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Date: August '86 | Centre for Policy Studies, 8 Wilfred Street, London SW1E 6PL (01-828 1176)

DISTANT VIEWS OF WILLIAM WALDEGRAVE'S OXFORD SPEECH

-from a landowner, an environmentalist and a developer

Julian Byng·Tony Paterson·Graham Pye

Price: £3·20

Distant views of

William Waldegrave's

Oxford Speech

- from a landowner, an environmentalist and a developer

- with a riposte from the Minister

Julian Byng * Tony Paterson * Graham Pye

Centre for Policy Studies
8 Wilfred Street, London SW1E 6PL
1986

THE MINISTER AND HIS THREE CRITICS

The Rt Hon William Waldegrave MP is the Minister for the Environment, Countryside and Local Government. Previous jobs in Government include Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of the Environment, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department of Education & Science. He was an early member of the Central Policy Review Staff. He has a family farm in the Mendip Hills.

The speech which we reprint, with his permission, was given on 7 January 1986 at the Oxford Farming Conference.

Julian Byng was educated at Eton, Lausanne University and King's College Cambridge where he graduated with a First Class Degree in Economics. Called to the Bar in 1954 he practised at the Chancery Bar until he took over the Family Estate, Wrotham Park, in south Hertfordshire. He now farms approximately 1,200 acres comprising 900 acres of arable land, approximately 200 acres of pasture devoted to a pedigree Jersey herd originally established by his grandparents in 1894 and about 60 acres for the breeding of thoroughbred racehorses. The balance is amenity land and woodlands.

Tony Paterson, a City solicitor, is prospective Conservative candidate for Brent South and Research Secretary of the Bow Group, for whom he has written two environmental papers: 'Conservation and the Conservatives' and 'A Role for Britain in the Acid Rainstorm'. He is a member of the recently formed Conservative Environment Forum, chaired by William Waldegrave, and of the Party's Agriculture & Countryside Forum.

Graham Pye was educated at Magdalen College School, Oxford and at Birmingham University, where he studied Civil Engineering.

In 1963 he joined his father's firm. His first job in the finance department was to raise a million pounds. In 1975 he took over from his father as Chairman and Managing Director of The Pye Group of Companies.

ISBN: 0-905880-88-9

Printed in England by Chameleon Press Ltd 5-25 Burr Road
London SW18 4SG

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THE MINISTER'S SPEECH

When a proposition has become universally acceptable to political commentators, writers of letters to MPs, media pundits and school-teachers taking current affairs classes, it is a very likely indication that the proposition in question is, or has become, false.

Such is the proposition that modern farming, of itself, is the principal enemy of the conservation of the English countryside, its flora, fauna and familiar landscape.

If there is one single message I want to leave with this Conference today it is that those whose primary duty is the formulation of environmental policy do not regard farming and farmers as their enemy. And the explanation of why that needs to be said today by an Environment Minister, as it does, makes as reasonable a starting point as any for my talk to you. If you will forgive me, I will therefore start with a short summary of how it came about that English farmers came to be identified as environmental villains by all those school-children and TV pundits, when they are the principal stewards of a countryside recently noted by the retiring London correspondent of the New York Times as almost our only national asset now worth a mention. Mr Apple (such is the gentleman's nom de plume) may have overdone his New Yorker's sourness about some other aspects of our national life; but most foreigners would share his perplexity with the now

generally accepted belief - if my mail bag is to be believed - held to by the 80% of our fellow citizens who live in towns, that the English countryside has not only been raped but also desecrated, destroyed, stolen, prairieised, turned into a dust bowl, poisoned, polluted and in general treated in ways which conjure pictures of a visit by Genghis Khan to a neighbouring Empire.

So let us start by saying that though of course the enormous increase in British agricultural production since the beginning of the Second World War has very dramatically changed the face of some parts of the country, leading to the quite inevitable loss of those habitats which were part and parcel of previous agricultural technologies (and in some cases of previous agricultural dereliction), we still have a marvellously beautiful countryside the principal threats to which are the perennial pressures of urban and industrial sprawl, not of farming.

So what has all the row been about? I think there are three different concerns which have got simplified into the anti-farming bandwaggon onto which people have been climbing.

The first and second have been with us in one form or another for at least two centuries. They are, in short-hand, the problem of access and the problem of conservation. I will say just a little about them because they are quite familiar, and are no more or less soluble now as problems of public

policy than they have ever been.

The roots of conflict between farmers and landowners and those, nowadays predominantly from our urban population, who to a greater or lesser degree resent the fact that the countryside is not an enormous park for their sole delectation, go back at least to the enclosures. At their heart lies an unwillingness on the part of many people who may own their own house but nothing territorial besides, to accept that someone can own open countryside in the same sense as they own their front gardens. In this area of potential conflict, though it will never disappear, Britain has developed over the years a characteristic set of compromises which define rights and duties in relation to access to the countryside which seem to me an admirable mitigation of the inevitable conflict which must exist in such matters in a highly populated island where most land is privately owned and farmed for profit. Though the extreme proponents of open access - extreme to me because as a Conservative and a pluralist I recognise their position as an ancient and honourable socialist position - will use any unpopularity which private landownership and free enterprise farming may be incurring to stir up old feuds, I do not believe this is really a live issue. We have the historic compromises the Common Law has made over trespass; we have the footpath network. As long as both sides behave sensibly - in the sort of way the recent Countryside Commission

Access Charter sets out - these problems are containable.

The second of the old conflicts, though I may be on more controversial ground in describing it as an old conflict, is the quite inevitable conflict between changing patterns of farming, and indeed other land uses, and the conservation of the habitats which were associated with previous patterns of land use. In case we get too arrogant as a species it is worth remembering of course that the changes man causes are pretty small beer compared to those the Good Lord arranges. After all, it is only the twinkling of a geological eye ago that most of this island was covered with ice and inhabited by polar bears, as a marvellous new series made by the BBC Wildlife Unit in my constituency is about to remind us. And when we start talking in serious geological time - well then, I am afraid I have yet to see the hypothesis that the end of the dinosaurs was brought about by the East Anglian cereal farmers using too much nitrogenous fertilisers. Nonetheless, of course, man's changes of agricultural techniques do displace particular habitats and their creatures, intentionally or accidentally. This can have important economic results. Almost from the beginning of properly recorded English history, for example, we find wise monarchs taking steps to preserve economically important species of trees, such as yew and oak. Sometimes the process is deliberate and quite understandable.

Wolf and bear gave way before a more domesticated

countryside; if farmers could have exterminated rabbits, I suspect rabbits would have followed the wolf into extinction; and if foresters could exterminate the grey squirrel they would probably do more for naturally seeded hard-woods than any number of national tree years. Nothing that has happened in the last forty years, I think, begins to compare with the clearance of mediaeval forests or the enclosures in its effect on our wilflife or on the look of the countryside. An NCC established in 1750 or 1650 would have had a frightful job to do. But it is a quite inevitable, and I believe quite understandable, side effect of our present possession of a much larger and better educated population that hundreds of thousands or even millions of people are, or can be, moved to generous concern about the future of other species with whom we share these islands. Some of this is logically difficult to defend: however much we try to dress it up into a sort of scientific argument about the preservation of the gene pool you still do much better for supporters if you are a seal or an orchid than if you are an adder or a toadstool, let alone a tapeworm or a wet-rot fungus. But that does not detract from the fact that the depth of sadness if a species of wild-flower or animal is lost is real and generous, and is bound to be built into public policy by any Government which recognises that man does not live by GDP statistics alone. Now here the challenge for modern farming is much more difficult to meet, in ways which win the support of non-

experts, partly for an almost logical reason. It is inherently very difficult to deal in a way which seems to him fair with a farmer who finds himself the owner of some rare habitat, because it is not after all him who has made it rare, but other people (to whom nothing was done by the powers that be) with the result that he, but not they, now suffers inconvenience. If I haven't improved my traditional hay meadow, perhaps because I haven't got around to it, while all my neighbours are growing oil seed rape in theirs, it seems jolly unfair to me that I am penalised because no-one stopped them making my meadow rare. This is why it seems entirely morally justifiable that under such circumstances the farmer should be given some cash, under a management agreement, or perhaps under a more general farm income support scheme, to recognise the fact that society has suddenly decided that the old hay meadow is tremendously interesting.

