

# The Real 'Great Betrayal'? Britain and the Canadian Cattle Crisis of 1992.

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## Abstract

Agriculture emerged from the First World War facing the problems of a drastically expanded and largely urban electorate, the decline of the traditional landowning class, with a greater political dependence on the inexperienced National Farmers Union. Meanwhile, the closer working relations with Government, embodied in the price and wage guarantees of the 1920 Agriculture Act, implied that a new era of agrarian policy had arrived. The repeal of those guarantees in 1921, now remembered as the 'Great Betrayal' – a classic symbol of State neglect – attracted little opposition from the NFU or parliamentarians. The contested removal of the ban on Canadian cattle imports reveals more about agriculture's political weakness. The crisis demonstrated a firm Government commitment to urban priorities and exposed differences among agriculturists. In its intensity, scale and consequences, the Canadian cattle crisis was in political terms a more serious 'Great Betrayal' than the Agriculture Act's repeal.

'THE issue in question', Asquith commented in 1922, 'has been a burning, or, at any rate, a smouldering political question, almost ever since I have been in public life'.<sup>1</sup> These lines may seem a trifle overstated today, but were not at the time. The argument over whether to admit live Canadian cattle into Britain split the cabinet and caused a Minister of Agriculture to lose his seat. It became the subject of a massive newspaper campaign, and of a Royal Commission. Large claims were made for Canadian cattle. Some said they would encourage disease, and ruin farms.<sup>2</sup> Others asserted that they would preserve arable acreages and provide business for towns and food for consumers. Asquith had chosen not to admit Canadian cattle into Britain during his term as Prime Minister from 1908 to 1916, but by the time of his successor, Lloyd George, a final decision was unavoidable.

The cattle crisis shares several features with the repeal of price guarantees for wheat and oats in 1921. Both were conclusively influenced by the 1914–18 War,

and by economic and political pressures in the immediate post-war years. There is though, one significant difference. The repeal of price guarantees went down in popular agrarian history as the 'Great Betrayal'. Because of it, argues the official illustrated centenary history of the Ministry of Agriculture: 'farmers felt a sense of betrayal which lasted up to World War Two and made it hard then to win back their confidence'.<sup>3</sup> At the time, however, the now-forgotten cattle crisis was the more hotly contested of the two. It sheds early light on the condition of agriculture's political lobby after the Great War, and its relationship to urban Britain.

## I

The end of the war created an unusually challenging series of problems for British farming, to a large extent because the political scene had been radically changed by the advent of Lloyd George. As Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922, he imposed state production and social priorities by introducing price guarantees for farmers

<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Debates [hereafter HCD], 1922, 157, col 90.  
<sup>2</sup> BPP, 1921, XVIII, RC on store cattle imports, p 53.

<sup>3</sup> S Foreman, *Loaves and Fishes: an illustrated history of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food 1889–1989*, 1989, p 25.

and wages protection for farm workers. In response to these actions, the National Farmers Union (NFU) expanded its political activities along with its membership, which trebled to roughly 100,000. Owner-occupiers and tenant farmers were motivated to join as they took up the land and the leading role in agrarian politics once occupied by the land-owning gentry. The landowners were organized under the Central Landowners Association. CLA members sat in both houses of Parliament, but their political importance was diminishing. Under pressure from death duties and rising taxation, landowners were disposing of property and concerned with their preservation as a social class. They were further outflanked by the Representation of the People Act, 1918, which trebled the size of the electorate, created an overwhelming preponderance of urban voters, and decisively shifted the policy balance further away from country to town. By inheriting the landlords' political mantle, NFU leaders were brought up against the problems of a politically inexperienced membership, an inherent suspicion of Government but a heavy dependence on it, and the need to build a successful working relationship with the relatively few and almost always Conservative parliamentarians interested in agricultural matters.<sup>4</sup>

Initially, the NFU embarked upon the post-war period with confidence, buoyed up by rising prices for agricultural products, and the knowledge that their support was vital to Lloyd George's vision of high corn production. NFU co-operation was severely tested by the Government's plan to maintain price controls on wheat, embodied in the Agriculture Act of 1920. Lloyd George and his coalition partner

Andrew Bonar Law, the leader of the Conservative majority, forced the Bill through remorseless opposition. The final Commons' consideration of Lords amendments had taken over twenty-two stormy hours. The NFU disliked the notions of maximum and minimum prices, and of linking wages to price guarantees in Part One of the Bill. It smacked of the worst sort of State interference – financial support conditional upon close regulation of the farmer's business affairs. Through the agency of the CLA, landlords resented the compensation for disturbance terms in Part Two of the Bill that had been mainly responsible for ensuring the NFU's reluctant support for Part One. As many over-taxed landlords were improving or selling land, the idea of offering greater securities to their tenants represented 'a heavy additional burden on owners who require to sell or desire to take their land in hand'.<sup>5</sup> The Bill was passed by the New Year of 1921. According to the wife of Lord Lee, the Minister for Agriculture, it represented 'the most concentrated struggle of his whole political career'.<sup>6</sup>

As recent research has testified, it was hardly surprising in these circumstances that the repeal of Part One of the Act was accomplished with little political difficulty just seven months later.<sup>7</sup> A drastic drop in prices occurred in the early months of the year, and the Government found itself unable to make up the increasing difference between the guaranteed price and the selling price. There was almost no opposition to repeal. 'Curiously enough,' remembered Griffith-Boscawen:

this complete upset of our policy was accepted with considerable equanimity. The fact is that many

<sup>4</sup> P Self and H Storing, *The State and the Farmer*, 1962; A Cooper, 'British Agricultural Policy 1912–1936. A Study in Conservative Politics', PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 1989; S Moore, 'The Agrarian Conservative Party in Parliament, 1920–1929' *Parl Hist*, 10, 1991, pp 342–362.

