

The Agriculture Act, 1920 and its Repeal— the “Great Betrayal”¹

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SUMMARY

IN 1917, faced with a drastic shortage of imported foods, the government of Mr Lloyd George introduced a food production campaign to stimulate the output of grain and potatoes from British farms. The financial basis of this campaign was secured partly by the fixed prices paid by the Ministry of Food, and partly by the provision, through the Corn Production Act, 1917, of guaranteed minimum prices for two cereals, wheat and oats, for the harvests up to and including that of 1922, thus covering a period equivalent to the normal cropping rotations of four or five years. These guaranteed prices were continued in a modified form by the Agriculture Act, 1920 for an indefinite period, and the Act included a clause stating that four years' notice would be given if parliament intended to abolish them. When the expected fall in cereal prices began in the spring of 1921, and the guarantees would have begun their task of protecting British farmers from serious financial loss, the Agriculture Act was repealed just before it came into effect, in spite of the clause about four years' notice. This paper describes the background to the legislation on agricultural policy between 1917 and 1921, and assesses its effects both on war-time production and on the relationships between the government and the agricultural community.

INTRODUCTION

During the seventy years which followed the repeal of the corn laws, the national policy for British agriculture was limited to paying farmers, for the food and raw materials they produced, prices determined by competition in markets increasingly dominated by overseas produce. This policy was considered so fundamental to the welfare of the country that when grain and meat prices fell sharply in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and successive governments showed real concern over the agricultural depression, protection by way of tariffs was never contemplated for any of the basic foods. At any time up to 1916 there was strong opposition to any policy which provided support for British farmers by raising the prices of imported grain, meat, or dairy produce.

In 1916, after nearly two years of war and of rising prices for foods, the then Prime Minister, Mr Asquith, appointed an agricultural policy sub-committee of the Reconstruction Committee to advise on the post-war problems of agriculture;

¹ I am indebted to Mr Richard Mather, who summarized for me the relevant cabinet and parliamentary papers on this topic; and also to the late Mrs Orwin, who gave me a draft of a paper on agricultural policy between the wars begun by her husband, the late Dr C. S. Orwin, the first Director of the Agricultural Economics Institute, Oxford.

its chairman was Lord Selborne, himself a former President of the Board of Agriculture. As an afterthought, the sub-committee was also asked to consider the question of an appropriate policy for the current emergency. Its interim report was published in January 1917, when German submarines were gathering for unrestricted warfare against ships approaching British ports; the Selborne sub-committee then recommended the introduction of guaranteed minimum prices for two corn crops, wheat and oats, to extend over at least four years. Such a guarantee would ensure that farmers could recoup, over the period of a normal crop rotation, the high cost of ploughing their grassland and the investment in implements required to increase immediately the output of cereals for human consumption. (Barley was omitted from the guarantee in deference to the temperance movement.)

In their interim report, and also in their final report published in March 1918, the Selborne sub-committee argued the case for the adoption by the state of a positive agricultural policy for the post-war years. The sub-committee urged the value to the nation of a greatly increased area of arable land as the basis of a stable and efficient agriculture, providing a higher proportion than in the years before 1914 of the nation's food, with less dependence upon imported feeds for animals.

In recommending that there should be a permanent increase, compared with the early years of the century, in the area of arable land and therefore in the area of corn crops, the Selborne sub-committee were influenced by three factors. There was impressive evidence, recently marshalled by Sir Thomas Middleton of the Food Production Department, that arable land, properly cultivated on a four- or five-course rotation, yielded more food per acre for human consumption than the average acre of grassland.¹ Grain and fodder crops, including grass leys, taken in rotation round a farm provided both cash crops, such as wheat and potatoes, and also meat and milk from the animals kept to consume the fodder, grass, and straw and to provide manure. Good grassland could be intensively grazed to provide a high output of livestock products, but then it was liable to become infested with parasites and weeds which seriously reduced its output and affected the health of the animals grazing on it; there was at that time no effective treatment for most internal parasites other than removing animals to clean pastures. In practice, therefore, the intensive grazing required to yield a high output from grassland could not be maintained for any length of time, except on a few favoured sites, such as the coastal marshes or the famed fattening pastures in the midlands.