There is here one concept, however, which worries me. It is what you might call the upside-down postage stamp syndrome. I believe that if you are a philatelist, your ambition will be to come across a misprinted postage stamp, preferably in its unused state. Such a postage stamp has, presumably, no aesthetic or other merit to differentiate it from an ordinary postage stamp. It is just rare. Now are we, in habitats, to preserve one of everything? We have this problem in buildings too. My Department recently, I believe, listed a

very fine Nissen hut somewhere near Yeovil. Well, that may be right. Will the NCC in due course find the collection of flora and fauna on badly kept municipal rubbish tips - the particular combination of ragwort, rats, magpies and black-backed gulls for example - worth listing if some beneficent authority is engaged in abolishing the very last such tip? I hope the question only needs stating to get its answer. The truth must be that rarity has to be taken with a pinch of salt. If a species is under pressure, yes by all means we must take action, and we must not keep genuinely rare eggs in too few baskets if we can help it; but it will just not be possible without driving ourselves lunatic to preserve examples of every combination of flora and fauna which may from time to time come into conjunction around some transient land-use or technique.

I only make such heavy weather of this to establish two points firmly. First, I think the NCC has a much more intellectually difficult job than is often recognised in establishing what it is that should be preserved, and why, and I think they are getting it just about right. Second, I think that the moral and logical position of the farmer who finds that his particular bit of flora or fauna is now rare is such that there should be no hesitation in saying that he deserves public money if he is asked to do better than those who have been allowed to extinguish their bits, and if it is expensive for him to do so. I believe such flows of money,

from taxpayer to land-user, for conservation expenses, are thoroughly justified and should become a useful and permanent adjunct to farm incomes for quite a considerable number of farmers, often in the rather more marginal farming areas where the inherent difficulty of farming has prevented our predecessors from extirpating species which may have gone for good elsewhere.Just to remind you, the Government has increased the money available for the NCC, a significant part of which is paid directly to farmers, from £7.9m in 1979/80 to £32.1m in 1986/87. What is more, this approach - somewhat quaintly called the 'voluntary' approach since it is based on a structure of carrots and sticks which would keep all but the most recalcitrant donkey on the move - this approach can avoid one real danger which is quite unknown to and unnoticed by those who campaign for top-down conservation controls on farmers instead of incentives and that is to set against each other those responsible for conservation and those who live in the countryside. It took a novelist's eye to encapsulate this danger for me, namely that of the admirable Howard Jacobson in his hilarious novel 'Peeping Tom' which I am afraid is not really suitable reading for such a respectable audience as this. It is about an unfortunate North London Jewish boy who suffers the inconvenience of being intermittently inhabited by the soul of Thomas Hardy. The hero, for reasons too complicated (and also, I am afraid, too salacious) to explain here, finds

himself in a Cornish village which belongs to the National Trust. There follows a splendidly comic account of what the hero sees as the regime imposed by the Trust on the aboriginal and other inhabitants; men from Land Rovers, striding the streets with canes under their arms and a stern view about dropped sweet papers, keep the village in trim for its annual inspection. Now of course in real life the National Trust, certainly when it was run by my brother-in-law, let alone his admirable successor, is not a bit like that. But the attitude - and the power relationship - is one that does exist, on both sides. I am often astonished by the contempt in which some so-called campaigners for the countryside hold those who live and work there; equally, I am frequently worried by the extent of the resentment you can find in the countryside against the representatives of the State whose duty it is to execute statutory conservation powers.

What we have to do is to forge the same sort of compromise on conservation which we have achieved on access, unsatisfactory (thank goodness) to extremists on both sides, but workable for the majority. The voluntary flag carriers for this sort of compromise in my view are the FWAG groups; positive suggestions have been made in the NFU's 'The Way Forward' and the CLA's Grettan Report, and also in the CPRE/CNP/WWF research study on 'How to Help Farmers and Keep England Beautiful'. The statutory guarantor of the conservationist

duties laid on land-users is the NCC. I do not necessarily think we have in place yet all the statutory powers we may need, particularly in the unclear margin between species preservation and aesthetic conservation. It is this area to which the supremely important initiative of the ESA's is relevant, and may show us the way forward. But I do not think we are far off a sustainable position if Governments continue to provide respectable levels of resources, as, I am proud to say, this Government is doing.

This conservation conflict is nothing new. England spawned a whole tradition of writers in the nineteenth century who inveighed against the destruction of our green and pleasant land by industrial development and agricultural neglect - the latter in the nineteenth century usually the consequence of agricultural slump. Cobbett saw the Great Wen of London gobbling all else up; Richard Jeffries lamented the loss of traditional country values and in his novel of the future 'After London' of 1885 saw an England where pollution and industrial wastes had destroyed the civilisation which had produced them. Chesterton saw the central planners - represented for him by H G Wells - destroying a social fabric along with the traditional English pattern of small towns and villages.

Like the access conflict, the conservation conflict is always with us and never can be solved once and for all. In both

these perennial arguments, the farmer, as land occupier and as user of new agricultural techniques is always in the middle, but has ultimately to be the person who operates the compromise which Parliament has to devise.

But by far the most alarming conflict in which farming finds itself is not with the Ramblers or with the CPRE, but with economic rationality. This is not, in Britain's case, a conflict which is the fault of British farmers. The structure of the CAP was not designed as a result of their lobbying. The fact remains, however, that the CAP does not work, overall, in the UK's interest, and the British Minister of Agriculture has different interests to secure from any of his continental colleagues, which often puts him in a near impossible position. The net result is all too well known: since 1977/78 a drop in net dairy incomes in the UK by over 50% in real terms and by over 60% in lowland cattle and sheep, while increased yields and over-pricing have improved cereal net incomes by over 60% in the same period although the disastrous weather in 1985 has reduced incomes significantly in all sectors. Nevertheless the long term trend is clear. No wonder we see an east-west divide in the agricultural nation to match the north-south industrial divide, and no wonder we see, on the one hand the tell-tale signs of incipient agricultural depression in the livestock country matched by economic absurdity and damage from the over-production of cereals elsewhere. Let there be no

mistake - both slump and over-production are matters of real concern to the environmental politician, and I will try to explain why.

It is an explanation not easy to make to senior colleagues. One such recently said to me 'You are never satisfied: when the farmers were reclaiming and draining new land, you said that that was environmentally wrong; now that some people say 14% of agricultural land will go out of use you say that is wrong too!. What do you want?'

The answer is no environmentalist wants the kind of agricultural depression represented by huge quantities of land going out of agricultural use. Putting aside the fact that agricultural failure on this scale would bring quite inexorable pressure (which can be seen already in some places) for the release of that land for housing and industrial development, the mere fact of the abandonment of husbandry on marginal hill farms and western livestock farms would bring a far greater environmental dereliction than has yet been seen merely from the fact that field sizes have increased or that stone walls are expensive to maintain. I doubt if those who campaign misguidedly under the environmental banner for a blanket cut in farm incomes quite understand how unattractive abandoned agricultural countryside can become. They can study the phenomenon if they want, in some parts of America: I hope we can avoid it

here. It is essential, in my view, if there is to be any hope of maintaining the familiar shape of that considerable portion of the English countryside which is fundamentally an animal husbandry countryside, for there to be decent incomes for the dairy and livestock sectors.

Equally, and less controversially, overproduction and over pricing under the CAP, particularly in cereals, have helped to produce very real environmental problems in some parts of the country. The nitrates problem is real; and there are areas of good flat eastern land which have been converted into mini prairies the long-term future of which may well be worrying even agriculturally (what about soil erosion, for example) and which have certainly put farmers in the public firing line as a result of the backlash of hostility which has been created by the economically quite pointless increase of production which they represent. It is not my job, thank goodness, to seek to negotiate a more sensible price structure which will help in the end to mitigate this (though it is my job to consider how best to deal with nitrates in the water); but once again a swing from super-abundance to dereliction is not what environmentalists want. We want a prosperous farming industry, which does not have to expand output to stay prosperous, but which can achieve a stable enough prosperity to carry a reasonable burden of quite expensive social responsibility in its management of the countryside.

