

The White Paper, *Agricultural Policy*, of 1926: its context and significance*

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Abstract

The dislocation caused by the repeal of the Agricultural Act of 1920 had made any agreement, either within farming itself or between the different political parties, as to how the highest economic return might be obtained from the land whilst providing a reasonable livelihood for those engaged in the industry, even more elusive. The White Paper, *Agricultural Policy*, of 1926 claimed its provisions, when taken together, offered the support and confidence farmers required to help themselves, whilst avoiding any controversial initiatives. The synthesis of 'expert' opinion, parliamentary lobbying and ministerial discussion, encapsulated in the White Paper, affords an example of the difficulties government met in reconciling expectations of a more proactive approach to policy making with the variety of insight and enterprise called for in 'modernizing' an industry so diverse in its circumstances as agriculture.

Analyses of the implementation of the hurried abandonment of government intervention in the economy following the Great War have ranged little further than the immediate post-war years. The impacts of the desire to return to the 'normalcy of 1914', and to restore 'home rule for industry', were felt over a much longer period. The Ministry of Agriculture provides an outstanding example of the severe constraints upon policy making experienced by the inherently interventionist departments established immediately after the war, covering the major domestic fields of agriculture, health, labour and transport.¹

Given that the White Paper, *Agricultural Policy*, of February 1926, was the first major policy appraisal to be published by the Ministry of Agriculture covering the totality of its field of responsibility, agricultural historians have paid surprisingly little attention to its content, or indeed its authorship.² Edith Whetham referred briefly to its 'minor ameliorations', farmers being left otherwise to find their own 'financial salvation'.³ Andrew Roberts, the most recent biographer of Edward Wood (Lord Halifax) found nothing auspicious about his single year (November 1924–October 1925) as Minister of Agriculture, except perhaps in providing an early example of his later endeavours as Foreign Secretary to 'strike' balances in what proved

* I am grateful for the constructive comment of the anonymous referees, and the guidance and assistance of The National Archives and Cambridge University Library.

¹ R. Lowe, 'The erosion of State intervention in Britain, 1917–24', *EcHR* 31 (1978), pp. 270–86.

³ E. Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VIII, 1914–39 (1978), p. 165.

² British Parliamentary Papers (BPP), 1926, XXIII,

to be fruitless negotiation.⁴ Halifax recalled his position as one of 'almost complete futility and frustration'. Given the political atmosphere, the only sound advice which he could give to farmers was to lay down their arable to grass, cut labour, and run their holdings on dog-and-stick lines. Fortunately he was soon appointed Viceroy of India.⁵ The state of the economy limited such 'amelioration' as his successor, Walter Guinness, was able to announce in the White Paper.⁶

Only recently has the White Paper attracted substantive notice. Paul Brassley cited its main recommendations as illustrative of what ministers believed to be 'the right course in the best interests of the industry itself and of the nation as whole', namely:

to proceed on the lines of education and encouragement rather than of coercion, to endeavour to create that confidence which is essential for progress, to stimulate the private enterprise of those engaged in the industry, to assist them to organise themselves on an economic basis, and to protect them from the dislocation of reversals of policy and from rash proposals which would impair progress and breed insecurity.⁷

The purpose of this paper is to explore the chronology of conferences and consultation, and of ministerial decision and parliamentary pressures, which led to the publication of the White Paper. Such policy making is perceived neither as 'a complete disjunction' between those wanting to preserve some kind of 'traditional hierarchical society' and advocates of a more 'narrow business approach', nor indeed as a jostling for influence between modernizers and those of a more paternalistic stance. The inception and drafting of the White Paper would appear much more characteristic of what Philip Williamson described as the Conservative method of efficient and economical administration, sound finance, prudent tax relief, preservation of imperial interests, and consolidation of well-established official policies.⁸

This paper seeks to place the 1926 White Paper in a longer perspective starting with agriculture's reversal of fortune in 1920. It falls into seven parts. The first considers the problems faced by the newly-established Ministry of Agriculture, the second the 'Great Council of the Soil' and the third the sectoral consultation which followed, the fourth and fifth the development of

⁴ A. Roberts, *'The Holy Fox'. A biography of Lord Halifax* (1991), p. 17.

⁵ Earl of Halifax, *Fulness of Days* (1957), pp. 100–1. Edward Wood (1881–1959), latterly Viscount and finally Earl of Halifax, was a large landowner in Yorkshire. His first class degree in modern history had been followed by election to a fellowship at All Souls. Elected as a Conservative Member of Parliament in 1910, he had, following military service and appointment in the Ministry of National Service, served as Under-Secretary for the Colonies in 1921, and President of the Board of Education in 1922. He served as Viceroy of India, 1926–31.

⁶ Walter Guinness (1880–1944), cr. Lord Moyne, 1932. Following military service, Guinness served successive

Conservative Governments as Under-Secretary of War, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, and Minister of Agriculture (F. Mullally, *The Silver Salver: The story of the Guinness family* (1981), pp. 65–6). As Minister of Agriculture he was responsible for the introduction of the national mark on eggs. He was assassinated by Zionist terrorists in Nov. 1944. ODNB.

⁷ P. Brassley, 'British farming between the wars', in P. Brassley, J. Burchardt and L. Thompson (eds), *The English countryside between the Wars* (2006), pp. 190–1; *Agricultural Policy*, p. 3.

⁸ A. F. Cooper, *British agricultural policy, 1912–36* (1989), pp. 64–93; P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin* (1999), p. 34.

policy which preceded the publication of the White Paper, and the sixth part the publication of the White Paper. A conclusion follows.

I

Edith Whetham's portrayal of the hasty repeal of the Agriculture Act of 1920 as the 'Great Betrayal' has encouraged historians to investigate who actually betrayed whom.⁹ The National Farmers' Union (NFU) was as keen as the government to secure some kind of permanent settlement. That appeared to be met by the guarantees given to prices and wages under the Agriculture Act of 1920, with its four years' notice of any termination. Market prices began to fall in early 1920 as overseas supplies became more plentiful. Not only was the cost of honouring such guarantees deemed prohibitive, but politically such 'artificial assistance' became untenable as other 'great' industries were affected even more severely by trade depression and unemployment. The NFU was supportive of withdrawal to the extent of obtaining abolition of the wages boards. Even if not an instigator of tariffs or subsidies, the Ministry might facilitate the means by which farmers could once again find their own salvation.¹⁰

There had never been consensus as to the scale and character of support for post-war agriculture. The majority report of the Royal Commission on Agriculture of 1919 might have prevailed, in as much as the Agriculture Act of December 1920 incorporated its main recommendation of guaranteed prices for wheat and oats as a means of sustaining the ploughed area. The minority report anticipated, however, many of the arguments which came to prevail in assessing the balance between prices, production costs and remuneration of labour, claiming that there:

was nothing in the conditions under which the industry was carried on before the War, or in the prospects now before it, [that] would justify us in recommending the continuance of the policy of guaranteed prices for cereals.