Secondly, good arable farming with its balance of crops and livestock employed twice or three times as many men per 100 acres as were employed on the ordinary permanent grass which dominated large areas of the English midlands. One man and his pair of horses were needed at that time for every 30, 40, or 50 acres of arable land, according to the type of rotation and the quality of the soil, while stockmen and shepherds were also required. The Selborne sub-committee deplored the "drift from the land" which had occurred in the past forty years, and which they associated

¹ T. H. Middleton, *The Recent Development of German Agriculture*, Cd. 8305, 1916; *Report of the Agricultural Policy Sub-Committee of the Reconstruction Committee*, Cd. 8506, 1917, and Cd. 9079, 1918.

with the conversion of arable to grass; they were anxious to ensure that more families were employed in rural areas after the war, either as farmers on newly created smallholdings, or as employees on well-managed arable farms.

Thirdly, the experience of war showed that arable farms equipped with horses and implements could easily and quickly grow more grain as an emergency measure, while the grassland farmers no longer had the horse-power, the manpower, the implements, or the knowledge to embark on arable farming. Their livestock, especially the dairy cows, were large consumers of imported grain and cattle cake, and in time of emergency, such as 1917, they were direct competitors with human beings for the limited volume of imports, while arable farmers had the by-products of the crops as winter food for their animals. On all counts, therefore, an extension of arable farming was judged to be desirable as a permanent policy for the post-war years, but arable farming imposed higher costs, more investment, and greater risks of a variable income than most forms of grassland farming. If national policy required the maintenance of arable farming over a larger area than would normally result from the operation of market forces, some inducement must be given by way of profitable crops which provided the immediate cash incomes of arable farmers.

As a long term policy, therefore, the Selborne sub-committee recommended that prices of two cereals be guaranteed indefinitely at a level which would generally cover the costs of ordinary arable farming. To ensure that the workers on the land were lifted out of the abyssmal poverty which had engulfed the southern and eastern counties of England, the sub-committee also recommended that wages boards should be set up, on the lines of the wages boards for sweated industries, with powers to enforce minimum wages for all able-bodied men. The sub-committee advised against any control of rents, on the ground that landowners would be required to invest considerable sums in new buildings, field drains, water supplies, and more repairs to the existing structures, and that they were therefore entitled to higher rents as an inducement to take a more active part in the welfare of the land.

Finally, the sub-committee strongly recommended that the agricultural departments should retain, in perpetuity, some of the powers to control land use which they had assumed in December 1916 under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA). If there were to be guaranteed prices and wages for farmers and workers, the nation should require in return a minimum level of efficiency in the use and management of its land. A detailed survey of all farms and woodlands should be followed by warning notices to occupiers or owners of land that, for any reason, was not making its proper contribution to production. If no improvement followed after a reasonable time, then the agricultural departments should terminate the tenancies of defaulting occupiers, or take over, for a minimum period of five years, the management of a neglected estate. The sub-committee called for a positive policy to improve the general efficiency of agriculture by an active partnership between landowners, farmers, and more powerful agricultural departments; by more pro-

vision for research, education, and advice on technical matters; by state investment in small-holdings, land reclamation, and forestry; by better organization through county agricultural committee and advisory councils in Whitehall and Edinburgh; and by a host of minor administrative improvements.

CORN PRODUCTION ACT, 1917

It can seldom have happened that any official committee found its recommendations implemented so fully as were those of the Selborne sub-committee. Within two years of the final report, legislative or administrative action had been taken on all the major recommendations. The Corn Production Act, 1917 provided guaranteed minimum prices for wheat and oats somewhat below the current buying prices of the Ministry of Food for the harvests of 1917 and 1918, and then on a descending scale for three further years. A minimum wage of 25s. a week was imposed immediately, causing a considerable increase in earnings in some of the low-wage areas, though earnings over most of the country had already reached or exceeded this level under the stimulus of a scarcity of able-bodied men. Wages boards were also set up in each county of England and Wales to provide from the end of 1917 a continuing review of wage rates linked to a standard working week. The Scots were satisfied with their existing system of voluntary negotiating committees, and so the proposal embodied in the Bill to establish wages boards there was dropped from the Act in its final form. Tenant farmers were further favoured by a clause which forbade landowners from raising rents because of the guaranteed prices provided by Part I of the Act, and tenants faced with a claim for higher rents could insist on arbitration to ascertain if the claim was illegally taking advantage of the guarantees. The existing powers of the agricultural departments to control cropping and land use were given a permanent form in the Bill, but here both Houses of Parliament insisted on considerable modifications.