As I say, it is the Ministry of Agriculture which has the extraordinarily difficult task of seeking to negotiate the terms of this stable prosperity against the background of European institutions built around a very different farm structure. My Department has to warn of dangers which may threaten the environment from the different measures which may be taken. First, and this is a principal theme of my talk today, we have as environmentalists to warn against the political and economic pendulum swinging too far the other way - towards rural slump and dereliction. Only a few commentators in urban bed-sitters would like to see the countryside made into wasteland, and even they have not thought it through. In reality no large tracts of land in a highly populated island like this would long remain waste; they would be taken up not by ancient meadow land and marshes full of the boom of the bittern, but by cheap housing, the aggregate industry, waste dumping, military training areas, and all the other alternative users of large tracts of land. Environmentalists must be persuaded to see that their battles with farmers over some modern techniques, their legitimate questioning of further new land drainage, or of the damage to water by excessive fertilisation or pesticide use, are really skirmishes and wrangles with a fundamental ally; not the real war. The real war, for the environmentalist, is to limit the permanent loss of countryside to urban and industrial development, and in that war farming is the only ally

environmentalists have. David Puttnam of the CPRE was right recently to remind us of the clarion call by all three party leaders in the 1930s to protect our countryside against thoughtless development, and to ask for similar commitment from all of us now. I am happy on behalf of Government to respond warmly. I would only add, as in fact I well know that CPRE understands, that farming is a wounded ally of the environmentalists, not a fallen enemy to be finished off with a final coup de grace.

So the time has come to start turning the slow-moving ship of public opinion back in a different direction. We have to get the TV producers to start making programmes aimed at answering the question 'who will tend the green and pleasant land if farmers don't?' I do not think they will easily find an answer.

But while I am happily able to pass the buck to MAFF of seeking to bend the social objectives of the CAP away from its original purposes of making the world safe for part-time farmers in Bavaria or citrus fruit collectives in Italy, and towards the provision of a decent income without endless increases in output for the larger farms of the UK, I do have a responsibility for some of the policies which are bound to be needed to supplement agricultural policy. The Department of the Environment must look to the needs of the rural economy as a whole as well as to planning and conservation

issues. I believe that we must be realistic, as both the NFU and CLA have been, about seeking to warn farmers that it is unlikely that in the future rural support is going to be seen really so exclusively as being a matter of agricultural support as in the past. From my Department's point of view, I greatly welcome the indications in the last census that rural populations are beginning to increase again after many decades of decline, in most of our countryside. This is very welcome to those who see the social stability and communal strength of villages and small towns as being far more reliable than their modern urban equivalents. We are not now so successful at living in cities that we can afford to ignore the fact that we have yet to hear of the Farrington Gurney riots or the police no-go areas of Stow-on-the-Wold.

And if, as they are, populations in many villages and small towns are slowly recovering, we should welcome it. As planners - and this is not always popular - we must not let green belt or wider rural planning policy block the small scale additional housing, the conversion of redundant farm buildings, and the light industrial developments which will be needed to sustain this improvement. But the warning to agriculture is that this incipient turn-around has not come from an increase in agricultural employment. Indeed even in the most rural areas, agriculture provides only something of the order of 10-15% of jobs. Or to put it another way, just increasing farm support only deals with one, rather limited

aspect of the overall problem of the rural economy, and does not create many jobs. So our wider countryside policies may not directly help farmers except in so far as farmers will be pleased like everyone else if rural schools and shops can be retained as a result of a healthier rural economy. But the prime aim is going to be to use the planning system, and such direct funding agencies as the Development Commission, to work steadily and sensitively to getting a wider base to the rural economy. I happen to believe that there will be plenty of opportunities for farmers in this. After all, they are a big proportion of the small rural business men. Even stretched as they presently are, they will still in many cases have something of a headstart, as established local businesses, and as holders of much of the land, in seeing opportunities in tourism, direct sales of food, sport and leisure, and lowland forestry (for surely one of the effects of declining farm land prices is going to bring the trees down off the hills, and a good thing too).

I have quite deliberately put this the other way round to the way it is sometimes put by those who appear to think that tourism and craft shops can replace milk and barley as principal sources of farm income. Of course they cannot. I think a better way of looking at it is to say that governments are going to be trying to widen opportunities for a range of rural employments, and that many farmers may be able beneficially to get in on some of the act. And here

we come full circle, because one of those new 'industries', now receiving some tens of millions, and still increasing, of government support each year, is the 'conservation industry', where once again this is often additional income to be made for farmers.

So my message today to both farmers and environmentalists is, I am sorry, but you have only each other. Farmers must stop regarding environmentalists as the embodied spirit of the hated man from Whitehall, intent on ruining a self-reliant and independent farming industry. It behoves the industry to recall what happened before the war and before the man from Whitehall, of whom the NCC or the Countryside Commission is only one modified modern aspect. They bring outside, non-farming concerns with them, maybe, but they also bring taxpayers' money and political protection. And on the other side, environmentalists, including the statutory bodies, national park authorities and all the rest, must not behave towards country people as if they were Victorian colonialists dealing with the lesser breeds without the law. Both together can create a political force - of environmentally conscious farming - capable of defending both their interests. Neither the farming lobby nor the environmental lobby alone - let alone in conflict with each other - has the power to look after the countryside properly. That, I believe, is the reality of the opportunity offered to farmers by environmental politics, and to environmentalists by the

farming interests, not least by those represented, this year, as for many years past, at the Oxford Farming Conference.

TWO CHEERS FOR THE MINISTER?

Julian Byng

In both tone and content the address of William Waldegrave to the Oxford Farming Conference deserves a cautious welcome from landowners and farmers; two cheers but not, for reasons which I shall try to explain later, three.

The first cheer is for the Minister's clarion call to the so-called 'green' lobby to recognise that agriculture is not the enemy of the rural environment, and that the main threats to our countryside are the pressures of urban and industrial sprawl. I would merely ask him to accept the qualification that it is only urban and industrial sprawl of the kind permitted and encouraged by the planning authorities that represents a threat. For reasons which I shall develop later, I believe that some encroachment on the countryside by housing and industry may be positively beneficial to the rural environment; contrast the development of the original part of Welwyn Garden City under the aegis of Sir Ebenezer Howard and under the stimulus of private enterprise not only with the wasteland into which so much of the Home Counties was developing during the inter-war period, after the long years of agricultural depression, but with the unimaginative rows of municipal housing which the New Town Corporations erected on adjacent areas after the 1939-45 war.

The Minister deserves his second cheer for his unequivocal

acceptance of the principle that if statutory powers are to be invoked to interfere with the right of the occupier of land to farm it, or otherwise exploit it, in the way he finds most profitable or most congenial, then it is only right that the State should compensate him for the loss of profit or other benefit foregone. While welcoming his acceptance of the lack of reason or logic in seeking to preserve one species or habitat or tract of land rather than another, I find it unfortunate that a Conservative Minister should not have addressed himself to the question who, if there is to be selective conservation, is likely in the long run to make the right choices. I shall come back to this later.

Let me now try and fill in the lacunae in what I, in common I think with most landowners and farmers, find a heartening address.

While the Minister accepts that the NCC would have had a difficult if not impossible task confronting it if it had existed at the time of the Enclosures, he appears not to recognise the corollary, namely that if the populace as a whole had then had the political power to prevent or even control the adoption of new farming methods, the countryside as we now know it would never have evolved. It is the same with urban planning; who can doubt that if planning controls in their present form had existed in the 17th century, the city fathers would have insisted on the rebuilding of the old St Pauls as it was before the Great Fire, or that if the

Crown Estate had been in private hands and planning controls had existed, Nash would never have been allowed to develop the Regent's Park (which the environmentalists would no doubt have claimed should be retained unbuilt-on to provide a 'Green Belt' and prevent the further expansion of Westminster towards Hampstead)?