But whilst the farmer should be left free in normal times 'to use his own judgment as to what he shall produce and as to how he shall produce it', the minority report also argued that 'the State must be prepared to take a very active part in its development'. There was 'a great need for the thorough exploration of such subjects' as education, including research and demonstration, dissemination of information, the equipping and capitalization of farms, and reform of 'the Agricultural Holdings Acts, local rating, cooperation and transportation' in promoting 'the general well-being of the industry'.¹¹

The legislative adjustment to peacetime conditions had begun in the autumn of 1919, with

⁹ E. Whetham, 'The Agriculture Act 1920 and its repeal – the "Great Betrayal"', *AgHR* 20 (1974), pp. 36–49.

¹⁰ A. F. Cooper, 'Another look at the "Great Betrayal": agrarian reformers and agricultural policy in Britain', *Agricultural Hist.*, 86 (1986), pp. 81–104; E. Penning-Rowsell, 'Who "Betrayed" whom? Power and politics in the 1920–1 agricultural crisis', *AgHR* 45 (1997),

pp. 176–94; J. Brown, 'Agricultural policy and the National Farmers' Union, 1908–1939', in J. R. Wordie (ed.), *Agriculture and politics in England, 1815–1939* (2000), pp. 180–1.

¹¹ BPP, 1919, VIII, Royal Commission on Agriculture, *Interim Report*; Whetham, *Agrarian History*, VIII, pp. 119–21.

a debate on the Agriculture and Fisheries (Councils etc.) Bill. In moving the Second Reading, the Parliamentary Secretary, Sir Arthur Boscawen, spoke of how the Board of Agriculture had reflected the decades of agricultural neglect, it being a 'sort of negative department', with certain 'policing' duties such as eradicating animal diseases. It had taken no active role in developing farming and 'looking after the possibilities of rural life'. Although the War had changed all that, and the Board was now expected to maintain and stimulate production, Boscawen warned that there must be no slipping back, as 'the immediate submarine menace' passed. One effective way of achieving that was to put the county war agricultural executive committees on a permanent, peacetime footing, and for the Board to appoint Councils of Agriculture for England and Wales. The Minister hoped the Councils, representative of each county committee and of the respective farming sectors (the landowner, farmer and agricultural worker), would come in time to act as 'agricultural parliaments'. Captain Edward Fitzroy successfully moved an amendment during the Bill's second reading, whereby parliament recognized the Board's considerably enhanced, peacetime role by giving it the title of 'a real Ministry'. It became the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Bill.¹²

However much it was 'a machinery of government' bill, there was political intent. The Liberal member, Francis Dyke Acland, saw the affirmation of the county committees, as the local counterparts of the Ministry's 'headquarters', to be essential in assuring the public of minimal levels of production, trading and organization. Fitzroy rejected all notion of 'a spoon-fed industry', but he believed 'a little wise expenditure, most obviously on research, would produce results of 'incredible value'. Whilst the Corn Production Acts (Repeal) Act of 1921 removed the regulatory element, the committees' potential as a facilitatory, educative force remained.¹³

The Ministry may not have been a new department, but its enhanced responsibilities were integral to the same post-war aspiration which caused the Ministries of Labour, Health and Transport to be established. It too was exposed to what Rodney Lowe has characterized as the political ambivalence, stultifying Treasury control, and inherent weaknesses which afflicted those other departments.¹⁴ Much has been made of Stanley Baldwin's evocation of the qualities of farming and the countryside but, as Williamson has argued, his over-riding concern was electoral, especially following the trebling of the franchise to include working class and female voters. It made for an even more 'kaleidoscopic picture' in which, as Baldwin expressed it, as President of the Board of Trade in June 1921, 'we find ourselves in the presence of a phenomenon, strange to us, and to which we are unaccustomed'. The whole economic environment was changing so much. His decision, taken on a balance of risks in the autumn of 1923, to use tariffs to revive manufacturing industry and subsidies to maintain the arable

¹² *Parliamentary Debates (PD), Commons*, 121, col. 267-76, 281-4, and 1955-7, and *Lords*, 37, col. 812-5. Edward Algernon Fitzroy (1869-1943), Northamptonshire landowner, was the second son of the third Baron Southampton, and sat for Northamptonshire seats from 1900 to 1906 and from 1910 onwards. He served as deputy chairman of committees 1922-24 and 1925-28, when he became Speaker of the House of Commons, a

post he held to his death. His widow was created Viscountess Daventry. He was described in 1918 as one of the 'solid block of county members who really are the backbone of our Party'. *ODNB*.

¹³ *PD, Commons*, 121, col. 300-2. See, for example, E. Melling, *History of the Kent County Council* (1975), pp. 35-9.

¹⁴ Lowe, 'Erosion of state intervention'.

area, met with electoral defeat.¹⁵ He thereafter spoke of his willingness to give sympathetic consideration to any practical proposal, but emphasized how agriculturalists, for their part, must recognize how the electorate had made plain its opposition to import duties on staple articles of food, and of how taxation was already so heavy as to rule out such 'expedients' as subsidies, which would add materially to national expenditure.¹⁶

Ramsay MacDonald, as Prime Minister of the first Labour government, similarly recognized such constraints. Not only had the Cabinet's Agricultural Policy Committee wanted further 'expert' consultation before recommending any 'full policy', but the Treasury's Controller of Supply Services, Sir George Barstow, wrote of his 'immense relief' that the Prime Minister had accepted that neither protective duties nor food subsidies should be adopted. 'Agriculture must be conducted on an economic basis without artificial supports from the public purse'.¹⁷ MacDonald, in his statement of February 1924, spoke of how 'all extraneous aids to agriculture' would only cause 'a further deterioration of the agricultural mind'. Farmers would come to depend upon 'the power of the State and their influence in Parliament to get doles from the public purse, instead of solving their own problems by applying their own energy'. Towns would be induced 'to regard agriculture as something that preys upon them'. There would have to be 'control of the most definite, detailed, and oppressive kind' to assure parliament that such bounties were achieving their object. MacDonald was perfectly certain that 'farmers would not agree to it'. MacDonald's statement, as drafted by the Cabinet's Agricultural Policy Committee, insisted that the government's role was one of restoring the machinery to ensure a reasonable level of wages and to provide such encouragement as might develop and extend co-operative organization and credit facilities. Every assurance should be given to smallholdings and allotments, and for the further extension of education and research. Funds for land drainage should be increased, and greater use made of the county councils' agricultural committees in raising farming standards and generally improving village life.¹⁸

Such political statements drew heavily upon 'expert' inquiry. The unfavourable comparisons drawn by some members of parliament between agricultural productivity in Britain and Germany had caused an 'expert' Agricultural Tribunal of Investigation to be appointed, in December 1922, to look into:

[the methods] adopted in other countries during the last fifty years to increase the prosperity of agriculture and to secure the fullest possible use of the land for the production of food and the employment of labour at a living wage, and to advise as to the methods by which those results can be achieved in this country.¹⁹

¹⁵ Williamson, *Baldwin*, p. 172; PD, Commons, 142, cols 1573-4.

