change this position, for many Unionists were surprisingly mute in the face of repeal. Cooper makes much of this silence among the politicians – Milner was, indeed, the only leading government minister to resign – and furthermore claims both that many farmers were pleased at the repeal of the Act and that the NFU offered only token opposition.⁷⁸

Cooper's case raises important questions regarding the NFU's path to protectionist policies. According to him the farming community had much to gain from de-control and renewed economic freedom. Therefore the NFU was ready to spearhead a new deal for the industry based not so much on the social reform offered by protectionist policies but on economic reconstruction. There is more than a hint of a provocative free market ideology being put forward here, and future key events in the development of the NFU (the handling of the milk issue and the more thorough going incorporation into policy making from 1939 onwards) do little to support the broad thrust of Cooper's thesis. Nonetheless by focusing on a political account of the great betrayal, in contrast to the economic emphasis of most other accounts he does point to a strand of thinking within the NFU not highlighted by other commentators.⁷⁹ But in his anxiety to discredit 'progressive' Unionist advocates of agricultural support

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, *passim*.

⁷⁸ Cooper, *op cit*, Chapter 3, *passim*.

⁷⁹ Whetham, *op cit*, for example, in the course of a painstakingly detailed account of the agricultural economic history of the period, accords the NFU only half a dozen pages in a book running to over three hundred pages. Consequently no space is devoted to the political complexity of the union.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, *passim*.

such as Milner and Bledisloe, however, Cooper surely overstates his case by failing to acknowledge the diversity of opinion within the NFU.

The Union, by the outset of 1919, had learnt a great deal in organizational terms and had established a reasonable working relationship with Government in order to implement state policy initiatives. It has not yet, however, fully resolved the ambivalences of policy which engendered difficulties in forging a long-term relationship with government. Crucially, as Cooper is right to point out, it was not fully convinced of the role of intervention in the marketplace. This was plain from NFU evidence presented to the 1919 Royal Commission on Agriculture:

A considerable body of evidence given by farmers went to show that in the opinion of many of them no measure for assisting the farming industry by means of guaranteed prices of cereals is necessary solely in the interests of farmers themselves. It was said by witnesses speaking on behalf of the NFUs, which represent altogether over 100,000 occupiers, that the farmers are prepared, if freed from control of their farming operations and permitted to make their own bargains in the labour and produce market, to carry on their industry in a manner satisfactory to themselves without guarantees from the State. In their opinion, it is for Parliament to decide whether the national requirements necessitate increased corn production and consequential restriction on their freedom of action as regards their system of cultivation.

There were a number of reasons for this ambivalence and reluctance to endorse a protectionist policy formula. It has to be remembered that wartime policy (and the 1920 Act) involved far more than just price support. Restrictions on freedom of managerial activity were one component, the determination of farm workers' wages another, and price controls (as opposed merely to price support) a third. These restrictions, particularly the emphasis in the policy on increasing the wages of farm workers, were a cause of resentment among many farmers. The emphasis by the policy-makers on cereal production also provoked

some antipathy among livestock farmers and those wedded to the norm of 'mixed' farming. But the main characteristic of the Union's position was its acquiescence in the final view of Government. Thus three of the four NFU representatives did, in fact, endorse the Commission's eventual support for guaranteed prices, while only the Welsh representative advocated an immediate return to the free market.⁸⁰

One of the lessons learnt by the Union at this time was to distinguish more carefully between price controls and price support. The recognition that de-regulation did not necessarily mean the abandonment of price support policies was a crucial intellectual step which the Union seems to have made sometime in 1919. Certainly by October of that year the NFU had moved more sharply towards a protectionist stance. A policy document, 'The Food of the People', proposed a programme of guaranteed prices, greater security of tenure, and reduced levels of taxation and rates. But Cooper claims that in less than two years the Union was again showing ambiguity on the question of support:

the Farmers' Union was not overly hostile to the government's repudiation of the Agriculture Act. A cabinet committee conducted confidential inquiries with the NFU on the subject of the Act. To its relief, the committee discovered that the assent of the Union to the suspension of guaranteed prices was not very difficult to secure, provided that the other provisions under Part I of the Act for Wages and Boards and supervision of farming were also repealed and that Part II of the Act was retained. Publicly, the organisation's only complaint was that the farmers had not been freed of the control, which deprived them of the free play of the market with respect to the prices of their produce, at an earlier date.⁸¹

But the position was, in reality, far more complicated. The Union leadership may have appeared compliant in its attempts to salvage something from the wreckage of the government's ill-fated new deal for agriculture. But it is too simplistic to

⁸⁰ Brooking, *op cit*, *passim*.

⁸¹ Cooper, *op cit*, pp 102-103. Part 2 of the Act dealt with tenure.

suggest, as Cooper does, that unanimity existed within the Union, with support for regulation being confined to a tiny élite comprising leading Unionists such as Milner and Bledisloe. It is true that few NFU activists had a strong liking for Bledisloe, but this was more due to his trenchant criticisms of the tenant bias of the Union than because of his views on protection. Cooper's case fails to address the evidence that it was in the counties that the debate raged most fiercely and where concern over the impact of de-regulation was often most forcefully expressed. For example, as early as December 1919 a meeting of the DFU Executive passed the following resolution:

That in view of the semi-official announcement that meat is to be de-controlled, we enter our protest against the proposal; we urge the Government to stand by its pledge as to guaranteed prices; and we also ask that in the event of de-control, that at least three months' notice be given by the Government.