Anyone who had the good fortune to visit the Treasure Houses of Britain Exhibition in Washington saw the benefits of five hundred years private patronage of the arts over a period during the greater part of which private taste could be indulged in without being inhibited by the dead hand of control by committees of politicians. Our traditional landscape is the product of an even longer period of evolution, under the private ownership of landowners of whom the majority, at least from the eighteenth century onwards, had benefited from a classical education and in many cases had had their tastes moulded by the romantic landscapes of Claude and Hobbema.

I do not know how many times the erection of a latter-day folly has been thwarted by planning controls; I do know that until recently at any rate a suburban planning authority would prevent the conversion of traditional tithe barns to dwelling accommodation because of slavish subservience to the principle that no additional dwelling should be permitted in the Green Belt, and be upheld by the Secretary of State on appeal. How fortunate we are that the planting of avenues

or new woods are not (at any rate yet) subject to any form of planning control.

Yet the Minister makes little mention of the importance of commercial forestry in creating and conserving the rural landscape, and at the same time providing the extra employment and prosperity which are equally essential to the preservation of the environment and to the economic strength of the country. While Europe produces 102% of its requirements of food, the United Kingdom on its own produces less than 10% of its timber requirements, and supplements the deficiency by importing £4bn of timber a year. So far from sniping at the tax reliefs afforded to timber growers, informed commentators should be seeking new fiscal incentives to stimulate timber production, because apart from the very large estates, whose importance has sadly diminished, no farmer is going to sacrifice the immediate returns brought by agriculture to enable his descendants in 70 to 200 years time to reap the benefits of his foresight.

I find it disturbing in this context that the Minister should say that he does not yet have in place all the statutory powers he may need; the clamour for the imposition of planning controls on agricultural buildings and commercial forestry fails to recognise that given freedom from control, and prosperity the traditional landowner can be trusted to build houses, cottages and even farm buildings, and to plant trees, copses and woods, which, however much the urban

'environmentalist' may resent the intrusion of new and unfamiliar shapes and species, are the foundations for our rural landscape of the future.

The Minister rightly acknowledges that the landowner and farmer are the most important allies that the so-called 'environmentalist' has. Indeed the history of British agriculture since the 1939-45 war has shown that given the right guidance and incentives the British farmer will produce what the community demands. It ill behoves those who complain of the structural changes to the landscape to lay the blame at the door of the farmer, who has done no more than respond with conspicuous success to the demand to produce more food. If the community demands from him something different, experience demonstrates that given the right fiscal and financial incentives, he will provide it.

But the threat to the conservation and evolution of our rural environment comes not merely from the environmentalist. The perennial agitation for the abolition of Field Sports, symptomatic of the lack of sympathy for and understanding of the way of life of country dwellers on the part of many townsmen, is a further threat to the conservation and evolution of the landscape and in many cases of the species which flourish there. How many of those who seek to control or abolish traditional rural sports in the name of humanity are aware of the influence which the desire of the traditional landowner to indulge in his preferred field sport

has had on the development of the landscape?

The Game Laws serve not only to safeguard the proprietary rights of the landowner in his game, but by making the killing or taking of game out of season a criminal offence, enables the reproductive cycles of the various species to continue undisturbed by human predators. Today's gamekeeper, by his constant war against natural predators, helps in the conservation not merely of the game which he seeks to protect, but also of numerous other rural species who might otherwise fall prey to them.

No doubt the resulting ecological balance is artificial in the sense that the preservation of game makes it otherwise than what it would be if there were no intervention to protect game, but who is to say that it is less preferable? Why, moreover, should certain species be protected simply because they are rare, and regardless of the damage they may cause? The golden eagle is, I understand, as much a menace to young lambs as to young grouse; so no doubt was the wolf when it was a natural inhabitant of these islands.

What special qualities does the politician, or a body of advisers appointed by politicians, have to determine whether a species of animal or plant merits state intervention to protect it against possible extinction, whether in consequence of the gamekeeper's efforts to preserve the game on which his livelihood depends, or in consequnce of changing

agricultural methods which the occupier of a farm has to adopt if he is to survive economically?

I am glad to note that the Minister acknowledges that there is no logical reason why a seal should have a better claim to protection than an adder or a tapeworm. Yet by recognising that there is a lobby which seeks to preserve for the mere sake of preservation but at the same time accepting, quite rightly, that we cannot preserve everything, he highlights what is, regrettably, a political fact of life (or rather accepted as such by the politician, which I suppose is the same thing), namely that he who shouts loudest has the most political 'clout'.

Whether, however, this must necessarily always be so is something to which I shall return below.

I have referred above to the influence of what I called the traditional land-owner. Until about 100 years ago most of the land in the United Kingdom belonged to a comparatively small number of people; they ranged from the small squire, hardly more sometimes than a yeoman farmer, to estates comprising tens or or even hundreds of thousands of acres belonging mainly to the nobility. Nearly all owners, however, shared the same ethos in their attitude and policies towards the land which they owned, the great estates more often than not setting the example in agricultural innovation; every schoolboy learns (or used to learn) of Coke

of Norfolk and 'Turnip' Townshend.

Yet these traditional landowners were not motivated (or not consciously so) by ecological fanaticism, nor so hide-bound by respect for the past that they hesitated to demolish the ancestral home and replace it by a new building in the style they admired, or which was then the fashion. It is, nevertheless, to them that we owe the landscape, often featuring the country house set in its park, which we now rightly recognise as one of our most precious assets. Equally important, the traditional landowner usually had, particularly in the case of the large estates which had other sources of income from coal, or railways or urban property, sufficient financial resources to take the long term view, thereby avoiding the temptation to maximise profits in the short run whatever the eventual effect on the land, and allowing him to afford rent holidays to their tenantry when times were hard.

Several factors have contributed to the decline in the influence of the traditional landowner. The agricultural depression starting in the 1870s, and the enactment of the Settled Land Act 1882, which made entailed estates saleable virtually at the whim of the life tenant, certainly played a part. There can be little doubt, however, that the major cause was the penal taxation of capital which started with the introduction of Harcourt's Death Duties in 1894, and has continued unabated to the present day, coupled with the

increase in the influence of the socialists who sought, and still seek, to change the social structure of the country by fiscal measures. Whereas Harcourt at least pleaded the exigencies of fiscal need for the imposition of Death Duties, the hysteria with which Lloyd George inveighed against land-ownership as such and the outpourings of even the so-called moderate socialists of the present day, make it clear that their real motive was and remains the achievement of political popularity by appeal to the feelings of envy which, sadly, can too easily be aroused.

Yet it is the decline in the influence of the traditional landowner accentuated by the breakup, usually to meet taxation liabilities, of the large estate that has been a major if not the most important factor in the threat to our environmental heritage. The family-owned large estate is replaced by the institution, or ownership is sub-divided between former tenant farmers most of whom, though admirably proficient in the exercise of their farming skills, are not generally concerned with (or do not have the resources to take) the long term view, or with selecting what is worthy of preservation in their heritage or with creating new landscapes adapted to the requirements of new technologies.

Hitherto the so-called ratchet effect has prevented successive Conservative Governments from reversing the fiscal policies of their predecessors. Yet there are signs that the tide is turning. The promised abolition of CTT on life-time

transfers is a welcome, though cautious, step in the right direction, but it has taken seven years to introduce despite the Prime Minister's unequivocal promise to abolish CTT when the socialists introduced it. There is, I fear, a similar gap between expectation and performance in the hopes expressed for the revitalisation of the rural economy. The Minister rightly pays tribute to the importance of a prosperous rural community, and has drawn attention to the part that can be played by the introduction of light industry (another use for redundant farm buildings), and small-scale housing development. He says that Green Belt and wider planning policies must not be allowed to block such developments; but it is exactly here that the landowner feels most frustrated when confronted with the ignorance and plain pig-headed obstinacy of many local planning authorities. There is widespread concern among many landowners that, whatever may be the Government's intention, it is being thwarted at local level. May we hope that this policy will soon be the subject of a new Circular, and will be implemented through the appeals procedure, reinforced perhaps by the threat to make the local planning authority pay a successful appellant's costs (perhaps by the members personally!)?