¹⁶ Cambridge University Library (CUL), Baldwin MSS 25.

¹⁷ TNA, CAB 23/47 (Cabinet Conclusions (C) 9(24)5, and C 11(24)3, and Appendix III (Cabinet Paper (CP) 81(24)), and T 161/179 (Agricultural policy 1924 - financial requirements, and Agricultural policy - proposals 1925-26).

¹⁸ PD, Commons, 169, col. 764-7.

¹⁹ BPP, 1923, IX, Cmd 1842, Agricultural Tribunal of Investigation, *Interim Report*. The Prime Minister appointed Sir William J. Ashley, Emeritus Professor of Commerce, Birmingham University; Professor W. G. S. Adams, Gladstone Professor of Political Theory and Institutions, Oxford University, and Professor D. H. MacGregor, Professor of Political Economy, Oxford University, to comprise the Tribunal. C. S. Orwin was appointed Agricultural Assessor.

The three leading economists, in acknowledging the industry to be in a 'very serious crisis', attributed the post-war decline in the arable area to two factors. Whereas farming remained the largest industry in most countries, the fact that it had fallen to fourth place in Britain meant a larger proportion of the population had a vested interest in food imports, both for their comparative cheapness and for the potentially-larger export markets for British manufactured goods. The second level of explanation focused not so much on the productive side of home agriculture, but on 'the dissipation of the monetary return'. The leading continental producers had a much more organized provision of agricultural credit, more farming 'advisors', more small-scale cultivation, and highly developed cooperative organizations.²⁰

The Agricultural Tribunal warned, however, that even if farming met its potential efficiency and profitability, there might still be a reduced area of arable and, therefore, reduced food output and employment. Why then was so much significance placed on arable farming? Of the three reasons adduced, namely the inseparability of farming from the plough and the store set by 'a flourishing rural population in the concentrated and intense life of the modern industrial state', the most pressing recently had been that of defence. It was however highly unlikely that all-party support would match the level of 'national insurance' required to restore the arable area to its level of 1918, namely the ploughing up of 2.5 million acres. It would require a public subsidy of £7 million, almost the cost of building a battleship each year. Nor did the Tribunal believe that 'the more scattered, more individual and less corporate nature' of farming merited such exceptional support. The requirement was rather for 'a policy pursued year in, year out, which combines research, education and organization'. As the Tribunal's interim report of March 1923 expressed it, 'Better farming, better business, better living' was 'the complete policy, and no part of this can be neglected'. With a more focused provision of agricultural credit, and expansion of the training and research required to instil a greater scientific and business-like awareness at the individual-farm scale, the Tribunal believed there was every reason to expect farmers to achieve, on their own initiative, the 'great developments in cooperative purchase and sale' found in some other European countries.²¹

Alongside such 'expert' opinion, Noel Buxton (the Minister of Agriculture in the first Labour Government) wanted intimation of what prominent agriculturalists and farming organizations believed should constitute 'a stable and permanent policy'. As Buxton wrote to George Dallas of the Agricultural Section of the Workers' Union, 'the government is not prepared to adopt either protection or subsidies as a remedy for agricultural depression, but, apart from those forms of assistance, we are anxious to consider any suggestions which might be made to us'. The replies to 'the Minister's questionnaire on agricultural policy' were analysed in late April. Only increased expenditure upon agricultural education and research was likely to be universally welcomed. There was little enthusiasm for the development of credit schemes, or indeed for cooperation. There was deep division as to wage regulation. But most strikingly, there was an insuperable 'cleavage between those who do and those

²⁰ BPP, 1924, VII, Cmd 2145, Agricultural Tribunal of Investigation. *Final Report*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 192–204. The report of Professor MacGregor.

who do not regard a subsidy, guaranteed price or protective duty as an essential condition of agricultural revival'. Taken together, there appeared little 'ground for hoping that any comprehensive agricultural programme' could be 'drawn up on non-party lines which will commend itself to the agricultural world generally'.²²

II

There was political consensus only to the extent that both the Conservative and Labour parties believed there could be no permanent solution to the problems of agriculture without the common agreement of all parties. Confronted therefore by an impasse as to what that agreement should comprise, the Conservative Party's election manifesto of 1924, *Looking ahead*, went no further than to promise that 'the Unionist Party, when returned to power, will call a conference representative of all those interested in agriculture, and of the various political parties, with the object of arriving at an agreed policy'. Both agriculture ministers in the new Conservative Government, Edward Wood and the Secretary for Scotland, Sir John Gilmour, saw their priority as agreement within the industry. The Cabinet of 12 November 1924 agreed to a conference being held with agricultural interests to agree, if possible, 'the general lines of an agricultural policy' which, subject to the agreement of the other political parties, might be adopted as 'a national policy'.²³

Wood was first off the mark with what one biographer called 'a high-sounding statement', on 28 November 1924, observing that, whilst there had been numerous and exhaustive inquiries, there was still no agreement on the main principles of agricultural policy.²⁴ A further attempt should be made, by way of a conference, the object being to agree:

that the industry should be conducted in such a manner as will secure the maximum employment of labour at reasonable rates of wages, together with the full use of the land for the production of food at the lowest possible prices consistent with a fair return to all those engaged in the industry.²⁵

Wood had warned the Cabinet, in obtaining its consent to the conference, that, unless all the objects were simultaneously attained, 'no measure for the relief of agriculture', nor assistance for any particular section, would 'secure the lasting support of the industrial population of this country'. But with that accord, there was a good prospect that such a programme, however radical, would be accepted by all the political parties. In asking the Conference to assume the need to raise the arable area by at least one million acres in order to obtain greater employment and volume of saleable-produce, he also emphasized the need for every type of land use to be as productive as possible, noting that livestock production contributed some 75 per cent of the total annual value, with fruit and vegetables representing a further 10 per cent. The Cabinet approved a parallel Scottish conference to consider 'what measures,

²² TNA, MAF 38/640 (Agricultural policy 1924 – invitations to various sections of agricultural industry to submit views).

²³ TNA, CAB 23/49 (C 59(24), 3).

²⁴ A. Campbell Johnson, *Viscount Halifax* (1941), pp. 126–7.