<sup>5</sup> Institute of Agricultural History, University of Reading [hereafter IAH], CLA MSS, CLA council meeting, 20 Oct, 1920.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Papers, 'A Good Innings', Privately published, 1939, vol 2, p 813. Courtauld Institute.

<sup>7</sup> A.F. Cooper, 'Another look at "The Great Betrayal,"' *Ag Hist*, 60, 1986, pp 80–104; Edith H. Whetham, 'The Agriculture Act, 1920 and its Repeal – the "Great Betrayal,"' *Ag Hist Rev*, 22, 1974, pp 36–49.

farmers were more anxious to be free from control than they were to have the subsidy. Farmers are beyond all things impatient of control of their business by Whitehall, not unnaturally, considering that they are small capitalists investing all their money in their business. They naturally think they can manage their farms better than any officials.<sup>8</sup>

With the burden of the Act behind them, the National Farmers Union and MPs from agricultural areas returned in relief to import protection: the staple proposal they had long relied on. The protectionist debate and the strong opinions it provoked formed the basis for the cattle crisis. 'They conjure up a mirage of prospective prosperity as a hungry gourmet might enjoy in imagination the savours of his favourite dishes', wrote Francis Blundell in 1928, an NFU sponsored MP for Ormskirk who later became a rare agrarian critic of the protectionists.<sup>9</sup> It is a telling example of the depth of feeling against overseas competition in the eastern counties that, in the Norwich area, local NFU and CLA branches could convene a joint conference with farm labourers with the aim of promoting protection.<sup>10</sup>

## II

The cattle embargo was an important post-war reminder of the main obstacle to agricultural protection, succinctly expressed in 1928 by the Executive Committee of Horncastle Conservative Association, which 'pointed out how apt people were to get the erroneous impression that our proposals meant dearer food'.<sup>11</sup> At base, protectionists identified their cause with cereal supplies. During the war and for some time into the 1920s, arable was the keystone of agrarian policy. Chastened by German naval threats to food supplies, and shortages after 1918,

Government policy was to extend or at best maintain arable acreages for as long as possible.<sup>12</sup> In this endeavour, the Government needed the co-operation of farmers from the electorally important region of East Anglia, steeped in a wheat-growing culture, and with time and money to involve themselves in the Union's development.<sup>13</sup> A hostile contemporary, A G Street, described this lobby in 1937:

Somehow or other there had grown up in London and most of England's large towns an agreed opinion that farming in England meant wheat first, East Anglia second, and the remainder of agricultural England not at all.

So the farming community of this district played to this fallacy. Its members produced noise all over East Anglia, noise in London clubs, noise in the headquarters of the NFU, and noise whenever and wherever possible.<sup>14</sup>

Politically speaking, the livestock industry was less prominent than the cereals lobby. Economically speaking, it was more successful. Admittedly, J A S Watson of Edinburgh University's Agriculture Department, thought in early 1922 – one year into the post-war price slump – that 'stock men have need of all the faith and optimism they can call to their aid'.<sup>15</sup> But livestock farmers generally – beef, pig, and sheep farmers – enjoyed considerably higher produce prices in 1922 than in the pre-war years 1911 to 1913.<sup>16</sup> Certainly, the rise in costs had also been considerable, but these were less marked for grass-farmers than for arable. After the war many farmers converted from arable to pasture, a trend regretfully described by the NFU as following 'safety first principles'.<sup>17</sup> The NFU, however, reminded members that 'meat production represents the largest section of British agricultural produce'.<sup>18</sup> Change was

<sup>12</sup> PRO, Cabinet MSS, Cab cons 23/12 wc 632, 20 Oct 1919.

<sup>13</sup> Self and Storing, *op cit*, p 45.

<sup>14</sup> A G Street, *Farming England*, 1937, p 74.

<sup>15</sup> IAH, NFU, 1922 *Yearbook*, p 299.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* Substantial price jumps were recorded of 149% for milk, 74% pork, 71% fat cattle, 53% sheep, 28% cheese.

<sup>17</sup> IAH, NFU, 1924 *Yearbook*, p 79.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p 232.

<sup>8</sup> Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen, *Memories*, 1925, p 237.

<sup>9</sup> FN Blundell, *The Agricultural Problem*, 1928, p 66.

<sup>10</sup> HCD, 1923, 160, col 1030.

<sup>11</sup> Lincolnshire RO, Horncastle Conservative Executive committee and women's branch committee, 22 Oct 1928.

also notable in the dairy sector. Milk prices attracted many farmers. New dairying areas opened up between the wars, especially in the East and South. Established dairying areas – notably Gloucestershire and Shropshire – increased their herd sizes.

In spite of his pessimism over the position of livestock, Watson at least took some comfort from a particular portion of it: 'the fact is that grain growing is, if anything, in a worse position than stock breeding'.<sup>19</sup> 'The world,' he concluded, 'cannot yet get on without the British livestock industry, which is its stud farm'.<sup>20</sup> British breeds such as the Hereford enjoyed an international reputation. There was general agreement with the observation made in 1921 by Watson's Edinburgh colleague Robert Wallace, Professor of Agriculture and Rural Economy, that 'the whole system of agriculture in this country is built up on the breeding and feeding of cattle'.<sup>21</sup> Along with sheep, cattle were the most important element in the arable-grass-livestock blend adopted by growing numbers of farmers in the economically uncertain years between the wars. Cattle were needed to manure the soil, to consume feed, and to milk or sell for beef. At the time Watson was writing, stock-breeders were protected by perhaps the most comprehensive and controversial legislation of the era. The difficulty was that it discriminated equally against all potential importers, which included Canada. Thus the restriction collided with both free trade and imperial preference, a cause that agrarian Conservative themselves often favoured. The result of this collision was the Canadian cattle crisis. Its resolution had a more immediate impact on the morale of agriculture as a whole than the Agriculture Act's repeal. Although the ructions of the cattle crisis have been ignored, it is arguable that the contemporaneous 'Great Betrayal'

of wheat and oats only won its higher place in agrarian myth because the concerns of cereal farmers, and not stock breeders, preoccupied the NFU and rural parliamentarians.