In parts of Virginia one can see the elegance and unobtrusiveness of what are obviously (from the numbers of motors discreetly parked outside) light industrial buildings, and not broiler houses, constructed in what in Britain would undoubtedly be designated Green Belt. Rural communities are

revitalised by new housing which blends with the landscape. Yet planning controls are minimal compared with this country. We see the beneficial effect of an environmentally sensitive consumer stimulating the private landowner to exploit his own land.

I suggest, therefore, that if we are to transmit to our successors a countryside which excites the same admiration as that which we have inherited, Government policy must be developed in two directions.

First, prosperity, whether derived from traditional agriculture or not must be stimulated in the countryside, and obstacles to the revitalisation of villages by small-scale new housing removed. If it is now impossible to restore the great estates which have been fragmented, the Government can at least ensure that fiscal reform facilitates the retention and expansion of those which have survived. If safeguards are considered a political necessity then let them be regulated and enforced by a new semi-judicial body wholly independent of the politicians, whether at local or national level.

Secondly, we must educate the urban electorate to realise that it is because of the stewardship of past generations of landowners, great and small, that we have inherited the countryside we now seek to conserve, but that conservation must not mean fossilisation. The countryside is a developing entity, and the townsman must learn to trust the landowner

and farmer to hand on to his successors a countryside which, though perhaps different in response to changing technologies, will still command the same admiration as that which he has inherited from his forbears. Provided he has confidence that he can hand on to future generations the fruits of his stewardship, there is every reason to believe (as the very existence of our landscape demonstrates) that the occupier of the land, whether tenant farmer or landowner, will, if untrammelled by bureaucracy, prove a better steward than the politician.

GREENING THE FARMERS

Tony Paterson

'It is a natural thing for a farmer to do - to grow more, but it is absurd to go on growing more and more food when one does not want more food. One needs to re-think the situation.'

Peter Giffard (as President of the Country Landowners' Association).

'That farmer is a poor creature who skins the land...'

President Theodore Roosevelt (Kansas,1910).

William Waldegrave's Oxford speech brought a step nearer the merger - formidable in its beneficial potential for the countryside - between the environmentalist and farming lobbies. The theme of reconciliation will be welcome to the growing number of Conservatives, especially in rural areas, whose political thinking now includes a green streak. The speech is worded in English as delightful as the language of Andrew Sullivan's pastoral polemic 'Greening the Tories', published last year by the Centre for Policy Studies.

In politics, symbols can matter. The promotion of William Waldegrave last September from Under-Secretary of State for the Environment to Minister of State for the Environment, Countryside and Local Government symbolised to many in the green movement a boost in the political status of their crusade as well as a welcome recognition of his impact in sewing a green thread through blue fabric.

The Conservatives nonetheless have a struggle on their hands to retain the responsible green vote. In many rural constituencies where, on the evidence of recent by-elections, the Alliance is a serious challenge, the environment issue may be becoming the electoral pivot. The protection of the countryside (especially the Green Belt) is Britain's foremost green political issue, just as combating forest damage is West Germany's. It should become a major element of a comprehensive environment package in the next Conservative manifesto. The failure of this Government to present all the good things which it has done for the environment as reflections of a cohesive green policy is a dangerous shortcoming. One in 40 of those who voted in the May 1986 Council elections in Bristol (Waldegrave country) actually voted Green.

In order to retain the 'country lover' vote, epitomised by the hundreds of thousands of people who are members of the RSPB, the National Trust, the Council for the Protection of Rural England or the County Trusts, the Government also needs to show that it is making progress as the champion of the countryside against the forces which menace it. Such progress is easier to achieve if farmers can be persuaded to commit themselves voluntarily to conservation. The 'Oxford' speech[1] matters because it is so persuasive in this regard. It is a shame that the Government is proposing to allow the Advisory Services of the Agriculture Department (MAFF) to charge farmers for advice on non-conservation matters. This

will discourage farmers from calling in the Advisory Service (ADAS) at all - leaving the farm gate open to replacement advisers from pesticide, chemical and farm machinery firms, whose counsel is unlikely to favour conservation.

In making out his case for a reconciliation, William Waldegrave picks out four conflicts or threats to farmers and to the countryside. He starts with the quiescent issue of countryside access. It is not too clear why he highlights this old and largely resolved conflict[2] - rather than a more recent issue such as straw-burning or pesticide use - unless to illustrate that compromises can help political problems to fade out over time. The Countryside Access Charter certainly deserves his accolade. (The Countryside Commission's accompanying booklet entitled 'Out in the Country', is equally packed with readable, even-handed commonsense[3].)

The second conflict he pinpointed is the public perception of farmers as, in effect, rural ne'er-do-wells, callous about countryside conservation, who will only desist from rural devastation once it is made worth their while. He makes two points here. The first, expressed entertainingly on page 9 is that we cannot, in habitats, preserve one of absolutely everything. No conservationist politician (except at the extremes) can cavil with this, so that there is some scope here for agreement with farmers, though where to draw the line remains a problem.

nothing morally wrong with paying farmers not to devastate features on their land which have become rare because similar features have already been blotted out on surrounding farmland. Yet there is no provision in planning law for paying property owners not to destroy buildings. It is only because we are used to farmers being paid by MAFF to do things which harm our countryside that we think it morally justifiable for the DoE to pay them not to.

The significance of this contradiction, which has a madcap (or maybe mad CAP) touch about it, worthy of 'Alice', fades, however, like the Cheshire Cat, if money paid as compensation to farmers takes the form of positive conservation grants instead of bribes not to do naughty things which they are not necessarily intending to do anyway. This is why William Waldegrave is quite right to describe the EEC's initiative over ESAs ('Environmentally Sensitive Areas'), in which positive conservation grants are to be paid to farmers as 'supremely important'. Credit is due to Michael Jopling for having prompted this initiative, which is repercussing through all EEC Member States.

William Waldegrave could, given time, have said much more in his speech about ESAs. We need to know what he sees as their role. There are two options. One is thought to be MAFF's approach: namely that they are a 'fire-fighting' device to be resorted to as seldom as possible for 'taking out' embarrassing areas, such as the Somerset Levels or the

embarrassing areas, such as the Somerset Levels or the Halvergate Marshes. The other approach, favoured by CPRE, is that ESAs may only number 5 or 6 to begin with but are a vital pilot scheme for much more general application once the concept has been shown to be workable in practice: hence the importance attached by the RSPB and CPRE to MAFF's carefully administering ESAs and not treating their emergence as a mere opportunity for further hand-outs to farmers with no strings attached. The second approach is preferable.

Conservationist politicians need to go on thinking about how to motivate farmers to become conservationists. For their own satisfaction, farmers want to be productive, not just country caretakers. A cereal farmer, for instance, likes to see himself as a useful vegetable grower, not as a flower landscaper. There is almost a contrast in farmers' minds between 'MAFF machismo' and 'environmental effeminacy' at the DoE. Yet there should not be, for what could be more futile (and therefore demotivating) for a farmer than to toil with muscle and machine all day to produce something which nobody wants? There is little service to the public or potential for self-respect here.

But would not a farmer obtain greater satisfaction in producing a smaller crop which somebody wants, by responsible farming methods which safeguard the land? This would also make more sense to the public. The challenge is to change the farmer's perception of achievement. The key is to involve him in

conservation as something positive. Farming and Wildlife Advisory Groups ('FWAGs') play a useful role here, though not nearly enough farmers belong to them. Government financial backing for FWAGs has risen encouragingly from £20,000 in 1983/84 to about £250,000 in 1986/87.