²⁵ TNA, MAF 53/120 (Agricultural policy, 1924–1938).

if any, are necessary, either by the State or by the agricultural industry itself, or by both in concert', to maintain and to increase the arable area, and 'by what further measures the economic maximum production of food from all the agricultural land of the country can be stimulated'.²⁶

The Scottish Conference, comprising leading landowners, tenant farmers, smallholders and farm workers, held the first of its eight meetings on 31 March 1925. It recognized farming to be 'one of the especial cares of the State', and that tariffs or subsidies were the only way of reversing quickly the 'retrograde' loss of some 200,000 acres of arable land since 1918. There was however so little possibility of their political acceptance that the Conference could recommend only less heroic remedies which, although not very far-reaching in themselves, might have the cumulative effect of maintaining the arable area, producing to a better average standard of farming, and securing a larger rural population.²⁷ Gilmour responded to criticism of the recommendations as being too timid and 'anaemic' by praising the Conference for avoiding 'propositions which were in the main outside the possibility of achievement'.²⁸ The fact that the Conference's report was not published until June 1925 meant account could be taken of the *debacle* of Wood's proposed Conference.

Biographers describe Wood's bitter disappointment at the failure of his own 'Great Council of the Soil' even to meet.²⁹ The invitations had explicitly required delegates to carry the full weight of their respective bodies. The landowners' organizations agreed to send three representatives. The NFU believed the Conference pointless, given the Government's pledge not to raise food prices and therefore not to invoke tariffs. In a sharp exchange, Wood both dismissed the Union's claim that there was nothing which the industry could do to improve its position, and insisted that the government would have a duty to consult the other political parties, whatever the Conference's recommendations as to some form of State action.³⁰ The National Union of Agricultural Workers and the Workers' Union both refused to participate. As Tom Williams, a Labour Party agricultural spokesman, recalled later, they refused to be led into a trap where the employers and landowners were bound to vote them down.³¹ Despite pressure from the Unionist Agriculture Committee to proceed, Wood was adamant that the whole purpose of the Conference was lost.³² Some little time later, Lloyd George produced his Land Reform plan for the Liberal Party, which was followed by publication of the Labour programme for land nationalization, control of cultivation, and stabilization of prices.³³

²⁶ TNA, MAF 53/61 (Agricultural policy, Nov. 1924-Feb. 1926) and 66 (Government's agricultural policy, 1925); CAB 24/169 (CP 504(24)), and CAB 23/49 (C 64(24), 7).

²⁷ Secretary for Scotland, *Report of the Scottish Conference on Agricultural Policy* (1925); National Archives of Scotland (NAS), AF 43/243 (Scottish Committee on Agricultural Policy, 1925).

²⁸ PD, *Commons*, 197, col. 666-7, and 683-4.

²⁹ S. Hodgson, *Lord Halifax. An Appreciation* (1941), pp. 51-3; Earl of Birkenhead, *Halifax* (1965), pp. 162-5.

³⁰ TNA, CAB 24/169 (CP 519(24)), and CAB 23/49 (C 65(24), 7).

³¹ T. Williams, *Digging for Britain* (1965); J. Sheail, 'Agriculture in the wider perspective', in Brassley *et al.* (eds), *English countryside between the wars*, p. 151.

³² TNA, MAF 53/61, and CAB 24/171 (CP 93(25)); PD, *Commons*, 191, col. 109-14.

³³ C. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside. The politics of rural Britain, 1918-1939* (2007); M. Tichelar, 'The Labour Party and land reform in the inter-war period', *Rural Hist.* 13, (2002), pp. 85-101.

III

Wood had obtained Cabinet approval on 25 February 1925 (even before the Scottish Conference met) for a two-part reply to an arranged Parliamentary Question. It blamed the labour unions for destroying what might 'have proven the foundations of an agreement between political parties as to a permanent national policy'. It was now for the government to frame such proposals as were 'consistent with the necessity of protecting the industry from the danger of sharp reversals of national policy'. To that extent, and in obtaining the Cabinet's approval to his having separate consultations with a much wider array of agricultural bodies, Wood had ratcheted forward the policy-making process.³⁴

Wood's position, in undertaking such consultation, was set out by Sir Francis Floud, his Permanent Secretary. Newspapers continued to refer to 'the plight of agriculture' but, as Floud pointed out, prices had stabilized. Lower wages and cheaper feedstuffs and fertilizers had helped to bring expenditure more into line with receipts. The Ministry's Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Daniel Hall, confirmed, in April 1925, that world prices for agricultural produce showed every promise of continuing to rise. Nor was the industry so disadvantaged as often claimed. Agriculture had received greater government attention than in any previous decade. Nearly £66.5 million had been provided by way of support over the previous seven years. Citing the recently-published 'expert' reports, Floud contended that the government should 'concentrate on strengthening the weak places in the industry', recognizing that, in so far as there was 'no royal road to the agricultural millennium', this must necessarily be a somewhat slow process. Hall similarly believed it was better, for the time being at least, 'to trust to the slow progress achieved by education and to minor measures for the improvement of farming'.³⁵

Turning to the opinions Wood was likely to encounter in his consultations, Floud wrote of how the abandonment of the Conference had shown most forcibly the difficulty of raising food production and the standard of living of those engaged in the industry in a way that was to the national advantage. Tariffs must not be allowed to sacrifice 'Britain's industrial supremacy', however small the agricultural base might become. The country's best interests were most effectively met by concentrating on manufactured exports, importing food from wherever it was cheapest and, thereby, supporting a much higher population than by any spurious policy of self-sufficiency.

As to the other 'heroic remedy', some form of subsidy, Wood had signified, on the day of his original announcement of a Conference, the adoption of the previous government's Sugar Beet (Subsidy) Bill. His 'patient competence' secured its enactment.³⁶ Crucially, he overcame fears of farmers being paid to do what they should have done anyway. If successful as a new crop, the ten-year diminishing subsidy would assuredly raise output and employment. At his meeting with Wood on 30 March 1925, the NFU President, Rowland R. Robbins, was concerned lest the Union was manoeuvred into a position where, by accepting subsidies in 'homoeopathic

³⁴ TNA, MAF 53/61, and CAB 23/49 (C 10(25), 5); *PD, Commons*, 181, col. 18–9; Anon., 'Council for Agriculture for England', *J. Ministry of Agriculture* 32 (1925), p. 54.

³⁵ TNA, MAF 53/62 (Agricultural policy, Nov. 1924 to Feb. 1926. Conservative administration) and 66.