Over the country as a whole the reaction was bitter. As Brooking comments:

Protests poured in from the county branches. Some even went as far as comparing the Government's 'breach of faith' with Germany's violation of Belgium in 1914, while others suggested that politicians could never be trusted in future and described the Coalition Government as a 'set of rogues'.⁸²

Having secured some compensation and fought off attempts by some government members to retain the Wages Board, the NFU, in Brooking's words 'steadily withdrew from any partnership with the State and carried out its activities from a position of political isolation'.⁸³ At the local level the county agricultural committees had been stripped of many of their functions too, but NFU activists continued to be involved in the low-key duties that remained the preserve of the committees, responsibilities which stood them in good stead when stringent powers were again assumed by

County War Agricultural Executive Committees at the outbreak of the Second World War. The Union initially also retained its involvement with the Council of Agriculture but withdrew in 1924. Despite these setbacks its membership did not decline dramatically and, just as importantly, neither did its organizational efficiency:

Any but the strongest and most determined organisation would have declined in similar circumstances. That the NFU did not decline says much for the administrative abilities of its leaders and the resilience and efficiency of its established procedures. On the other hand the very desperate nature of the NFU's situation helps explain why it fared as well as it did. The repeal of guaranteed prices caused the organisation to lose its innocence. After 1922 it was much more hard headed in its dealing with government and came to regard any single panacea, whether State assistance or co-operation, as unrealistic. From that moment on it came to rely more on its own resources. That tendency helps explain how survival was later turned to real advantage despite the negative suspicion of State assistance bred by the repeal.⁸⁴

IV

We would argue, therefore, that this period of agricultural politics, in which agricultural corporatism has its roots, was marked by the gradual emergence of a powerful and well-organized pressure group. During the 1920s and 1930s when corporatist ideas were being extensively canvassed it had the organizational capability and the monopoly of representation which made it possible for it to contemplate forging fresh relations with Government. Moreover it had sufficient experience of the perils of such a partnership to enable it to face Government as a seasoned and tough negotiator. However, for such a partnership fully to emerge, the sort of conditions which might prompt each side to recognize the need for cooperation had to exist. Such a context became intrusively apparent at the outset of the Second World War. But even before that the beginnings of corporatist relations had been firmly

⁸² Brooking, *op cit*, p 195.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p 196.

⁸⁴ Brooking, *op cit*, p 197.

established by the emergence of the Milk Marketing Board and by the tentative moves back towards agricultural protection which occurred in the 1930s.

In seeking to specify the enabling features which made the development of corporatist relations possible we must give due weight to the experiences of the First World War and its immediate aftermath; for these provided the framework of political understanding which was a precondition for future initiatives. That the specific initiatives taken ultimately failed was due in no small part to the somewhat misguided impulse to tie policies too closely to the unusual circumstances of war: not least the need to concentrate on wheat production. State support of British agriculture did, of course, need to be much more broadly based. It also

needed to be more firmly rooted in the market-place, and particularly the sectors of agriculture to which Britain in the twentieth century was better suited. Those developments which moved eventually towards the generation of policy arrangements entailing a 'working partnership' between farmers and the state have been extensively chronicled by Self and Storing and others. Such policy options were, however, only available because of a whole set of preconditions, and critical amongst these was the prior emergence of a representative farmers' organization with the necessary organizational capability and political acumen. We have sought to indicate in this paper the comparatively neglected processes by which the National Farmers' Union came to acquire these necessary competences.

Notes and Comments

ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF FOOD AND SOCIETY

The Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS) will be holding its fifth annual meeting at Tucson, Arizona on 14-16 June 1991. For more information contact Dr William Hart, Department of Dietetics, School of Allied Health Professions, St Louis University, 1504 S Grand Boulevard, St Louis, Missouri 63104. Phone 314-577-8525.

HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

A symposium on the History of Agriculture and the Environment will be held at the National Archives Building, Washington, DC, on 19-21 June 1991. The symposium will be interdisciplinary in nature and will consider the history of agriculture and the environment in its broadest aspects. The sponsors are the Agricultural History Society, the American Society for Environmental History, and the agencies of the US Department of Agriculture. Further

information can be obtained from Douglas Helms, National Historian, Soil Conservation Service, PO Box 2890, Washington, DC. Phone 202-447-3766.

ENVIRONMENT, WILDLIFE, AND CONSERVATION EXHIBITION

The Sunday Times Environment, Wildlife, and Conservation Exhibition will be held in the Grand Hall, Olympia on 6-11 July 1991. A major international conference on the environment will be held concurrently with the exhibition and a feature of the event will be a special Environmental Technology Pavilion. The exhibition will provide an opportunity for all those concerned with the environment and conservation to demonstrate the action they are taking. The exhibition is supported by The Royal Society for Nature Conservation.

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