Even if CPRE's concept of ESAs predominates in the end, so that they welcomely proliferate across our countryside, the Government is unlikely to be considered to have been doing enough to win the rural green vote at the General Election, unless it acts on other green issues as well. First, some minimal planning regulation needs to be introduced (although farm buildings and land should, contrary to Labour's recent 'Rural Charter' stay outside the rating system). The most hideous feature of our modern countryside, because it is so incongruous and unblending in its shape, is the grain silo. It is irresponsible of governments to have allowed farmers to perforate the rural skyline with these protruding stumps, particularly when all that was needed was often a little expert advice about where to locate them inconspicuously in the first place.

Limited planning permission should be required for such eyesores and also for substantial agricultural operations. This could take one of two forms. The first alternative is that a farmer would have to notify his local authority before, for example, grubbing up a hedgerow or filling in a pond. If he heard nothing back within, say 6 weeks, he could proceed. The local authority could, on the other hand,

intervene within the 6-week period if it wished, and an appeals procedure would then, where appropriate, come into operation. The second alternative is that the equivalent of a Tree Preservation Order could be imposed by local authorities on special landscape features. This would still leave farmers with substantial scope to continue unimpeded with most agricultural operations.

The other major countryside conservation issue which can no longer be shirked is the effect of chemical pollution leached off farmland into freshwater systems. William Waldegrave laid some stress on his responsibility for this particular aspect of farming, despite his ministerial position outside MAFF (on page 17). The danger was recently highlighted in an article entitled 'Farm Pollution Behind Decline of Devon Rivers'[4]. This reported that the South West Water Authority had announced measures to reverse the long-term deterioration of two salmon rivers in Devon, the Torridge and the Tamar, which has mainly been caused by agricultural intensification. Livestock numbers doubled between 1952 and 1982. The potential pollution load from the 84,000 cattle in the Torridge catchment alone is equivalent to 589,000 people. The increase in livestock has brought with it intensified fertiliser use.

Farm waste handling facilities need to be controlled - or a political price will be paid for our inaction. The Government should accept the strong case recognised by the

DoE's Central Policy Planning Unit for a tax on nitrogen fertilisers and pesticides.

The clash with economic rationality

William Waldegrave rightly identifies the farmers' most alarming conflict as being with economic rationality, rather than with the Ramblers or with CPRE and the rest of the countryside conservation lobby. At the heart of the conflict with economic reality lies the Common Agricultural Policy. Farmers themselves sense the change in the political climate and realise that they cannot go on being cosseted by the taxpayer on anything like the present scale for much longer.

It is to be hoped that the Prime Minister will soon apply some of her political will to CAP reform. A recent CPRE research document argues cogently for major reductions in guaranteed farm price levels, with most of the savings going towards a more direct and discriminating system of payments to farmers, benefiting landscape and wildlife conservation and supporting the rural economy[5]. The key objective, still irksomely only on the horizon, (though recently approved, at last, by the European Commission) remains to persuade EEC Member States to allow CAP money, from the fund called 'FEOGA', to be used for country conservation.

While the CAP may technically lie outside William Waldegrave's ministerial purview, it would be most helpful if he does feel able in due course to proffer a similar proposal

to CPRE's as Minister of State for (inter alia) the Countryside at the DoE, in view of the continuing healthy tug-of-war between his Department and MAFF over control of countryside policy. The public impact of the 'Oxford' speech itself struck a significant blow on the DoE's behalf in this wrangle (whether or not it was intended to do so!).

The distinguished House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities commented in its influential 1984 Report, 'Agriculture and the Environment' that: 'In the past the DoE have been largely subordinate to MAFF, and have not been active enough in promoting care for the environment'. They called for greater co-operation between the two Departments[6]. William Waldegrave's subsequent promotion to Minister of State for the Countryside appears to have endorsed this recommendation.

Cementing the relationship

In his most persuasive bid to weld farmers and conservationists into a coalition, William Waldegrave declares (on page 17) that:-

> 'The real war, for the environmentalist, is to limit the permanent loss of countryside to urban and industrial development, and in that war farming is the only ally environmentalists have.'

After the pathetically weak line taken by MAFF last March against the proposed building of a new 'village' by building consortia in the Green Belt at Tillingham Hall, Essex and

with Building Societies now joining in the deplorable clamour for building land in the Green Belt in the South East, farmers might reciprocally conclude that conservationists and the DoE are their best allies, as the concrete encroaches.

William Waldegrave has taken a consistent line on this subject for many years. In his book 'The Binding of Leviathan', written in 1977, he said, admittedly a bit optimistically:-

> 'Green-field sites should not now be available for development; it is scandalous that they are; and they will shortly not be'7.

Green Belt is the most sensitive environmental issue for the Government. A new reason for environmentalists concerned about the Green Belt to vote Conservative has emerged since the 'Oxford' speech was made on 7 January 1986. This is that the nationally set business rate proposed for all commercial and industrial ratepayers in the Government's recent Green Paper 'Paying for Local Government'[8] would remove the threat of high rates which scares many companies away from inner city areas dominated by Labour. This reform will encourage business back into the inner cities, thereby providing jobs where they are most needed and helping to relieve the intense pressure for building on greenfield sites.

Conclusion

It is conceivable that the Government would gain more votes, in view of the unpopularity of CAP hand-outs to farmers, if

it made them squeal rather than patiently wooed them in the name of conservation, as William Waldegrave did in his 'Oxford' speech. However the cherished links between farmers and the Conservative Party are too well-knit for that.

Even so, farmers would do well to gauge the direction of the breeze from William Waldegrave's words, and to remember that, one day, it may be those farmers who have done most to preserve the fine features of the landscapes which they cultivate, who will have the best grounds for claiming Government grants. If this does happen, it would be consistent with the recent politically astute decision of the Government to include in the Agriculture Bill a clause (Clause 11) requiring Ministers of Agriculture to balance farming interests with those of conservation and recreation, when determining their policies[9]. Even a year ago, such a clause was unthinkable to the Government. Down on the farm, change is going to be rough and rapid. To the farmers, country conservation offers a lifeline, if only they will take it. To the Government, it promises an electoral harvest, if only it will earn it.

Footnotes

1. This 'voluntary approach' was also commended by the Conservative-dominated Commons Environment Select Committee's 1985 report on the Wildlife and Countryside Act. First report from the Commons Environment Select Committee, Session 1984-85, Chapter 2. HMSO

2. Access was discussed in detail when the Country Landowners' Association gave evidence to the Agriculture and Environment Sub-Committee of the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities on 17 January 1984 (Session 1983-84,20th Report at p.75). HMSO

3. Published 1985. Available from the Countryside Commission, John Dower House, Crescent Place, Cheltenham, Glos. GL50 3RA.

4. Environmental Data Services ('ENDS') Report 134 (March 1986), p.5. HMSO

5. 'How To Help Farmers And Keep England Beautiful' by Geoffrey Sinclair (1985), commissioned by CPRE, 4 Hobart Place, London SW1 and the Council for National Parks.

6. Session 1983-84, 20th Report at p.xxxv. HMSO

7. 'The Binding of Leviathan', Hamish Hamilton Limited,1978.

8. 'Paying for Local Government' - Cmnd. 9714. HMSO

9. Surprisingly, this change is expected to have no cost implications for MAFF. Nor will any staff be internally redeployed in consequence: see answer dated 21 May 1986 by Mrs Peggy Fenner MP to Parliamentary Question no.41 put down by Mr Richard Ottaway MP.

HOUSINGLAND SHORTAGE - FARMLAND SURPLUS

Graham Pye

At first sight it may appear impertinent for a housebuilder or developer to intrude into debate about the future of farming. But William Waldegrave's contribution to the Oxford Farming Conference so clearly addresses wider social and economic issues affecting the use of land that all sections of the community may properly join in. Evidently he speaks for many in the environmental lobby when he suggests that policy about farming is, henceforth, to be shaped as at least as much by reference to the environment and the protection of the countryside as by consideration of the future of one of the great industries of our country. Thus he has served notice on us all whether we have feelings about the countryside or not; or whether we ever visit it; or whether we are profoundly indifferent to it - as many of our citizens undoutedly are - that an increasing part of our GNP will be poured into the farming industry; not to produce food, but to conserve the countryside.