³⁶ Campbell Johnson, *Halifax*, p. 127.

doses', it had to accept such conditions as the Exchequer might impose, particularly given that a subsidy of at least £2 per acre might be required to have any impact. On the premise that farmers were more hostile to control than they wanted subsidy, Wood affirmed in a note to Baldwin in May 1925, that both subsidies and tariffs were outside 'the pale of practical politics'. It was 'both sound and politic to stand upon the ground that encouragement is more powerful than coercion'.³⁷

The separate consultations made little headway. John Beard and George Dallas of the Agricultural Section of the Workers' Union, at their meeting with Wood in May 1925, indicated that they had come not to make 'any concrete suggestions', but rather to give their opinion on any points the Minister wished to raise. Nor was there positive recommendation from the NFU. When Wood asked for the 'real view at headquarters' as to how the inefficient, idle and bad farmer should be dealt with (particularly with the proportion of holdings in owner-occupancy increasing), Robbins conceded that theoretically, wilful neglect should not be tolerated. The Union would, however, incur much abuse if it were publicly to support such intervention. Recalling their wartime experience, members would be afraid that any move to deal with bad farmers would soon encompass those farmers whom, however diligent, were adjudged to be making insufficient use of their land. It was no injustice to a future Labour government to assume its drastic use of such a power in deciding what was essentially the mode of cultivation.³⁸

There remained the one body which the Minister was required to consult, the Council of Agriculture for England, as established by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries Act of 1919. A representative committee was appointed to draft its response to Wood's request for advice on how the industry might achieve 'the maximum employment at a reasonable rate of wages, together with the full use of land for food production at the lowest possible price consistent with a fair return'. The draft of August 1925 went further than had other consultees in actually suggesting what it perceived to be the most efficacious form of subsidy. Rather than being paid on all arable land, the sum of £2 per acre might be given on roughly a quarter of that area, namely upon the fallow crops and land forming part of the farm rotation. It would both help to keep the land in good condition and provide for a full complement of men, horses and equipment. Yet even such a compromise was severely criticized when debated at a special meeting of the Council in August 1925. The Committee's chairman, Lord Clinton, protested that the intention was not to help farmers 'carry on'. They had never asked for a subsidy. Nor did they need one to make a living. The purpose was rather to enable 'a satisfactory number of men to be employed at a decent rate of wages'. The Conference agreed by 49 to 14 votes to recommend the subsidy.³⁹

Nothing had really changed, in as much as Lord Clinton had made any subsidy conditional upon there being an overriding imperative. None was found. Floud was confident that farmers could sufficiently adapt, provided they were told clearly by all political parties what was expected of them. The NFU did not demur. When asked by Wood whether 'the industry

³⁷ TNA, MAF 53/61.

³⁸ TNA, MAF 53/62.

³⁹ Anon., 'Council for Agriculture for England', J.

Ministry of Agriculture 32 (1925), pp. 525–35; Council for Agriculture for England, *Report on Agricultural Policy*

(1925).

should be left to work out its own solution on purely economic lines' – that it should follow whatever course was profitable, even if that meant less output and labour – Robbins indicated that 'if the country were prepared to face the consequences', his members would have no complaint. Crucially, the Cabinet Committee for Imperial Defence had found no case for requiring farmers to produce more in peacetime than economic considerations permitted. Lord Bledisloe, the Parliamentary Secretary, wrote of how the farming community must accept such a verdict as final. It was not only better business for farmers to devote their energies to livestock husbandry, but it had been 'the unturned grass' which had provided the fertility so desperately needed for the crops grown in the Great War.⁴⁰

The eventual White Paper of February 1926 confirmed wide support for a national policy aimed at securing the 'highest economic possibilities' for food production and 'a reasonable livelihood for the greatest number of people'. The tariffs required by such a policy would be contrary to Government pledges and the policies of the other political parties. A subsidy of even £2 per acre might be insufficient to achieve any significant increase. As with many industries, farming had been severely hit by the post-war fall in prices, but had weathered the storm. The government accordingly believed the right course was to proceed along the lines of education and encouragement; to assist the industry itself onto a more economic basis, and to protect it from such dislocation as would impair progress and breed insecurity.⁴¹

IV

The special meeting of the Council of Agriculture for England in August had approved, without dissent, the greater part of the drafting committee's report, supporting the emphasis placed by Wood upon cutting costs and improving agricultural marketing. It was the approach long advocated by Lord Bledisloe, the Parliamentary Secretary.⁴² His admonitory stance had been well displayed by his address to a Gloucestershire branch of the NFU in January 1925, and his enunciation of what were rhetorically called his 'five extremely unpopular propositions'. The first of these was that the farming community would never win the respect it deserved without greater unity on the broader issues. Second, Bledisloe argued that it must cut production costs, paradoxically through larger outlay on labour-saving machinery and 'the instructed, far-sighted, and well-informed use of artificial fertilisers'. Third, there needed to be a greater resourcefulness, most obviously in keeping abreast of scientific and technical advances. Fourth, there had to be greater cooperation in the production and sale of produce, and fifth much more focus on providing both what consumers wanted and to a higher and more uniform standard. The Scottish Conference and the numerous other memoranda and consultations came to very similar conclusions, any differences arising from the priorities set in tackling them.⁴³

⁴⁰ TNA, MAF 53/62; PD, Lords, 61, col. 418.

⁴¹ *Agricultural Policy*, pp. 2–3.

⁴² The owner of a 4000-acre Gloucestershire estate and Unionist Member of Parliament, Charles Bathurst (1867–1958) had been ennobled as Lord Bledisloe for his war services (he was later elevated to a Viscount),

served as President of the Central Landowners' Association and, at times, was closely associated with the agricultural policies of both Lloyd George and Ramsay MacDonald. ODNB; E. J. Russell, 'Obituary', *J. Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 119 (1958), pp. 57–9.

⁴³ CUL, Baldwin MSS 25.

Floud had remarked that the most valuable stock on any holding were people but, as Bledisloe warned, in commenting on a draft Cabinet paper of September 1925, any greater opportunity for training and research would never carry conviction without reasonably certain prospects of using them. Of the various lines of 'useful' assistance, the White Paper placed credit at the forefront. An 'official' Cabinet sub-committee had reported on the inadequacy of agricultural credit in January 1923.⁴⁴ Floud identified the unprecedented break-up of the landlord-tenant relationship, and consequent loss of cheap capital, as the weakest part of the agricultural system. As Wood spelt out to Baldwin, the large landowners, so often the pioneers of nineteenth-century 'high' farming, had sold up, or had become so impoverished that they were mere rent-collectors. Especially where they had been forced to buy their holdings or face eviction, many of the new owner-occupiers were forced to economize in all directions. The Council of Agriculture perceived the unprecedented changes in land ownership as simply exacerbating the chronic under-capitalization of the industry, pointing to the great advantage of the agricultural banks in other countries with their commitment to, and detailed knowledge of, the sector.⁴⁵ The White Paper acknowledged the need to bring 'the general credit machinery' more into line with existing economic needs. Bledisloe added, in the House of Lords' debate on the White Paper, how negotiations were underway with the joint stock banks. A report recently published by the Ministry's economists had identified how they might act as a channel for a central bank in raising moneys through the issue of debentures to the public for both long-term mortgages and loans for land improvement. Short-term credit was much more difficult. The concept of chattel mortgages had been successfully taken up in New Zealand.⁴⁶