### III

The origins of the cattle dispute lie in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the havoc wrought by cattle plague, pleuro-pneumonia and foot-and-mouth, persuaded the Board of Agriculture to withdraw its discretionary right to admit imports of live animals. Cattle from the United States were prohibited in 1879, and by early 1892 prohibition had been extended to cover several European states. In September of that year, pleuro-pneumonia was suspected in a consignment of Canadian cattle, and by November Canada had been included in the embargo.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, a consolidating contagious diseases Bill was passed, followed in 1896 by an Act comprehensively banning the import of live animals except for instant slaughter.<sup>23</sup> The Canadians naturally resented this, feeling that the suspicions of pleuro-pneumonia were unfounded – 'probably rightly,' admitted Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen long afterward.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, as Minister of Agriculture between 1921 and 1922 he backed the embargo. Official fears about the consequences of diseased foreign cattle escaping the scrutiny of British health inspectors persisted into the post-war period, and were voiced by Sir Daniel Hall, the Ministry of Agriculture's chief scientific adviser.

The 1896 Act banned imports of 'stores' – beef cattle destined for feeding and fattening in British fields. Stock breeders around the British Isles unsurprisingly felt that the embargo assisted them. Many small

<sup>19</sup> IAH, NFU, 1922 *Yearbook*, p 299.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p 300.

<sup>21</sup> BPP, 1921, XVIII, p 51.

<sup>22</sup> A H H Matthews, *Fifty Years of Agricultural Politics*, 1915, p 34.

<sup>23</sup> HCD, 1896, XXXVIII, col 1617.

<sup>24</sup> Griffith-Boscawen, *op cit*, p 238.

farms were engaged in cattle-breeding. Most were located in the uplands on the western side of Britain; usually small family-run farms, or, on occasion, politically-sensitive holdings settled by ex-servicemen with state encouragement. According to R. R. Robbins, the 1921 NFU President, 'a large portion of this class is practically confined to the breeding and rearing of young stock as their chief source of livelihood'.<sup>25</sup> Doubts about the embargo existed amongst other agriculturists. Many graziers with good pasture bought stores in spring, fattened them on grass with purchased corn and cake and produced beef in the summer months. This practice was particularly prevalent in Leicestershire and Northumberland. Primarily arable farmers, usually found in the eastern counties of England and Scotland, grew crops of turnips and bought large numbers of stores in the Autumn. The cattle were kept in stalls, fed turnips, straw and a certain amount of cake, and turned into winter beef. These two groups were likely, at best, to be unenthusiastic about the embargo. Livestock was the biggest source of profit to the powerful East Anglian farmers, for all their political and emotional devotion to supplying wheat. Furthermore, stores were needed to trample and manure the soil. Distaste for the embargo was of long-standing in this region: East Anglian MPs had stiffly contested the 1896 Bill. Leicestershire and Northumberland relied on a steady supply of stores. Northumbrian farmers obtained theirs from Ireland and Cumbria; farmers in Leicestershire and other traditional 'beef and hunting' areas<sup>26</sup> were searching for a choice of stores sources to cut rising costs, resist the introduction of dairying, and answer the demands for fresh meat from urban consumers.

Other opponents to the embargo

included butchers, imperial free traders and spokesmen for urban areas who contended, with varying degrees of certainty, that Canadian stores would reduce the price of home meat; manufacturers of cattle cake and their supply trades, representatives from market towns and city ports all anxious for business. An awkwardly-named pressure group was formed in Glasgow in 1901, the 'Free Importation of Canadian Cattle Association of Great Britain'. Their arguments were an odd mixture of national security, consumer demand and imperial responsibility. At root lay the belief that despite the claims of UK breeders, the national herd was insufficient to feed the expanding urban population, who for health reasons and personal taste preferred fresh meat over chilled or frozen. Shortages had been forecast for some time. The Board of Agriculture noted in 1912 that the:

possibly from the consumers point of view somewhat ominous, fact is that overseas supplies show insufficient expansion...to meet the increased demand.<sup>27</sup>

This concern intensified after the Great War, when the threat to British food supplies had been made plain to all. In 1921 John Edwards, President of the London retail meat traders, foresaw that Canadian stores might lower beef by sixpence in the pound.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, an opponent claimed the embargo's removal would only add an extra ounce a week to the consumer's beef diet.<sup>29</sup>

There was also an imperial perspective. Although the original embargo was worldwide with the local exception of Ireland, twenty years later Canada in particular stood to benefit from the removal of what one critic called 'an old sore and an old grievance'.<sup>30</sup> The stigma of disease was

<sup>25</sup> BPP, 1921, XVIII, p 63.

<sup>26</sup> A G Street, *op cit*, pp 58-64.

<sup>27</sup> Board of Agriculture, 1912 *Ag Stats*, IV, p 279, cited in BPP, 1921, XVIII, p 335.

<sup>28</sup> HCD, 1924, 170, col 1945.

<sup>29</sup> BPP, 1921, XVIII, p 317.