Six months' experience of the working of the current powers under DORA, exercised on behalf of the agricultural departments by agricultural executive committees in each county, had led to a few cases where farmers or landowners felt themselves aggrieved by what they considered unreasonable cropping orders, or dispossession without adequate cause. Under the existing system a complainant could appeal only to the local commissioner of the agricultural departments and through him to the higher officials in London or Edinburgh, all members of the same organization from which came the original source of complaint. The Lords insisted that any powers over cropping, and any proposal to evict tenants or to take control of an estate, must be subject to the right of an appeal to an independent arbitrator. After much political bargaining the final compromise embodied such rights of appeal into Part IV of the Corn Production Act, which was to come into force at the end of one year or at the end of hostilities, whichever occurred first.

Meanwhile, the powers of the agricultural departments under DORA remained in force. In the eighteen months between January 1917 and June 1918 some 1½ million acres of permanent grass and half a million acres of temporary grass had been

ploughed and planted with grain or potatoes to feed a beleaguered nation (table 1). The county committees issued compulsory cropping orders in thousands, but only to give tenant farmers protection from any post-war claims for breach of their leases, which very often forbade the ploughing of established grass. Few of these

TABLE I
AREA UNDER GRAIN IN GREAT BRITAIN, 1914-21 (in thousands of acres)

	<i>Wheat</i>	<i>Barley</i>	<i>Oats</i>	<i>Potatoes</i>	<i>Temporary grass</i>	<i>Permanent grass</i>
1914	1,868	1,699	2,849	614	3,917	17,607
1915	2,247	1,381	3,071	608	3,879	17,579
1916	1,912	1,502	3,075	558	4,125	17,495
1917	1,918	1,619	3,300	656	4,038	17,251
1918	2,557	1,654	4,024	803	3,490	15,896
1919	2,221	1,683	3,675	630	3,700	15,782
1920	1,875	1,842	3,304	707	4,125	15,846
1921	1,976	1,606	3,161	712	4,073	15,906

Source: Agricultural Statistics.

compulsory cropping orders were ever opposed by their recipients, with whom the desired action had normally been agreed before the order was signed. The food-production campaign was primarily an exercise in self-government by the farming community, based on the persuasion and experience of the respected farmers, estate agents, and landowners who composed the county committees.

CORN PRODUCTION (AMENDMENT) ACT 1918

In the summer of 1918, when the German armies were once more threatening the gates of Paris, Part IV of the Corn Production Act was due to come into effect. The agricultural departments felt convinced that the right of appeal against cropping orders, rarely as it might be exercised, would hinder the work of the county committees in adding yet another half-million acres of grassland to the area under corn for the harvest of 1919, when a continuing shortage of imports was certain, whatever else remained unknown. The President of the Board of Agriculture, Mr Prothero (later Lord Ernle), therefore introduced into parliament the Corn Production (Amendment) Bill, continuing indefinitely the existing powers of the agricultural departments under DORA. He admitted that the Bill broke the bargain formerly made with the House of Lords, but pleaded the national necessity. Members of both Houses dealt roughly with the proposed legislation, partly because the final report of the Selborne Committee, recently published, recommended that similar powers to those in the Corn Production Act should be continued in perpetuity. It looked to many members of the general public, in and out of Parliament, that the government was trying to perpetuate into times of peace drastic measures

of control only tolerable in the emergency of war. Farmers and landowners had nobly responded to the appeals for greater output of human food, and although they had lost to the armed services almost all their fit young men, they had planted nearly 9,000,000 acres of land in Britain with grain and potatoes, the largest harvest within living memory. Many of them objected to the prospect of finding themselves, at the end of this gigantic effort, subjected permanently to a form of control which, however designed to improve efficiency, might involve the loss of their land, their homes, and their livelihoods, a form of control which was not to be imposed on any other industry. The amending Act was eventually passed, but the able Director-General of the Food Production Department, Lord Lee of Fareham, resigned his post in view of the censure cast on his department in the course of the debates.