'I believe', he says, 'such flows of money from taxpayers to land users for conservation expenses are thoroughly justified and should become a useful and permanent adjunct to farm incomes for quite a considerable number of farmers.'

He appears to justify this on two main grounds. Firstly, the right of the farmer who is asked by the community to conserve, to expect others to bear the cost of so doing; and

secondly, as a way to prevent the land being used for any kind of development. Despite the abuse at present being hurled at farmers by the environmentalists - probably even more ferocious and ill-deserved than that hurled at housebuilders - Mr Waldegrave says that the environmentalists' real war is not with the farmer, who is their 'wounded ally', but with urbanism in all its forms.

This approach is worrying for several reasons; its failure to recognise the size, the sheer scale, of the problem which faces farming; the financial implications to the country of pursuing Mr Waldegrave's logic (which cannot, in fact, be applied only to a few marginal areas); and the regrettable disdain shown by the environmental campaigner for the rights and wishes of the majority of our people to share in the wealth and personal comfort which comes from the development of new jobs and homes, consequent upon demographic and economic changes in our society. The worst result, however, of this approach is that ultimately it would not only damage the quality of urban life but also - inevitably - fuel the decline of the rural economy, to the detriment of all who depend upon it. Hard questions arising from these points have not been answered by the environmental lobby.

Let me, however, first challenge the fundamental assumption which underlies everything Mr Waldegrave said at the Oxford Farming Conference - that is, that the conservation of the environment (equated with the preservation in aspic of an

18th century field pattern) is a priority which transcends all others. I, too, care about the environment, but not to the exclusion of all other matters and certainly not at the expense of sacrificing the changes which are necessary if our economy is to evolve, or the altar of one particular view of the countryside.

The environment embraces far more considerations than just that; but in his elegant and learned dissertation on the origins of the conflicts between the town dweller and the landowner, Mr Waldegrave omitted to bring the issues up to date and to consider solutions to some of the tensions in modern society. In my view one problem stems from the fact that the landowner has more land than he can profitably use; which he cannot, however, afford to maintain in idleness, while those political leaders who speak for the interests of the town - not least in Mr Waldegrave's own party - have promised and been able to give to many people, their chance to own their own bit of property, and to enhance their environment. Since, in our property-owning democracy, people are investing their own money in that property and that environment they naturally wish to make it as pleasant as possible - and do they not have that right?

From these considerations a new concurrence of interest - not conflict - emerges between the urban population in a property-owning democracy and the landowners and farmers, (the traditional property owners) which must be given greater

encouragement. This holds out better prospects for the farmers and likelier means of contributing towards an effective level of environmental protection than anything which Mr Waldegrave - and most conservationists - are preaching. It is therefore as misleading for Mr Waldegrave to say that the real war for the environmentalist lies in the attempt to limit permanent loss of the countryside to urban and industrial development, as it is misguided of him to sneer that vacant land would be taken up not by 'ancient meadow' but by 'cheap housing'.... and all the alternative users of large tracts of land.

Land is a fundamental economic asset and it is the right and duty of every society to use that land for its benefit -<u>not</u> to pretend that somehow industrial urban society is today so intrinsically unclean and wicked that, unlike all its predecessors, the town and its citizens should not be allowed to use the land. Of course, the uses may well include some of the objectives which Mr Waldegrave identifies. But this is where it is necessary to look at the question of scale.

It seems that it has been frequently put to Mr Waldegrave that about 15%, maybe more, of the land which at present we use for agriculture will soon be surplus to requirements, and should be taken out of production. That is the scale of the problem facing agriculture; but it is also the scale of the opportunity facing the nation to re-examine the use of a major asset which, as Mark Twain said, 'they ain't making any

more.' About 23.5 million acres of land is at present used for farming in England and Wales. A loss of 15% would mean that some 3.5 million acres would become available for other uses, or would revert to an untended condition.

Farmers could not, as Mr Waldegrave accepts, be expected to sacrifice their farm businesses without adequate compensation. But where are the resources necessary to provide this compensation? How can we justify a call of such magnitude on the taxpayers' pocket, in the face of other demands? William Waldegrave talks about the community paying to maintain rare bits of flora and fauna if the farmer cannot afford to do so; but the available budget for this is only £5-6M per year. He falls silent before the real problem; the scale of resources required to maintain 3.5 million idle acres of land. No readily acceptable method is immediately available for calculating the cost, but guesses can be made using two different methods. Whether calculated on the basis of profits per acre foregone, or of the cost of persuading farmers to stay as they are, the lowest possible figure would be £50 per acre per year, and could easily be over £100 per acre. So keeping 3.5 million acres out of production, but fully conserved, could cost the nation at least £175M per year and possibly as much as £400M per year. Let's call it £250M per year for the sake of argument. Since the cry is to cut public expenditure, not to increase it, what would we need to forego?

On MAFF budgets, it could be paid for by permanently abandoning all research (1986/87 costs equal £240M) or nearly all expenditure by MAFF in Scotland and Wales (1986/87 costs - £267M). Closer to home for Mr Waldegrave, as the Minister for Environment, the permanent abandonment of the urban programme (£227M for 1986/87) could almost pay for the preservation in aspic of the countryside. By contrast, the programme for environmentally sensitive areas has been funded only to the tune of £6M - a very long way short of the sums which the Countryside Commission hoped would be found.

In these terms, many will clearly find the whole approach preposterous, even if it were in theory desirable. But is it even desirable, since we face a continued expansion of households until the end of the century? When we need to provide homes in areas where most people at present live: that is, in counties which already have the greatest degree of environmental protection in the form of green belts and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, to which agricultural protection is yet another added layer? Is it not also widely accepted that we need to adapt and modernise our economic structures, and to resite industries in locations which will help to produce profits, if we are to increase our international competitiveness, and to improve our systems of transport and communications? All of this means, surely, that it is both proper and inescapable that land should be used for those purposes; and should be taken out of previously uneconomic uses in order to meet these changing

needs. Hitherto, there have been strategic reasons for resisting other uses in order to maintain the capacity of the farming industry. Now that this is no longer a requirement; now that it is desirable to reduce this capacity no good economic reason can be adduced for delaying the release of some of this farming land to facilitate the process of change. Indeed surprisingly sound economic arguments can be made for hastening the process. Since it will be beyond the ability, and probably the will, of the taxpayer to fund farmers' inactivity on the scale that the environmentalists' solution might dictate, it is, in fact, the development industry which could and should make common cause with the farmer and provide him with resources that the environmentalists cannot, by themselves, afford.

Again, this comes down to the question of scale. Mr Waldegrave implies that the incursion of housing and other needs of development, unless resisted, would over-run this surplus farming land. Little evidence supports this view - either in terms of demand or of the policy framework within which this might happen. Indeed, all the evidence points the other way.