<sup>30</sup> House of Lords RO[hereafter HLRO], Bonar Law MSS, BL 100/3/9, Imperial Conference, Cattle embargo, 26 Apr 1917, p 6.

keenly felt, but the general case against the embargo began slowly, gathering strength as the war and resulting disruption of other forms of trade reinforced existing arguments and added new ones. After Ireland, Canada was the nearest source of stores supplies. Potential competition was therefore limited. Australian and New Zealand meat arrived in the inferior form of frozen beef. Australian supplies were also less reliable, as cattle there were more subject to drought. By the outbreak of the Great War, the growing population of the USA had diverted both American and Argentine chilled meat exports away from UK consumers. Canadian arable needed an expanding livestock trade to secure its own advance into foreign markets. The trade in cattle for slaughter at UK ports had been disrupted by the war, and it was thought that store exports would compensate. In 1921 the Canadian Minister of Agriculture claimed that two to three hundred thousand stores could be landed at once, increasing to half a million annually within five years – an attractive prospect to the embargo's opponents, but horrifying to its supporters. Prof. Wallace warned that such figures would 'completely upset' the whole system of breeding.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, the small Canadian domestic market, and the suitability of Canadian farms for the rearing but not the fattening of cattle necessitated profitable export markets for stores or slaughter. These were closed in Great Britain after 1892, but opened in the United States after 1913 when President Wilson's Democratic administration lifted tariff barriers. Since then, Canadian farmers enjoyed but were nonetheless heavily dependent on the American market. 'The [USA] Beef Trust at the present time, if it likes to go into Canada, can buy up all the cattle in Canada if it has the money to do it', claimed Sir

John Stephen, a leading British miller of oil and cake for cattle.<sup>32</sup>

#### IV

The Liberals returned several MPs at their 1905 General Election victory who had pledged to lift the embargo. However, no legislation was introduced by the governments of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, and official support for the embargo was confirmed at every parliamentary session before 1914. The matter was raised once more at a special committee of the Imperial War Conference on 26 April 1917. There, the Canadian Minister for Public Works made a motion to lift the embargo as speedily as possible. 'If it is desired to protect the cattle industry in the United Kingdom, let it be done; that is a matter for domestic concern,' observed Sir Robert Borden, their chief conference representative and Prime Minister, 'but do not accomplish it by the enforcement of a regulation which casts an undeserved slur upon conditions in Canada'.<sup>33</sup>

At this meeting, Britain was represented by Ernest Prothero (later Lord Ernle), President of the Board of Agriculture. The Chairman was Walter Long, the Colonial Secretary, a Wiltshire landowner, and as Robert Blake has commented, a country gentleman of ancient lineage and prominent representative of rural England.<sup>34</sup> Long believed that, in the cause of imperial unity, 'there must be genuine and thorough reciprocity' in trade between Britain and the Empire.<sup>35</sup> He had also been responsible for the Act of 1896, for which his autobiography made no apology, although he conceded that: 'it was impossible to resist Sir Robert's contention that immunity from disease for a quarter of a century had

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p 293.

<sup>33</sup> HLRO, *op cit*, p 4.

<sup>34</sup> R Blake, *The Unknown Prime Minister*, 1953, p 242.

<sup>35</sup> Lord Long of Wraxall, *Memoirs*, 1923, p 242.

<sup>31</sup> BPP, 1921, XVIII, p 51.

made it impossible to adhere to the old policy'.<sup>36</sup> Prothero too, accepted that Canadian cattle were free from pleuropneumonia 'and on those grounds therefore we should receive the present suggestion for the removal of the embargo very sympathetically'. His enthusiasm then led him to suggest that 'we could, not by legislation but merely by an order of the Board of Agriculture, put Canada into the free list to-day'. Long headed off the Canadian rejoinder ('Then for heavens sake why do they not do it?') by interjecting that a parliamentary repeal of his 1896 Act was probably necessary. The discussion closed with a clear agreement to remove the embargo as speedily as possible, but the minutes indicate that Long refused Canadian demands for a formal resolution. The difference between an 'agreement' and a formal resolution to admit stores was to preoccupy both sides for the next four years.<sup>37</sup>

All the representatives understood that wartime shortages of shipping space meant there could be no imports until hostilities had ceased, but no other obstacles to the eventual arrival of Canadian cattle were foreseen. It is less inconsistent than it might at first seem that only a month after this undertaking to the Canadians, Prothero told the concerned Sir Hamar Greenwood, the future Irish Secretary of State, that he could not say whether or under what conditions Canadian stores might be permitted to enter British ports.<sup>38</sup> At the time of the conference, Prothero assumed that the drive to extend arable production would eventually reach the point where even increases in British and Irish-bred stores would be unable to deal with the increased volumes of straw and root crops. As Ireland progressed towards fattening and feeding cattle at home rather than Britain, Prothero anticipated less concern among

Irish breeders that Canadian stores would undermine their business.<sup>39</sup>

Once the war ended, Canadian agriculturists and their supporters in the UK requested the British Government to redeem Prothero's pledge. They lobbied until 1921, provoking what Asquith – who supported them now he was out of office – described as 'various awkward little incidents'.<sup>40</sup> On 3 March, 1919, for example, Prothero informed representatives of the Canadian Live Stock Commission and Department of Agriculture that the unsettled State of British farming and the general health risk of foreign imports made the removal of the embargo inopportune, a view he repeated to subsequent deputations and to the press. This stance was adopted by Prothero's ministerial successor, Lord Lee, in late 1919 and January 1921.<sup>41</sup> Both men, though, admitted the basic point – that Canadian cattle were free from disease. Events moved forward when another Minister of Agriculture, who crucially for the embargo's opponents was a member of the House of Commons, succeeded Lee in February, 1921. Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen followed the position taken by Prothero and Lee that as the 'majority of farmers in the country were strongly opposed to any change', and that 'as Minister of Agriculture I was appointed to safeguard their interests and represent their views', he was not prepared to risk their livelihoods, or forfeit their confidence in him and in an expanded role for his department.<sup>42</sup> On this issue, Griffith-Boscawen maintained the position he had originally held as Lord Lee's Parliamentary Secretary.<sup>43</sup> As a Member of Parliament, the new minister's promotion to Cabinet rank necessitated by law his return in a by-election. Griffith-Boscawen's Midlands

<sup>39</sup> HLRO, *op cit*, p 3.