The conflict of opinion over the 1918 Act arose partly from the different visions of the post-war world. For many farmers and landowners, the end of the war should be followed, as speedily as possible, by a return to the conditions that ruled in the pre-war world, where each farmer ran his own business, subject to no interference but that of his landlord, with whom he had a working arrangement embodied in a written lease or sanctioned by local custom. In those days also, farmers struck their own wage bargains with their men, finding that the market generally gave them the upper hand within a certain range set again by local conditions; once engaged, and in a tied cottage, the insecurity and poverty of the agricultural workers, especially in southern and eastern England, enabled a good many farmers and landowners to exercise authority in minor matters of daily life over those living on, and from, the land. Although many farmers welcomed the wage boards and the greater uniformity of wages which resulted, there were others who resented the very idea of representatives of the workers sitting as equals with the farmers on committees which regulated minimum wages and enforced the payment of overtime rates on every farm in the county; through the county agricultural committees representatives of the workers were currently taking part in decisions whether or not a farm was over-staffed and must spare a man to the army. And the growing scarcity of men had turned the bargaining power in the labour market against the employers, so that a threat to give notice became, for the first time in living memory, an effective weapon against a farmer who could not get on with his men. There were many farmers who could not tolerate this reversal of the pre-war balance of power between employers and employed. On the other hand, the reports of the Selborne committee, and of the Milner committee which reported in 1915 on measures to increase production during the war, embodied a different view of the post-war world.¹ Here, strengthened Ministries of Agriculture in London, Edinburgh, and Aberystwyth, controlled by men of education, technical knowledge, and vision, would formulate a national policy for agricultural production, to be implemented partly by controlled prices and regulated wages, and partly by the regular supervision of all farms and estates through permanent committees of the ablest farmers

¹ *Interim Report*, Cd. 8048, 1915, and *Final Report*, Cd. 8095, 1915.

and landowners in each county. Instead of thousands of acres of neglected pasture and water-logged land, members of these committees saw well-cultivated arable fields, worked in approved rotations by contented and well-paid workers, producing vastly increased quantities of grain for the nation, and also supporting larger herds and flocks without the need for expensive imports of grain. The incompetent, the drunkard, the "practical man who practised the errors of his forefathers" would be eliminated in favour of technically trained young men, who had been taught not only the wisdom of their predecessors but also the agricultural sciences and the mysteries of book-keeping, so that they could calculate their costs of production to a fraction of a penny per gallon of milk. Colonies of smallholders, newly established by government loans on land reclaimed from moor and marsh, would loyally support co-operative marketing and buying societies, carrying into civilian life the discipline they had learnt in the armed services. Just how the increased rural population, employed on the land at high wages and living contentedly in improved cottages, could be combined with higher profits for the employing farmers and with food prices acceptable to the urban buyers was not explained; the existing scarcity and high prices of food, and the prospect of still greater stringency in the immediate post-war period, were arguments enough for supporting a permanent policy of agricultural expansion.

POST-WAR POLICY

With the end of the fighting in November 1918, the descending scale of guaranteed prices embodied in the 1917 Act became of immediate importance. After a brief halt in the winter of 1918-19, wholesale and retail prices began again to rise. The new wages boards increased minimum wage rates to keep pace with the cost of living, and by the spring of 1919 farmers were paying at least twice the pre-war rates; the low-wage counties in the south of England, where farmworkers before the war were earning 15s. a week or less, had experienced an even greater rise, with minimum wage rates at 37s. 6d. or 40s. a week, increased in May 1920 to a range of 42s.-46s. a week. The guaranteed minimum prices for wheat and oats written into the 1917 Act were completely out of line with the buying prices of the Ministry of Food, which had risen year by year; but when that wartime Ministry disappeared and markets were again open to unrestricted imports, the farmers foresaw that they would be left paying wages at current rates but with only derisory minimum prices for two commodities as the reward for their wartime investment of money and effort. For it had been expressly stated that the new wage boards set up under the 1917 Act were to be a permanent innovation which would continue into the post-war world, while the guarantee of prices ended with the harvest of 1921. Moreover, the impact of four years of rising costs and stable rents on the finances of landowners led in the immediate post-war years to huge sales of land from estates at prices which reflected the profits of the period of belligerence, rather than the uncertain prospects of the post-war world. Farmers buying their own farms on mortgages, and ex-service men taking up smallholdings or buying themselves a home and a business,

were alike in pressing upon the government the necessity for a new formulation of the established policy of maintaining arable farming at a profitable level.

The usual response of government to political pressure is another enquiry, and a Royal Commission was duly appointed in 1919 to "enquire into the economic prospects of the agricultural industry in Great Britain with special reference to the adjustment of a balance between the prices of agricultural commodities, the costs of production, the remuneration of labour and hours of employment." The four volumes of the evidence given to the Commission, and the supplementary reports on profits of farming and earnings of workers, provide an invaluable picture of the development of British agriculture during the First World War, but it was the three interim reports presented in December 1919 by a majority of twelve, a minority of eleven, and a minority of one that are of importance in the history of agricultural policy.¹