As the White Paper observed, the question of marketing had been investigated by a Departmental Committee under the Marquess of Linlithgow, with a final report of November 1923. It contrasted the prevailing parochial, haphazard and obsolete methods of marketing with the moves made by other industries, and by agricultural competitors abroad, to consolidate and form large-scale trading units. In a series of published reports, the Ministry's own economists emphasized the need to follow foreign examples.⁴⁷ The Council of Agriculture particularly pressed the pivotal role of cooperatives in farming generally and smallholdings particularly, there being significant economies to be made in establishing, say, farmers' auction markets and combinations to force down railway companies' carriage rates, which Bledisloe claimed to be the highest in the world. Whilst promising to consider sympathetically applications to assist sound schemes for cooperatives, the White Paper insisted, as had the Council of Agriculture, that the main initiative must come from farmers. An insight into the potential obstacles came from Floud's observation to NFU representatives of how much the Ministry's own economists were impressed by the way Californian fruit was brought to central points, graded and packed. As Robbins pointed out, whilst such

⁴⁴ BPP, 1923, IX, Cmd 1810, *Report of the Committee on Agricultural Credit*.

⁴⁵ TNA, MAF 53/62; Council of Agriculture, *Agricultural Policy*, pp. 8–12.

⁴⁶ *PD, Lords*, 63, col. 212.

⁴⁷ BPP, 1924, VIII, Cmd 2008, *Departmental Committee on distribution and prices of agricultural produce. Final Report*; Cooper, *British agricultural policy*, pp. 73–4.

cooperatives were helpful where large areas grew a few varieties, British orchards had a hundred-and-one varieties, not out of stupidity, but rather to spread the risks in such variable growing conditions.⁴⁸

Wood had emphasized to Baldwin, in his note of May 1925, how any national policy must demonstrably benefit each of the agricultural classes. To help prevent the landlord-tenant system from breaking down completely, £5 million was proposed by way of loans for estate improvement. As for farmers themselves, Wood pressed for a 'state-assisted land-purchase' scheme. A scheme of £20 million might enable one million acres to be subdivided between 5,000 owner-occupiers – a very small proportion, as Barstow pointed out, of the total population of 300,000 farmers. The Treasury's formal response was to distinguish between proposals intended to increase the country's productive powers and those simply to make agriculturalists relatively better off. Not only was there nothing to be gained from a further shift of the burden onto 'the hard-pressed industrialist', but the only way of raising more government-credit was upon the open market and, therefore, contrary to post-war financial policy.⁴⁹

To aid the farm labourer, Wood believed that a capital investment of £15 million over five years would enable a further 250,000 acres to be turned over to smallholdings for some 20,000 families. The county councils were empowered, under the Smallholdings and Allotments Act of 1908, to acquire land for such purposes. The wartime embargo on their borrowing had ended such development, but a further £20 million had been provided under the Land Settlement Facilities Act of 1919, for the settlement of ex-servicemen. It made the county councils the largest landowners, with a combined estate of nearly 450,000 acres, occupied by some 30,000 smallholding tenants. Wood pressed for legislation to address the ten-year cessation in providing holdings, so as to enable those with the most relevant skills, the farm labourers, to climb onto 'the farming ladder'.⁵⁰

Whatever the right course for 'this small and densely populated country', Bledisloe had written to Baldwin, in March 1925, the future was certainly not that of the 'territorial magnate', with thousands of acres of half-cultivated land. Such neglect would only make the nationalization of land even more attractive to ill-informed urban politicians. The small owner-occupier was the greatest buttress against Bolshevism, developing 'in his family and environment the habit of industry and thrift'. In suggesting the publication of an anonymous *ballon d'essai*, Bledisloe emphasized to Baldwin how much more was at stake than merely the economic salvation of the countryside. Rural prosperity was of increasing importance to the great urban populations as exports fell and manufacturers became more reliant upon the purchasing power of home markets. Such a system of 'peasant proprietorship' on the Danish model could, furthermore, be 'a breeding ground' for just the kind of prospective British settler the Dominions were seeking to attract. Bledisloe had seen for himself how the Scandinavians were the most successful migrant-settlers of the prairies. Canada, and perhaps Australia too, would ultimately be lost to Britain unless such settlers were forthcoming.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Council of Agriculture, *Agricultural Policy*, pp. 8–13; TNA, MAF 53/62.

⁴⁹ TNA, MAF 53/62, and T 161/179.

⁵⁰ F. L. Floud, *The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries* (1937), pp. 143–63; TNA, MAF 53/62.

⁵¹ CUL, Baldwin MSS 25.

V

Few objected to the principle of the State giving modest assistance to agricultural enterprise. Its priority among all the other claims upon the national purse was, however, bound to be contested. It called for both discrimination as to what might be sought by ministerial negotiation, and considerable concession in what eventually could be announced in the White Paper. Such concession was all the greater for the ambivalence shown by both the agricultural industry and the Ministry in formulating what Winston Churchill, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, described as 'these vague, half-considered projects for spending money and exhausting credit'.⁵²

Policy making was driven by the expectation that Wood would make a parliamentary statement as to the outcome of his consultations following the Summer recess. Where Wood's impulse was simply to itemize the measures needed, Floud emphasized the importance of the Cabinet discussing them within some over-arching policy. Given that subsidies were 'off' (as Wood expressed it), the government's duty was both to encourage and assist enterprise and to protect it from political dislocation. It was, as Floud wrote, an obvious and appropriate course for a Conservative government – not copying, but attacking the other parties – basing its policy upon owner-occupancy rather than State ownership and, therefore, providing for assisted land-purchase, for those who wish to buy their farms, and the development of smallholdings on prudent lines. Bledisloe wrote warmly of how he concurred in every way. Wood similarly agreed such definition of Conservative agricultural policy would both advance the national *desiderata* and command general sympathy.⁵³

However strong the political case, such forthrightness was soon dissipated by what Lowe has described, in the wider context, as the Treasury's debilitating effect and departmental weakness. The pre-war requirement, that there had first to be discussion with the Treasury before any item could be put on the Cabinet agenda, was renewed in April 1924.⁵⁴ The Treasury's Controller of Finance, Sir Otto Niemeyer, found Floud remarkably accommodating, he having been previously warned of opposition to any large scheme of government credit, whether 'for agricultural, electrical or other schemes'. According to the Treasury note of the meeting, Floud had conceded almost straightway that the 'more ambitious schemes of Mr Wood's programme' were politically impossible. To the Treasury's surprise, 'he did not maintain that they were vital to agriculture – indeed he seemed not to combat the view that our agriculture is in a pretty good way, as compared with some other countries'. Floud agreed that serious consideration might only be given to grant aid for smallholdings and land drainage. Wood, for his part, suggested that he should convene a ministerial Agriculture Committee to draft a Government statement on the outcome of his consultations. The Cabinet of 5 August 1925 approved the appointment of such a committee, as well as grant aid of £1 million over five years for land drainage, largely as a replacement of the annual unemployment relief schemes of previous years.⁵⁵ Of all agricultural

⁵² TNA, T 161/179.