<sup>40</sup> HCD, 1922, 157, col 93.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 154, cols 22–23.

<sup>42</sup> Griffith-Boscawen, *op cit*, pp 127–128.

<sup>43</sup> HCD, 1920, 132, cols 949–50; *Ibid*, 135, cols 2129–2130; *Ibid*, 136, col 40.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p 244.

<sup>37</sup> HLRO, *op cit*, pp 4–6.

<sup>38</sup> HCD, 1917, XCIII, col 2636.

constituency of Dudley was heavily industrial: British opponents of the embargo saw an opportunity to accuse the minister of keeping cheaper Empire meat from the tables of his own working class urban electorate. 'I suppose', Griffith-Boscawen recalled of his erstwhile constituents, 'that many of them have never even seen a farm'.<sup>44</sup>

The hitherto sporadic and ineffective British anti-embargo lobby gained momentum. Its chief adherents at this juncture included the Federation of Meat Traders' associations, whose members wanted Canadian meat in their stores; the free-trade imperialist and Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill, whose constituency of Dundee agitated in favour of opening the ports to Canadian cattle; and the press magnate, Lord Beaverbrook. In him, embargo supporters faced a determined opponent, an experienced political operator and a masterly mass communicator. The ensuing cattle campaign – presaging Beaverbrook's Empire Crusade a decade later – was motivated in part by his Canadian background. He had worked with Borden in the past, most recently during the war as a self-styled 'Canadian Eye-Witness' with the partial aim of asserting a separate identity for Canada's soldiery. His main newspaper, the *Daily Express*, announced it would campaign against the Agriculture Minister's reelection and placarded Dudley with posters that read 'Boscawen Plumps For Dear Meat'. Beaverbrook kept to this simple argument against the embargo throughout the controversy. He and other supporters of imperial preference enjoyed finding themselves in the position of campaigning against protection in support of freer trade and cheap food. Conversely, outright free traders opposed the embargo on imperial grounds. This strange situation contributed to the problems of the pro-embargo agr-

arian lobby. 'I fought desperately with my back to the wall', Griffith-Boscawen truthfully remembered.<sup>45</sup> He wrote to Beaverbrook in high dudgeon:

Now you and I have been friends in the past, and though I have every reason to feel bitterly annoyed at the violent and unprovoked attack in the *Daily Express* at the moment when I was fighting for my seat I don't want any personal questions raised and certainly not through a misunderstanding.<sup>46</sup>

Beaverbrook coolly replied: 'I take no responsibility for the editorial management of the paper or the form in which news appears, and I should be very sorry to think that there had been any personal attack on you in the *Daily Express* and I cannot find one in the files'.<sup>47</sup> This breathtaking defence, economical with the spirit of the truth, was not readily accepted by insiders. The Chairman of the Conservative Party, Sir George Younger, asked Bonar Law to help stop the 'disgraceful as well as unfair' attacks on Griffith-Boscawen; the General Committee of the Carlton Club notified Bonar Law of their 'profound regret' at Beaverbrook's treatment of another club member.<sup>48</sup> 'If you wish to attack my attitude over this issue I beg of you to do so without regard for our personal relations', wrote Beaverbrook to Bonar Law, enclosing copies of his exchange with the Agriculture Minister.<sup>49</sup> But as Beaverbrook would have known, it was not politically sensible for Bonar Law, let alone in his lonely, loyal character, to turn against one of his few close friends.

When Griffith-Boscawen eventually succumbed by 270 votes in a poll of twenty thousand, the embargo's opponents were galvanized. The newspaper campaign spread from the *Daily Express* to *The Times*. 'These papers have raised a very hurricane

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p 128.

<sup>46</sup> HLRO, BL 100/2/33, Griffith-Boscawen to Beaverbrook, 24 Feb 1921.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, BL 100/2/53, Beaverbrook to Griffith-Boscawen, 24 Feb 1921.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, BL 100/2/29, Sir George Younger to BL, 23 Feb 1921; BL 100/3/10, Carlton Club Gen. Committee to BL, 9 Mar 1921.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, BL 100/2/33; Beaverbrook to Bonar Law, 24 Feb 1921.

<sup>44</sup> Griffith-Boscawen, *op cit*, p 128.

of excitement,' complained Ernest Evans, Liberal MP for Cardigan.<sup>50</sup> Walter Elliot, the Conservative MP for Lanark, alleged:

We have been subjected to a perfect bombardment of leaflets and threatened with every kind of other consequences to ourselves if we dare to oppose the will of Lord Beaverbrook on this matter, ranging from the break-up of the British Empire to the personal hostility of the *Daily Express* at the next General Election.<sup>51</sup>

Griffith-Boscawen rapidly announced his new candidature for the firmly agricultural division of Taunton. The Government established a Royal Commission to investigate the embargo, chaired by a former Lord Chancellor, Lord Finlay. The decision was welcomed by the NFU and supportive MPs, who felt sure of continued ministerial support in maintaining the Act of 1896.<sup>52</sup> Under the chairmanship of the Marquess of Crewe, the Livestock Defence Committee prepared a detailed case for the embargo on behalf of its fifty-seven member organizations, which included a large number of breed and agricultural societies and chambers of agriculture, as well as the Royal Agricultural Society of England. Their position was presented to the Commission by a legal team led by Douglas Hogg, KC, a future Lord Chancellor. Griffith-Boscawen marshalled testimony from his ministry and the Irish Board of Agriculture. The embargo's opponents were suspicious of Finlay, and did not initially have a counsel to represent them, although they eventually selected Evan Charteris KC, on behalf of the Free Importation of Canadian Cattle Association. Ninety-two witnesses were eventually heard in June and July. The atmosphere was intensified by an Emergency Tariff Bill passed at the end of May by the new Republican-led Government in the USA. It included a six-

month duty of 30 per cent on cattle imports, creating further uncertainties among Canadian farmers. In late 1921 the Commission, while admitting that their conclusions might cause a decline in domestic cattle breeding, found that imperial policy and protection of home industry formed no part of its terms of reference. This left the question of disease. The Commission simply endorsed the accepted view that cattle plague, pleuro-pneumonia and foot and mouth had not existed in Canada for thirty years. It thereupon shocked both sides by reporting in favour of opening the ports.<sup>53</sup>