The majority report noted that cereal prices seemed likely to remain high because of the current shortage; but that farmers had no assurance that they would be maintained at a level which covered their costs in view of increased production abroad and the eventual return of normal conditions in the shipping trade. It therefore recommended that the government should give adequate guarantees for the maintenance of cereal prices, for at least the period of a normal crop rotation, in order to make effective the official policy of encouraging arable farming and a high output of both grain and crops from our own land. In spite of the objections of the temperance movement, there were strong reasons for including barley, as well as wheat and oats, in the guarantee, which should be continued indefinitely until Parliament gave four years' notice of withdrawal. In view of the uncertainty over future costs the majority report suggested that the minimum prices should be linked to changes in "ascertained costs of production"; the base of such adjustments should be prices of 68s. per quarter for wheat, 59s. per quarter for barley, and 46s. per quarter for oats of the 1919 crop, which should be regarded as covering the costs of that crop. These prices can be compared with those established by the 1917 Act of 55s. and 32s. per quarter for wheat and oats respectively of the 1918 and 1919 crops, falling to 45s. and 24s. per quarter for the three years 1920-1-2. At the time the Royal Commission was deliberating, the Ministry of Food was buying wheat from British farmers at an average price of 75s. 6d. per quarter for the 1919 harvest; in the winter of 1920-1 it was paying an average price of 85s. 6d. per quarter for British wheat while buying North American wheat c.i.f. at British ports at over 100s. per quarter. British farmers then had reason to complain that they were being underpaid in relation to what they could have secured with free markets.

The eleven members of the Royal Commission who signed the minority report were unfortunate in writing on their first page that "the evidence submitted to us does not show that there is any prospect for some years to come of a fall in cereal prices to a level unremunerative to the farmer. Indeed all the evidence goes to prove to the contrary." Having thus summarized expert opinion on the subject of market

¹ R.C. Agriculture, Cmd. 473, 1919.

prices, they argued that the guaranteed minimum prices at the levels proposed by the majority report would be unlikely to encourage an increased output of cereals, given the level of existing production and of current costs; even the much higher prices being paid by the Ministry of Food for the crops of the 1919 harvest had failed to prevent some decline in the area under grain between June 1918 and 1919, as farmers put under temporary grass fields which had carried more than the usual succession of crops. They considered that it would be damaging to the best interests of agriculture if it were to conduct its operations on the uncertain basis of guaranteed prices offered by a Parliament which could not bind its successors in office.

It was left for a second minority report, signed by Mr (later Lord) Cautley alone, to point out the existing relationship between the guaranteed prices provided by Part I of the 1917 Act and the wages boards set up under Part II. No witness before the Royal Commission had ever suggested the repeal of Part II of the 1917 Act, and Mr Cautley himself regarded the maintenance of the wages boards as essential to the well-being of the farming industry. Although other trades with wages boards had no guaranteed prices from the government to offset the costs, Mr Cautley felt that in agriculture they were politically linked together, if only by the statement made by the Prime Minister, Mr Lloyd George, on 23 February 1917 that "if the government guarantees prices, labour must also be guaranteed." Rather reluctantly, therefore, this second minority report supported the idea of a guarantee of minimum prices for cereals for at least four years ahead.

Given this diversity of expert opinion, it is perhaps surprising that the Agriculture Act, 1920, adopted so whole-heartedly the recommendations of the majority report.¹ As introduced by the Parliamentary Secretary, Sir Arthur Boscawen, into the House of Commons, the Agriculture Bill continued indefinitely those provisions of the Corn Production Act, 1917, which authorized guaranteed minimum prices for wheat and oats (not for barley); the new minimum prices were those proposed by the majority report, with the same adjustment annually to take account of changes in costs of production. These minimum prices were to continue indefinitely, until four years' notice had been given of their termination by Order in Council:²

we put in the four years' notice as a clear indication of the intention of Parliament today that a guaranteed price shall not be terminated unless four years' notice, equal to an ordinary rotation, is given to the farmer.

Sir Arthur went on to say that the minimum prices were not intended to provide a high level of profits, but to guarantee farmers against serious loss on their arable farming if prices fell drastically on the free market; the proposed minimum prices were thought to be somewhat below the average cost of production. The guarantees continued the mechanism set up by the Corn Production Acts of deficiency pay-

¹ Many of the recommendations of the Selborne Committee for the better administration of agriculture were also implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Act, 1919.