⁵³ TNA, MAF 53/62.

⁵⁴ Lowe, 'Erosion of state intervention', p. 282; G. C. Peden, *The Treasury and British public policy,*

1906–1959 (2000), p. 167.

⁵⁵ TNA, T 161/179, MAF 53/62, and CAB 24/174 (CP 376(25), and CAB 23/50 (C 43(25), 4).

operations, cooperative organization was most obviously needed where the neglect of even a single watercourse prejudiced the farming of extensive areas. The Scottish conference had perceived it to be the first essential for agricultural progress, the unemployment relief schemes having shown what might be accomplished in rehabilitating and extending earlier schemes.⁵⁶

Wood spoke from the chair, at the first meeting of his ministerial Agriculture Committee on 13 October 1925, of how government policy must not only be based on economic considerations but also offer some alternative to the policies of other political parties, namely of promoting both greater owner-occupancy and more smallholdings. The formal minutes, however, record how the meeting concluded that 'the moment was not a favourable one for launching a large agricultural credit scheme'. Churchill saw no political, social or economic advantage in increasing the number of smallholdings. So great was the plight of smallholders in the eastern counties that Walter Guinness, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, deprecated any further move to put pressure on local authorities to increase their number. Bledisloe pointed to how most of the bacon, eggs, poultry, butter and cheese imported to Britain came from such smallholdings. Gilmour recounted the particularly impressive record of Scottish smallholders at the Committee's second meeting – only 2 per cent of smallholdings in Scotland (4 per cent in England and Wales) had failed. Ministers' scepticism as to whether farmers required help to purchase their holdings was, however, reinforced by the revelation that the proportion of holdings in owner-occupancy had risen substantially from 13.7 per cent (4.1 million acres) in 1920 to 23 per cent (6.5 million acres) in 1924.⁵⁷

Such misgivings as to the core elements of the proposed government statement had been well rehearsed. Barstow at the Treasury had argued strongly that a farmer's capital was best kept liquid for investment directly in food production and wages. The NFU representatives had made a similar point at their meeting with Wood. Far from raising food output, the overall effect of any State loans might be further to inflate land values, causing a farmer to be better off as a tenant. As to smallholdings, the same NFU representatives had cited a recent speech by Ramsay MacDonald who, whilst a strong advocate of smallholdings, had also conceded how modern machinery and improved husbandry methods were bound to favour the larger producer. The overall effect of any increase in smallholders might be to depress market prices further in their producing what was already in over-abundant supply.⁵⁸

Wood responded to Churchill's assertion that 'Agriculture was asking too much from the Exchequer' by emphasizing how the Agriculture Committee 'must also bear in mind his own difficult position in guiding the (Unionist) Party away from the idea of subsidies'. He recognized the need for 'the most rigorous retrenchment and economy', but he could not be responsible for an agricultural policy which did not make some provision for smallholding development. The Lord Privy Seal, the Marquess of Salisbury, thought nothing would be more disastrous than for the Government to have to repudiate in the spring some part of an autumn statement. The Committee, fearful that such a further deterioration in public finances might well arise, agreed to adjourn. It was not until mid-January 1926 that a further draft policy-statement

⁵⁶ Secretary for Scotland, *Agricultural Policy*, pp. 7–9; J. Sheail, 'Arterial drainage in inter-war Britain: a legislative perspective', *AgHR* 50 (2002), pp. 253–70.

⁵⁷ TNA, MAF 53/62, and CAB 27/293 (Agricultural Committee (A(25))).

⁵⁸ TNA, T 161/179, and MAF 53/61.

was circulated, with the intention of its becoming the eventual White Paper. Wood wrote, in correspondence, of its reading well. By the time the Agriculture Committee met again, Wood had become Viceroy of India. His successor as Minister, Walter Guinness, spoke from the chair of how, rather than his original claim for £15 million over five years, he had agreed with the Treasury that £6 million should be provided over four-and-a-half years where the provision of small- and cottage-holdings should be further encouraged by the county councils. Churchill confirmed that the Treasury would do its utmost to persuade the joint stock banks to accept, and give every encouragement to, an agricultural credit scheme. Gilmour asked that Scottish farming should be explicitly included within the compass of the White Paper, the text of which was approved, with minimal amendment, by the Cabinet of 29 January 1926.⁵⁹

VI

The White Paper had a thoroughly bad reception. Opposition spokesmen, in a House of Lords debate on the White Paper, attacked the Government for failing to either obtain a consensus, or develop any constructive policy of its own. It reminded an NFU representative on the Council of Agriculture of the ‘fussy housewife who is always sweepin’ and dustin’, but there’s never any smell of cookin’.⁶⁰ Guinness countered such charges by pointing to the bills that had been brought forward, which included the Smallholdings and Allotments Act, advancing ‘the small occupying owner side by side with the tenant’, followed by an Agricultural Credits Act. But none addressed, as Guinness himself acknowledged, ‘the root causes of agricultural depression’.⁶¹

Why had the Government (as Guinness later wrote) been ‘forced back’ on the policy as encapsulated in the White Paper, of simply hoping that these ‘small reforms’ might have such a cumulative effect as to make significant, long-term advance possible? The Ministry of Agriculture, although not a new department, had been given an explicitly more-interventionist role. Wood seemed well-suited to the challenge. A scholarly figure knowledgeable in agriculture, he wanted, in his own words, to encompass all shades of political opinion in tackling ‘the gravity of our social problems and the importance of getting fundamental things right’.⁶² Yet as Bledisloe wrote, in April 1925, the Ministry of Agriculture found itself powerless to formulate any scheme for the permanent security of agriculture, or to augment materially food output and employment.⁶³ Alongside the constraints of a policy of ‘sound money’ and continued commitment to free trade, there was the enormity of the stigma which continued to be attached to the enactment (as much as the repeal) of the Agriculture Act of 1920. The rashness of Lloyd George’s government in entering into a guarantee of that kind, and the cost of its repeal both to industry and the Exchequer (by way of compensation), was adjudged to have caused such disruption and loss of confidence that any such future

⁵⁹ TNA, MAF 53/62, and CAB 24/178 (CP 25(26)), and CAB 23/52 (C 2(26), 3).

⁶⁰ PD, *Lords*, 63, col. 185–205; PD, *Commons*, 196, col. 2106–14; Anonymous, ‘Council of Agriculture’, *J. Ministry of Agriculture*, 33, 1128–9.