The NFU complained that the Commission's Report 'fails to justify the abandonment of a policy which has stood the test of time,' and called upon the Government to 'make an immediate pronouncement in favour of the present system'.<sup>54</sup> Lord Crewe declared that the Royal Commission's members did not understand rural life. Amidst rising agrarian indignation, Griffith-Boscawen felt compelled to recommend in Cabinet that the Report should be disregarded. This course was adopted, and confirmed to the Commons at the opening of the 1922 session.<sup>55</sup>

Counselled by Lord Beaverbrook, the Meat Traders' Federation passed a resolution 'expressing astonishment and surprise at the determination of the Government to betray us over the Report of the Royal Commission'.<sup>56</sup> A fierce argument broke out between Griffith-Boscawen and the Federation. Again at the suggestion of Beaverbrook, the Federation revealed that they had agreed not to oppose the Agriculture Minister's successful election for Taunton in return for accepting the Royal Commission. Griffith-Boscawen

<sup>50</sup> HCD, 1922, 157, col 83.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 157, col 85.

<sup>52</sup> PRO, Ministry of Agriculture MSS, MAF 53/12, 'Deputation to the PM from the Commons Ag Committee,' 15 Mar 1921, p 19.

<sup>53</sup> BPP, 1921, XVIII, p 9.

<sup>54</sup> IAH, NFU, 1922 *Yearbook*, p 233.

<sup>55</sup> Griffith-Boscawen, *op cit*, p 239.

<sup>56</sup> HLRO, Beaverbrook MSS, B/16, Beaverbrook to John Edwards, 11 Feb 1922.

angrily replied to the Meat Traders' President that no such dishonourable bargain was made, counter-claiming that the Federation was untruthfully alleging he had promised to lift the embargo if the Commission recommended it.<sup>57</sup> Capitalizing on the furore, Churchill and Robert Horne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, told the Cabinet that they were unable to agree to the retention of the embargo. The Prime Minister was put in a difficult position. The dispute had now split the Cabinet, and threatened to split the Conservative Party, the majority partner in his coalition government. Under pressure from two of his senior ministers and close allies, Lloyd George acceded to their demands but, showing the political instinct for which he was famed, he reduced the chance of permanent fractures by removing the Government whip. The Cabinet agreed that 'in the event of a private member's discussion taking place,' the matter would be left to the judgement of the House.<sup>58</sup> To Griffith-Boscawen's dismay, his colleagues went further and fixed 24 July as the day for the discussion.

The embargo was finally overturned by 247 votes to 171 in the course of a heated seven-hour Commons debate. Members were treated to the extraordinary spectacle of two Cabinet members, Winston Churchill and Griffith-Boscawen, speaking in opposition to each other. 'The House of Commons has deserted the farming in favour of the trading interests' the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* lamented.<sup>59</sup> 'After last night', next morning's *Daily Express* correctly foresaw, 'even the Government cannot stand out against the community any longer'.<sup>60</sup> Even the House of Lords, 'which I certainly thought would stand firm, gave way on the subject', lamented

Griffith-Boscawen.<sup>61</sup> Lord Chaplin, a former Conservative President of the Board of Agriculture, moved to maintain the embargo, but could only manage a compromise: a Liberal proposal to lift the embargo without conditions was rejected, but Walter (now Lord) Long's motion accepting the Royal Commission's view that Canadian cattle were healthy, and might be admitted as stores under quarantine, was passed without a division.<sup>62</sup>

## V

Twelve months earlier, Part One of the Agriculture Act was repealed without fuss, and with approval from many agriculturists. But the cattle crisis involved an intense political battle. This distinction is important, because the conflict shows that by 1922 agrarian spokesmen had not come to terms with post-war political conditions. Pro-embargo activists were outmanoeuvred on several fronts. They were unable to wield the same tremendous instrument of persuasion as their opponents. The anti-embargo lobby had the *Daily Express* at their disposal; the NFU relied on the *Farmer and Stockbreeder*. The agricultural lobby was an easy target for conspiracy theorists on this occasion as on others between 1918 and 1929, most notably during the campaign for agricultural rates reform. The *Daily Express* claimed that 'a small section of British agricultural interests' had held onto the embargo for years by 'subterranean wire-pulling'.<sup>63</sup> A Labour MP warned colleagues about the existence of 'a strong coalition of all the parties, associations and trusts in favour of the embargo'.<sup>64</sup> Of course, the fact was that Churchill's well-timed decision to withdraw Cabinet support for the embargo, and Beaverbrook's com-

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Griffith-Boscawen to John Edwards, 18 May 1922.

<sup>58</sup> PRO, Cab cons 23/30: 34(22)6, 13 Jun 1922.

<sup>59</sup> *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 31 Jul 1922.

<sup>60</sup> *Daily Express*, 25 Jul 1922.

<sup>61</sup> Griffith-Boscawen, *op cit*, p 240.

<sup>62</sup> House of Lords Debates, 1922, 51, col 354.

<sup>63</sup> *Daily Express*, *op cit*.