² *Hansard*, 7 June 1920.

ments equal to the difference between the market price and the guaranteed price; these deficiency payments were to be made not on sales but on assumed yields of four quarters of wheat and five quarters of oats to the acre, as returned in the annual census in June. Farmers therefore would receive deficiency payments in any year in which market prices fell below those guaranteed, whether they sold their crops or fed them to their own livestock. These arrangements thus left untouched the level of market prices so that the cost of supporting the output of cereals would fall on taxes, not on the prices of foods.

The provisions in the Bill for controlling the standards of cultivation and of estate management generally repeated those originally inserted into the 1917 Act, and were again severely criticized by both Houses of Parliament, and particularly by many of their lordships, including the Earl of Ancaster, who was shortly to become Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture. As the Bill emerged from a long attack, it provided that orders issued by county committees, enforcing minimum standards of cultivation and of estate maintenance, were subject to appeal to an independent arbitrator; they could only be valid if they did not affect injuriously the persons interested in the land, or alter the general character of a holding. These amendments made by the Lords were reluctantly accepted by the Commons just before the Christmas recess of 1920 under pressure from the government to get the Bill passed as soon as possible. The Ministry of Food was under sentence of death, its arrangements for relinquishing control of cereals in the summer of 1921 were far advanced, and the government was anxious to have the new arrangements for guaranteed minimum prices publicized before the spring sowings for the crops to be harvested in 1921, when Part I of the new Act was due to come into effect.

THE BREAK IN PRICES

There had been short crops of grain in the northern hemisphere in 1919 and 1920, and the abundant harvests of the southern hemisphere could not be shipped to Britain in the immediate post-war years. Prices of all cereals continued to rise in the early months of 1921 as the supplies of the previous harvest ran out, but with the arrival of spring there came also rumours of gigantic harvests impending in North America, and of loaded ships on their way to Britain across the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean.

In May and June the Cabinet considered a paper by the agricultural ministers setting out current estimates of the sums likely to be required in the next winter to meet the guarantees given in the Agriculture Act. The Wheat Commission tentatively forecast that the price of North American wheat might fall by the autumn to half of its level in the early spring; at a price of around 50s. a quarter for wheat c.i.f. British ports, deficiency payments might amount to £12 million on that crop, and £17 million on oats, assuming a normal relationship between these prices. It is recorded that the Cabinet "felt that it would be out of the question to continue to pay the heavy subsidies involved in the Act without adequate return in the form of an increase in corn production"; it learnt with concern from the

agricultural ministers that the area under corn in June 1921 was likely to be hardly changed from that recorded in 1920, which was a little lower than that of 1919.¹

Now it seems odd, to say the least, that a Cabinet concerned with the prospect of paying large sums to farmers to implement the guarantees given under the Agriculture Act, 1920 should consider that an increase in the area under corn was desirable when every extra acre grown added to those sums. One would have thought that, as the contingency developed which had been foreseen, and farmers were faced with the prospect of heavy loss from market prices, the Cabinet would have rejoiced in the fact that the expansion programme originally launched for 1919—the ploughing of another half-million acres of grassland to be planted with cereals—had been abandoned by the county committees after the armistice, and that farmers, left to their own judgement in what they planted, had slightly reduced the area of corn. Moreover, in the previous December, when the Agriculture Bill was being discussed in Parliament, the Chancellor of the Exchequer had suggested to the Cabinet that the guaranteed prices might involve paying to farmers sums ranging from £12 million to £80 million, depending on the level of the market, and that the guaranteed prices should be reconsidered in order to reduce so huge a liability. At that time the Cabinet had agreed with the agricultural ministers that, in spite of the reduced powers to control cultivation, the government was

deeply pledged to the policy of guaranteed minimum prices, coupled with the control of cultivation, and that it was impossible at this stage to retract from those specific pledges. Further, the prices in the Agriculture Bill were based upon the findings of the Royal Commission on Agriculture, who had examined a number of expert witnesses on the subject. Consequently, any departure from the prices would be regarded as a serious breach of faith by the farming community.²

THE REPEAL OF THE AGRICULTURE ACT, 1920

Although in December 1920 the Cabinet had pushed the altered Agriculture Act through a reluctant House of Commons by emphasizing its importance for the forthcoming harvest, in June 1921 it decided that Part I of the Act, which continued from the Corn Production Acts the provisions for guaranteed prices, must be cancelled forthwith, without any reference to the four years' notice; as a sop to one section of agricultural opinion, dominating the National Farmers' Union, the wages boards were also to be killed.³ The agricultural ministers were authorized to revoke these sections of the Act at once, and to bribe the farmers into acquiescence by