⁶¹ PD, *Commons*, 198, 786, and 217, 269; NAS, AF

43/210 (Agricultural policy. Conference of agricultural interests in Scotland, 1924–5).

⁶² H. Begbie (‘A Gentleman with a Duster’), *The Conservative Mind* (1924), pp. 47–59.

⁶³ TNA, MAF 53/62.

assurance of continuity and permanence must be backed by the most explicit, cross-party support. Neither the first Labour government, nor Baldwin's governments, were able to obtain such consensus for an overall agricultural policy, even among the relevant agricultural bodies.

Wood's dogged pursuit of consultation hardly accords with David Cannadine's characterization of him as representative of an 'essentially decorative marginality', with little interest in his ministerial posts.⁶⁴ His perseverance might rather be criticized for quite the opposite reason. The debacle of the abortive Conference might seem rather to support the cynicism voiced by Edward Fitzroy in moving his amendment to establish a Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in 1919. It was naïve to believe that the representatives of the various sectoral interest groups would act as a unified whole upon such bodies as the wages boards. As Fitzroy contended, each would continue to fight its corner.⁶⁵ Yet it was only by imposing such accountability upon delegates to his abortive Conference that Wood could hope to address what Ramsay MacDonald, in his earlier parliamentary statement, had acknowledged as the fact that the State could offer nothing by way of substantial benefit until the farming community organized itself along more competitive lines. There was so little evidence of agriculturalists embarking upon the structural reforms so urgently needed to break away from what Cooper has called 'the inertia of custom'.⁶⁶

Wood was not so much naïve as manipulative in the sense that, as Lord Harris remarked in the Lords' debate of July 1925, he must have known the impossibility of increasing the arable area and labour force without tariff protection, or subsidy.⁶⁷ With all the 'expert' evidence to hand, Floud himself wrote of how:

the whole ground of agricultural politics has been so thoroughly surveyed and dug by numerous inquiries in recent years that we cannot expect to find any completely novel remedy which has not previously been conceived.⁶⁸

Yet it was only by relentlessly focussing the attention of the disparate interests which comprised the agricultural industry upon the salient issues that Wood could hope to secure some responsibility on their part for the organizational enterprise that would enable government to discharge a facilitatory role. The emerging lesson of the post-war 'catastrophic' intervention on the part of the Lloyd George government was not the rejection of State intervention, but rather the need for a considerably more informed and, therefore, relevant assessment of the scale and nature of the under-pinning support required.

Guinness later claimed that such apparent lack of policy making arose from fundamental disagreement as to whether the problems of agriculture stemmed mainly from low market prices, as the Government contended, or from the system of tenure, as the other parties claimed. Perhaps more accurately, account had to be taken not only of the inextricable linkages between these two issues of market prices and tenure, but of the dilemma of

⁶⁴ D. Cannadine, *The decline and fall of the British aristocracy* (1990), p. 220.

⁶⁵ *PD, Commons*, 121, col. 284.

⁶⁶ *PD, Commons*, 169, col. 764-7; Cooper, *British*

agricultural policy, p. 72.

⁶⁷ *PD, Lords*, 61, col. 445-6.

⁶⁸ TNA, MAF 53/62.

⁶⁹ CUL, Baldwin MS, 25.

reconciling what was deemed best for those comprising the agricultural classes with what was variously defined as the national interest.⁶⁹ As Tom Williams put it, on the evening the White Paper was published, simply leaving agriculture to look after itself was tantamount to the Government telling farmers to treat land as their particular reserve to be used only to their best advantage, domestic food-production being of so little importance. In fact, the agricultural and public perspectives were inextricably linked. Although regretting that the national output of breadstuffs had fallen from 20 per cent of domestic consumption in 1914 to 18 per cent in 1925, Bledisloe was even more alarmed that the market share of domestic meat production had fallen from 80 to 40 per cent, a very striking feature being the proportion of fresh meat imported from such countries as Holland.⁷⁰

VII

Edith Whetham chose, in her *Agrarian History* of the period, to focus upon how legislation and ministerial pronouncement influenced farmers' plans for production, and the decisions of landowners whether to invest in, or sell, their estates.⁷¹ But as this paper has emphasized, the respective agricultural and landed bodies also profoundly affected Whitehall and Westminster policy making. It was a two-way process. Such interpenetration was most obviously achieved through the kind of statutory advisory-bodies, whose utility was assessed by a volume published under the auspices of the Oxford University Politics Research Committee in 1940. Ministers of the various government departments could be much more confident of their policy making, where so advised. Such bodies were:

an opportunity for meeting and answering the criticisms anticipated, weighing the alternative suggestions and finding them wanting, and doing all this in a committee room sheltered from the boisterous weather of public controversy.⁷²

That was not, however, how the Ministry of Agriculture appeared to function. That same academic study characterized the Ministry as:

sailing for two decades through waters, which are always troubled and were then invariably stormy, with no clear idea either of its destination or its course.

Perhaps more perceptively, the Ministry and those who offered it advice, statutory and otherwise, rightly concluded that any amelioration must come through facilitating what farmers themselves saw as their priority, rather than some definitively interventionist, and therefore top-down, policy.

It was not until a further war that agriculture attained such recognition as 'a senior partner in our economy' that the fiscal resources were secured that made such facilitatory support significant. But even in promoting the Agricultural Bill of 1947, there was a striking continuity in the emphasis laid by Tom Williams, now the Minister of Agriculture, upon the close

⁷⁰ PD, *Commons*, 181, col.109-14, and *Lords*, 63, col. 220; TNA, MAF 53/62.

⁷¹ Whetham, *Agrarian History*, VIII, p. xxii.

⁷² R.V.Vernon and N.Mansergh, *Advisory bodies. A study of their uses in relation to central government, 1919-39* (1940).

consultation there had been with representatives of that industry. The bill was the product of 'the combined wisdom of all the different sections of that industry, and of the advertised views of the three major political parties'.⁷³ Such close accord between government and governed, as embodied in both the promotion and year-on-year operation of the act, was especially pertinent, given how, as the White Paper *Rural England* re-emphasized in 1995, the health of the countryside was not something to be determined centrally. In so far as rural wellbeing arose from a myriad of human actions, the success of any policy, and more particularly that of farming, depends upon lots of small-scale changes. Such enterprise must heed not only the profoundly different expectations of the towns and cities but, more particularly perhaps, those pursued within the different parts of the extraordinarily diverse rural environment.⁷⁴ Such an observation might well illustrate the dilemma confronted by the authors of the *Agricultural Policy* White Paper, some two generations earlier in the mid-1920s, in obtaining accord at so formative a point in the twentieth-century adjustment of central governance to the countryside.

⁷³ *PD, Commons*, 432, col. 625–6.

⁷⁴ BPP, 1994–95, Cm 3016, Secretary of State for the Environment and Minister of Agriculture, *Rural England*.