<sup>64</sup> HCD, 1922, 157, col 64.

munications skills far exceeded those of the NFU or Griffith-Boscawen. The comment of William Shaw, the anti-embargo Labour MP for the livestock market town of Forfar, that 'we had only a poorly organised crowd,' seems at best disingenuous.<sup>65</sup> The singular logic of the issue enabled enemies of the embargo to employ the arguments of imperial preference and free trade. Their mutual cause infiltrated the country as well as the town. Walter Long had already been persuaded by the case for imperial relations, and the embargo's supporters were obliged to keep an eye on agriculturists for signs of desertion, a point that did not bode well for future joint policy initiatives. Party lines split in unexpected ways. Griffith-Boscawen exposed the contradictions of the cattle crisis when he reminded MPs:

I was a supporter of the Imperial Preference policy of the late Mr. Chamberlain, and a whole-hog supporter, at a time when many of those who are now advocating the removal of the embargo on Imperial grounds were his bitterest opponents.<sup>66</sup>

Supporters of the embargo were thrown off balance by the organised campaign against them. Some preferred to apportion blame for the problems faced by British stockbreeding than to endorse the embargo. Edward Fitzroy, the Daventry MP and a leading member of the Commons Agriculture Committee, told Lloyd George defensively that the deficiency of stores was partly caused by the wartime increase in arable land.<sup>67</sup> 'Undoubtedly the fact that live stock is depleted is due largely to Government interference', concluded the NFU Conference Chairman in 1921.<sup>68</sup> The CLA after the war was more concerned with the mitigating the impact of supertax and estates duty on its members. Those thorny issues made its leaders more inclined to leave practical agricultural matters to the

NFU, and less inclined to activate their own membership, many of whom sat in the House of Lords. The Executive Committee reported in April, 1921, that it had 'watched the movement for the removal of the restrictions' but suspended judgement until the Royal Commission had reported.<sup>69</sup> The CLA Council was slightly less hesitant, and in response to a number of branch resolutions submitted in March 1921, decided to back the embargo;<sup>70</sup> but it was not until November 1921 that a formal resolution was finally moved. This reluctance among the landlords' spokesmen became more apparent when the embargo debate reached the Lords.

Most fatally of all, 'agriculturists were as usual not united', as Griffith-Boscawen remembered.<sup>71</sup> Fifty-nine of the sixty NFU county branches – with Northumberland the sole dissentient – passed resolutions in favour of the embargo. This perhaps indicates a rare outbreak of grass-roots political activism by small farmers who usually left politicking to their larger and leisured brethren. Their arguments, though, were weakened by the internal conflicts of interest between breeders, feeders and arable farmers. 'One argument used in favour of removing the embargo has been that the agricultural industry is not unanimous on the point, and it was said that certain districts wanted the embargo removed', noted a delegate to the 1921 NFU Conference.<sup>72</sup> William Shaw stoked the flames and exposed divisions in the officially united ranks of the NFU when he averred: 'It is the commercial farmer who wants the embargo taken off – the man to whom profits are more than prizes'.<sup>73</sup> The fact, affirmed by Edward Fitzroy in 1924, that milk 'is the only

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 157, 107.

<sup>67</sup> PRO, MAF 53/12, p 8.

<sup>68</sup> IAH, NFU, *op cit*, p 49.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, CLA executive committee report, 12 Apr 1921.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, CLA council meeting, 1 Nov 1921.

<sup>71</sup> Griffith-Boscawen, *op cit*, p 240.

<sup>72</sup> NFU, *op cit*.

<sup>73</sup> HCD, 1922, 157, col 65.

commodity that agriculture produces which is not open to competition from the whole of the world',<sup>74</sup> and the Royal Commission's conclusion that Canadian cattle would not damage the milk supply, decided the growing dairy sector's indifference to the embargo. As Griffith-Boscawen accepted, Prothero's original undertaking meant in effect 'that the matter had been hopelessly compromised'.<sup>75</sup> Walter Long's changed attitude to his own Act was similarly damaging. Were not these, Asquith rhetorically inquired, the opinions of two men who by their official positions and personal experience were 'perhaps more qualified than anyone else to speak for the Government of the day in agricultural matters? The House must remember that'.<sup>76</sup>

Because agriculture was disunited, sympathetic parliamentarians could not work with the NFU or the CLA as easily as Beaverbrook worked with the Meat Traders' Federation. According to Griffith-Boscawen the support offered by the cereals sector to livestock was at best tardy, at worst non-existent. At least half the Scottish farmers, and those from Northumberland, Norfolk, 'and the eastern counties generally' wished to lift the embargo.<sup>77</sup> Graziers on the east coast of England and Scotland wanted Canadian stores in their fields. The Secretary of State for Scotland supported Churchill and Horne by warning Cabinet that the Scottish Board of Agriculture opposed the embargo.<sup>78</sup> Crofters wished to retain their monopoly of livestock sales to lowland arable farmers, but the more intensively farmed areas wanted Canadian cattle to eat their root crops and supply valuable manure. Eventually, the Scottish NFU sent four representatives to the Royal