¹ P.R.O., Cab. 23/25/38(21), 11 May, 1921; Cab. 23/26/46(21), and Paper CP-2995, 1 June 1921; Cab. 23/26/47(21), 2 June 1921; Cab. 23/26/50(21), 16 June 1921; Cab. 23/26/52(21), 22 June 1921. U. Hicks, *Finance of British Government 1920-1936*, 1938, p. 90, gives the following figures for expenditure on agriculture in Great Britain in the five post-war years:

	£ million				
	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924
Ordinary expenditure:	15.5	8.6	4.9	8.4	5.8
Corn Production Acts (Repeal) Act payments, wheat, and oats:	—	19.7	—	—	—

² P.R.O. Cab. 23/23/71(20) 16 Dec. 1920 and Paper CP-1313.

³ *Hansard*, Lords, 2 Aug. 1920, col. 139, speech by Lord Strachie.

offering, for the current harvest only, a payment for each acre of wheat and oats, the total sum to be smaller than the expected deficiency payments for 1921-2 under the guarantees.

In July 1921, thirteen months after (as Parliamentary Secretary) he had introduced into the Commons the second reading of the Agriculture Act, 1920, Sir Arthur Boscawen (then the Minister for Agriculture) introduced into the same House the Corn Production Acts (Repeal) Bill, which abolished the most important sections of the previous legislation dealing with minimum prices and minimum wages.¹ Sir Arthur claimed that the government had been impelled into this action by absolute necessity. The fall in cereal prices had been heavier and more sudden than anyone had expected; the financial position of the country was infinitely worse than it had been six months ago, and the need for retrenchment in government expenditure even more urgent. In addition, he argued that as the provisions relating to efficient cultivation of land and management of estates had been virtually eliminated by the amendments of the House of Lords, Parliament was justified in withdrawing from the bargain with the agricultural interest which had been embodied in the first draft of the Agriculture Act, now that the cost of the guarantees had greatly increased beyond what had formerly been expected.

There were of course those, like the minority of eleven on the Royal Commission, who could legitimately say, "We told you so," and who approved of the removal of state subsidies and state control in favour of the no greater uncertainties of the market mechanism, both for prices and wages. Such was the Earl of Ancaster, who had recently become Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, and therefore was responsible for introducing into the House of Lords the repeal of the legislation which he had opposed in the previous December. There were others, both in parliament and outside, who were willing to abolish guarantees for prices, but who sought to maintain the wages boards as essential for the defence of an exploited minority of workers. Sir Arthur Boscawen argued that the Scottish system of voluntary conciliation committees could better serve the needs of the English farmworkers than statutory wage boards whose minimum rates were enforceable by law, but there were strong differences between the two countries. The Scottish workers were engaged for a year or half-year, and those changing jobs did so together at the many half-yearly hiring fairs, which provided excellent opportunities for the local organizers of the Scottish Farm Servants Union to set minimum wages on an agreed pattern. Some of the northern counties in England worked on the same half-yearly engagements, but the vast majority of farmworkers south of the border were engaged indefinitely subject to a week's notice; there was therefore a continuous trickle of dis-engagements and re-engagements occurring in each parish, and there was no formal market for the unions to organize. Moreover, unemployment had begun to rise ominously in the spring of 1921, partly because of the strikes in the coal-mining industry and the shipyards which had reduced employment in other industries; nearly two million unemployed were recorded in

¹ *Hansard*, 4 July 1921.

July 1921, so that a downward pressure on agricultural wages, inevitable as retail prices began to fall, could only be intensified by the abolition of the formal mechanism for securing minimum wage rates.

Those sections of the Corn Production Acts which provided guaranteed minimum prices for wheat and oats, and a statutory mechanism for enforcing minimum wages, were duly repealed on 19 August 1921. Farmers were to be given grants of £3 per acre for wheat and £4 per acre for oats of the 1921 harvest; as a late concession a special fund of £1 million was established for the furtherance of agricultural education, research, and advisory work in Britain. Otherwise all that remained of the legislation of 1919 and 1920 for a permanent agricultural policy were the provisions elevating the old Board of Agriculture under a President into a Ministry under a Minister; the newly formed county agricultural committees, shorn of their powers to secure efficiency in the use of land but charged with the promotion of technical education and advisory work; central advisory councils for England and Wales and for Scotland, which, incidentally, were never consulted by the government on this reversal of agricultural policy;¹ and an increase in the compensation payable to tenant farmers who received notice to quit.

This repudiation of the four years' notice written into the Agriculture Act, designed to protect farmers against serious financial loss in the post-war depression, was instantly called by farmers the "great betrayal". The Lloyd George government no doubt saved a considerable amount of money by this action, and thereby lightened the load of taxation, and it undoubtedly was supported by a strong body of opinion in favour of abolishing state controls of, and state support to, the agricultural interests. But the "great betrayal" had precisely the effect foreshadowed by Mr F. D. Acland (who had been Parliamentary Secretary of agriculture in the coalition government from May 1915 to December 1916) in a notable and moving speech in the House of Commons on the second reading of the repeal Bill. He emphasized that greater efficiency in farming depended upon trust and co-operation between the farmers and landowners on the one hand, and the scientists and administrators on the other. The repeal of the government's pledge would inevitably lead to the breakdown of that trust and co-operation, and the financial disaster facing many arable farmers would be blamed upon the government and all its successors in office. "It is important that farmers should regard the experts of the Ministry of Agriculture, not as tricky or ignorant bureaucrats, but as anxious to assist them. Now the Board and all its servants will be handicapped for years." The same opinions were voiced in the House of Lords on 3 August 1921 by Viscount Milner and the Earl of Selborne, chairmen of the two war-time committees on food production.

When I recently interviewed farmers in connection with the agricultural history of the inter-war years, it was noteworthy how the older men went back, unprompted, to the repeal in 1921 of the Corn Production Acts as the cause of financial difficulties for themselves or their fathers in the years immediately after the First

¹ *Hansard*, Lords, 3 Aug. 1921, cols. 171-2.

World War. The British government could not, of course, be blamed for the post-war fall in prices which was a world-wide phenomenon bound to cause financial distress to all entrepreneurs. But what farmers resented was the immediate withdrawal of all but token assistance when the implementation of the four-year guarantee would have enabled them to recoup the costs of converting their war-time farming to more normal patterns. Much arable land was still out of its proper rotation in 1921 as a result of the extra courses of cereals taken in 1917, 1918, and 1919, and required expensive cultivations to conquer weeds before it could even be put down to grass. Profits made during the war carried many families through the lean years which followed 1921, but the financial disasters prophesied by Mr Acland did indeed overtake many of the ex-service men who came into farming after the war, as well as many of those families who were forced, by the sale of estates, into buying their farms in the post-war years on borrowed money.

Notes and Comments

VALE OF EVESHAM RESEARCH PAPERS

Volume IV of *Research Papers*, published by the Vale of Evesham Historical Society, contains articles by C. J. Bond on the estates of Evesham Abbey, G. B. Stow, Jr. on the *Vita Ricardi* as a source for the reign of Richard II, S. H. Grylls on Elmley Castle sundials, and J. A. Johnston on the Vale of Evesham 1702-8: the evidence from probate inventories and wills. The volume, price £1.50 (plus postage and packing), may be ordered from the Publications Manager, Vale of Evesham Historical Society, Almonry Museum, Evesham, Worcestershire.

DANISH AGRICULTURE

One of the few works on Danish agriculture available in English, Erik Helmer Pedersen's *The Danish Agricultural Industry 1910-39*, has recently been published by the University of Copenhagen Institute of Economic History. A limited number of copies are available, and may be obtained by writing to the author at the Institute of Economic History, Norregade 7 C, DK-1165 Copenhagen K.

ENGLISH FIELD NAMES

A paper by John Field, author of the recent volume *English Field Names: a Dictionary*, has

been published by the Dacorum College of Further Education. The paper, entitled "Compliment and Commemoration in English Field-Names", was read at a meeting of the Names Council of Great Britain and Ireland in March 1973. It may be obtained from the Librarian, Dacorum College, Marlowes, Hemel Hempstead, Herts HP1 1HD, price 20p.

OPEN SEMINARS AT READING

Readers living within reach of the University of Reading, Whiteknights Park, may be interested in attending one or more of the Lent Term Open Seminars arranged by Dr E. J. T. Collins of the University's Institute of Agricultural History. The meetings, which will be held in the Palmer Building, Room G. 01, at 3.30, are as follows:

- 13 February Mr C. Dewey (University of Leicester): The causes of agricultural stagnation in Bengal, 1858-1947.
- 20 February Dr E. J. T. Collins (University of Reading): Old wine in new bottles—cereal eating in Britain in the twentieth century.
- 27 February Dr R. Bradley (University of Reading): Some recent approaches to pre-historic agriculture in Britain.

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