Commission, two for the embargo and two against. Lloyd George forcefully reminded Conservative parliamentarians that opinion about the embargo: 'depends really on the part of the Country you come from'.<sup>79</sup> It was conceded by all that agricultural labourers equated cheap meat with lifting the embargo, in common with their urban counterparts.<sup>80</sup> In contrast, the urban-based Labour Party opposed the embargo as a united force. They reflected the campaign for cheap meat from the towns. The City of London held a special conference at the Guildhall in March 1921, that carried an anti-embargo resolution on behalf of a large number of corporations including Birmingham, Glasgow and Cardiff. The regional fractures identified by Griffith-Boscawen mainly divided the Tories, who were unanimously for the ban in Ulster but less unanimous in other districts. At the final division in the Commons, three Conservative MPs from East Anglia did not vote at all and two voted against the embargo. Three Conservative Members from the livestock counties of Leicestershire and Staffordshire did not support the embargo. The no-vote of Stafford Member William Ormsby-Gore, despite his keen interest in agrarian affairs, may be explained by his parallel interest in imperial affairs – in 1922 he became Under-Secretary for the Colonies. Sir Smith Hill Child sat for Stone in Staffordshire, and Sir Keith Fraser represented Market Harborough, one of the most important grazing districts where much of the country's feed-cattle was purchased. Since graziers and market traders expected to benefit from Canadian business, Child and Fraser abstained.<sup>81</sup>

A Bill re-admitting stores into Britain subject to strict veterinary supervision quickly followed the Commons debate, receiving its second reading on 7

<sup>74</sup> HCD, 1924, 171, col 2538.

<sup>75</sup> Griffith-Boscawen, *op cit*.

<sup>76</sup> HCD, 1922, 157, col 92.

<sup>77</sup> Griffith-Boscawen, *op cit*.

<sup>78</sup> PRO, Cabinet MSS, *op cit*.

<sup>79</sup> PRO, MAF 53/12, p 18.

<sup>80</sup> BPP, 1921, XVIII, p 58.

<sup>81</sup> HCD, 1922, 157, cols 175–8.

December, 1922, and coming into operation on 1 April, 1923 as the Importation of Animals Act. Northern Ireland MPs complained about the import conditions set by the new Bill, but others now argued that agriculture must become more aware of post-war political realities. Robert Bruford, the Conservative Member for Wells in Somerset elected with NFU approval, had originally defended the embargo as one of the few full-time farmers in the Commons. As the debate over the replacement Bill unfolded, Bruford announced that it was useless for agriculture to resist. The British people were against the embargo, and if agriculture could show the people that they were reasonable, 'we shall do more to get them with us than we shall by resisting their desire'.<sup>82</sup> So it was at this late stage, during discussions of the new Bill that agriculturists found a measure of unity and accomplished their most effective work. According to its Tory Chairman, Chelmsford MP Ernest Pretymann, the Commons Agriculture Committee took 'an active interest in the question', and helped prevent the passage of certain categories of live cattle from the port to inland markets.<sup>83</sup>

'Thus', concluded the NFU of the affair, 'our stock-breeders received their share of discouragement'.<sup>84</sup> Further signs that agricultural protection was not a realistic possibility appeared in 1923, when it failed to feature in Baldwin's failed 1923 tariff election programme. For the rest of the decade, protectionists vainly concentrated on securing limited safeguards against a small range of overseas products like skimmed milk or malting barley. As for the embargo itself, the overall effect on trade of its repeal was minuscule, in contrast to the political heat and effort generated by the controversy. Canadian stores came

in, but not the 200,000 once forecast. Only 26,114 arrived between April and November, 1923, in the first seven months following the lifting of the embargo.<sup>85</sup> Five months later, Labour's Agriculture Minister commented: 'The numbers of Canadian stores which have so far been imported are too small to have had any appreciable affect on the price of meat'.<sup>86</sup> More ironically, Britain experienced three of its worse ever outbreaks of foot-and-mouth between 1922 and 1924. Canada promptly banned British exports. In 1926, a Conservative MP even requested more Canadian cattle imports to make up the resulting shortfall.<sup>87</sup> Sir Daniel Hall later conceded: 'Neither the fears nor the expectations of the protagonists in this dispute have been realised; no disease has been admitted and the imports of Canadian stores have been negligible'.<sup>88</sup>

## VI

Nevertheless, because of the scale of the original arguments, the political implications of the Canadian cattle crisis are more suggestive. For the first time, the structural weakness of the post-war agricultural lobby as a whole had prompted a major defeat. There had been division, bad co-ordination between various agrarian interests and a complete inability to win the understanding of the newly-enfranchised industrial populace. Lloyd George well understood that the majority of people were town-dwellers:

and if they are convinced that their meat is being kept at a high price in order to benefit agriculture without any rhyme or reason for it, you may depend upon it they will sweep aside everything and any Government will be beaten upon it.<sup>89</sup>

The embargo's defenders lacked ways to

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 159, col 2088.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 1923, 162, col 2360.

<sup>84</sup> IAH, NFU, 1924 *Yearbook*, p 77.

<sup>85</sup> HCD, 1923, 168, cols 5-6.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 1924, 170, col 1945.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 1926, 198, col 1436.

<sup>88</sup> Lord Ernle, *English Farming*, 5th editn, 1936, p 469.

<sup>89</sup> PRO, MAF 53/12, p 13.

communicate their rural message to urban public opinion. Worse, their specifically agrarian priorities were opposed to the experienced, organized and veteran supporters of imperial preference and free trade. 'The whole plea for the embargo', the *Express* accurately concluded, 'resolved itself into an unjustified claim that a small section of British agricultural interests should be protected against Canadian cattle. This claim, if admitted, would mean taxing the people's meat'.<sup>90</sup>

The scrapping of price guarantees in 1921 did not provoke the same ructions as

the cattle controversy. The repeal of the Agriculture Act only became a 'Great Betrayal' after arable farmers had re-learned the lesson that in a free market prices travel down as well as up, and had resorted to vain demands for protection. The cattle crisis is more illustrative of agriculture's post-war political position. It exposed the futility of the protectionist option, the inherent political weakness of the agrarian lobby, the unhealthy dominance of cereal policy at the expense of solidarity with smaller but more successful sectors of the agrarian economy. If any political event merits the bitter title 'Great Betrayal', it is the resolution of the Canadian cattle crisis.

<sup>90</sup> *Daily Express*, 25 Jul 1922.