ANNUAL AVERAGE LOSS OF AGRICULTURAL LAND
FOR 5 YEAR PERIODS ('000 HECTARES)*

England & Wales	Urban Uses	Govt.Depts.	Woodland	Other Adjustments
1922-1926	9.1	0.0	0.6	7.8
1926-1931	21.1	0.0	2.7	+ 6.1
1931-1936	25.1	1.4	1.6	+ 3.2
1936-1939	25.1	8.3	6.8	+ 4.4
1939-1945	5.3	41.0	7.7	+31.1
1945-1950	17.5	+14.6	7.3	+ 4.6
1950-1955	15.5	+ 2.5	9.1	+ 6.8
1955-1960	14.0	+ 1.2	8.0	1.5
1960-1965	15.3	+ 1.0	6.6	0.9
1965-1970	16.8	+ 0.6	5.5	2.5
1970-1975	14.9	0.4	3.0	12.5
1974-1979	10.8	+ 0.3	0.9	0.9
1975-1980	9.3	+ 0.2	0.7	9.6
1976-1981	7.8	+ 0.1	0.6	11.3

*1 Hectare = 2.4 Acres

Source: MAFF

At present farm and other 'green fields' lose less to all forms of urban development than at any time since records started in the 1920's (excluding only the war years). Losses of farmland to urbanisation were at their peak in the 1930's, but planning policies have helped to reduce this by two-thirds or more. Contrary to popular myth, the economics of development actually make the recycling of some sites more viable than the development of green fields. Under 20,000 acres per annum are lost to all forms of urban development and if continued to the end of the century (but slowing down at the present rate) this process would probably result in the loss of no more than 200,000 acres - a drop in the ocean (or rather, straw in the haystack) of the 3,500,000 acre surplus. Of this land lost to urbanisation, housebuilding probably accounts for half or even less, according to Mr Waldegrave's DoE colleague, Lord Elton, who told the RIBA in June this year that almost half of all new housing development now takes place on 'urban land'. That definition may not tell us too much, since it includes not only recycled land but also green fields within the urban fence, some of which are probably farmland. Nevertheless, if even 40% of total development requirements can be met from sources other than farmland (and this is almost certainly the case) the size of the take from farming land to meet all requirements of development is clearly very small as a proportion of both surplus and all farm land (certainly <u>not</u> the phantasm of encroaching urbanism conjured up by Mr Waldegrave).

But immense opportunities to improve both urban and rural life are now opened up as a result of these impending surpluses. Already too little land is available for development. The Property Market Report for Spring 1986, prepared by the Inland Revenue Valuation Office, starts its report on residential building land by saying that: 'The market has been limited by land shortages in many areas. In places with strong demand, this has resulted in sharp price increases'. Those shortages are the result of priorities given to AONBs and other landscape requirements, policies for the protection of farming land and the deliberate extension of the green belt far beyond the intention of Abercrombie and its other originators. Such policies may be quite proper, but taken all together they have given the 'environment' a higher priority than either national or economic wellbeing, and require the community to forego growth in its protection. Now, however, for the first time in decades a new option has been opened up. The hitherto inexorable rise in prices of housing land which affects the costs of the public and private sector, and reduces the supply of houses to levels below demand, could be corrected by taking advantage of this option, and using a modest proportion of the farming land which is unaminously agreed to be surplus.

At average prices of even £100,000 per acre, this policy would present a capital injection into the farming community which could make a handsome contribution towards environmental initiatives on the vast acreage which would

still be left. It could produce resources to help deliver what Mr Waldegrave is at the moment promising to farmers and environmentalists without being able to pay for it. Again, let us look at scale; the farmers need £250M a year; assuming that as much as 200,000 acres of farmland was sold for development by the end of the century (far higher than likely under most estimates of demand) this would yield £200M. That is roughly equivalent to the sum which Mr Waldegrave appears to be offering the environmentalists from taxpayers' pockets. So, between Mr Waldegrave and housebuilders, that is a start; but it still leaves to be found from elsewhere over 80% of the costs of environmental protection of farmland which Mr Waldegrave wants. It shows clearly that simple answers of the kind which he offers farmers do not add up.

Environmental care costs money, but the scale of that money is far beyond any single solution or source at present available. So farmers must be allowed to take advantage of each and any solution which is on offer. On this count, housebuilders and environmentalists are equally useful to them. But what Mr Waldegrave and, regrettably, others who want to prevent urbanism at any price have not faced up to, is the fact that they must find relevant economic solutions. It is for farmers to work out, with the help of a sympathetic political community, the ways to permute such solutions: to what extent they should invest in low-yield, high-priced, 'natural' foodstuffs, or in new leisure products, or take advantage of this subsidy or that, and this development

opportunity or that. This means that farmers should not allow themselves to be dictated to by urban armchair environmentalists, who expect farmers to help them suspend the evolution of land use. Environmentalists have no right to close all the doors but one to them - nor to prevent the rest of the community from taking the opportunities which are opened up to use some surplus farmland for development, in order to improve the quality of life of our urban population. Looked at realistically, the problem of agricultural surpluses then becomes an opportunity for the nation, rather than just a crisis for farming.

THE MINISTER'S RIPOSTE

I started my Oxford Farming Speech by saying that when propositions become universally acceptable then those propositions are almost certainly wrong. I am therefore not quite as discouraged by criticism as I might have been. Indeed I am pleased that the speech should have attracted attention and I am honoured by the pains to which the contributors to this paper have gone in order to comment on the speech and by the offer of the Centre for Policy Studies to publish the whole discussion.

I have already had my say at length in the beginning, so in fairness to other contributors and to the reader I will keep my responses to my critics short. I was glad to get at least 2 cheers from the landowners and farmers; after all, E M Forster gave no more to democracy.

Before coming to his main points, I think I disagree with Julian Byng on his history. I do not think it true that either the agricultural or the architectural improvements of the 'Age of Reason' would have been stopped by public opinion. Most enclosures were voluntary and created a large number of new small freeholders through the compensation arrangements. Furthermore the enclosure landscape was much older than most people realise. Only in a central belt running from the South through the Midlands was the landscape radically changed. And in those days patrons of architecture were enthusiastic for new ideas because these remained human

in scale, used traditional materials and conformed to accepted canons of taste, which is more then can be said today. It is the gap between popular and elitist taste which has opened up in recent years which is the trouble - but that is another subject!

Certainly I agree that private patronage of art by an individual is usually preferable to the taste of a committee. (More private patronage should be a by-product of our quest for tax cuts). But I think the analogy between artistic patrons and modern farming businesses is a little optimistic. Certainly there are some marvellously managed estates - often the big ones are the best, irritatingly for the 'small is beautiful' supporters. But I fear there are too many examples of farming practices and technology which are entirely charmless for it to be very convincing to say that private (including corporate and trustee) ownership can be left wholly alone. We do not, after all, take that view about buildings. And there is also the small matter that the general public pays to subsidise British farming to the tune of £2.6 billion a year. A certain interest in the outcome of this spending seems not unreasonable. But Mr Byng is, I think, accepting my central point that there is no reason why the taxpayer should not now ask for some environmental as well as production objectives to be met in exchange for his money. Meanwhile there is a very light planning regime over farming.

Our opponents, not us, threaten controls on farming and other rural activities (the Alliance are in favour of it on alternate weekdays) and on the specific point Mr Byng fairly makes about the conversion of farm buildings for other uses, we have recently urged local authorities to take a generous attitude to the granting of such planning permissions, even in Green Belts, to help the diversification of the rural economy. And here I am right alongside Mr Byng. Making a reality of diversified rural economy - with forestry and light industry playing their parts - was one of the themes of my speech, and must become one of the themes of the Conservative countryside policy. On that, we have no disagreement.

Tony Paterson makes a characteristically thoughtful comment, as one of the Conservative party's leading environmentalists. I think he is a bit optimistic in saying that access to the countryside is a 'quiescent issue'. Common land? Footpath rows? Bulls in fields? Hippy convoys? Water privatisation and access? There are plenty of issues: but he is quite right that I reminded people of this area of policy exactly because I think we have managed it reasonably well. Sensible compromise is possible.

More importantly however I believe Tony Paterson is quite right to stress the vital importance of the ESA initiative because it represents positive policy: payment to do something, not simply as 'dane-geld'. It is from this start

farming and conservation area. FWAGs are the symbol of the new world, as he says.

Since my speech we have gone out to consultation on a proposal for a limited Landscape Conservation Order power of the kind he wanted - an initiative that has not had the impact it should have had. Again it represents a potential breakthrough.

Tony Paterson, in short, is in my view exactly on target, both in objective policy terms and political terms.

Graham Pye is of course right to remind us the demands of his customers. I would just ask him this. England is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Our population is now, roughly, stable. We have preserved some 80% of our land from development. Is this not an achievement which should be maintained? Do we retreat from the 19th century cities and move our (nearly stable) population into the undamaged countryside? Surely not. We have a more formidable challenge for his skills, which is to revitalise the cities. I do not believe that all that land which need not be used for intensive farming in the future need go wholly out of farming and forestry uses - the market will see to it that more extensive, less capital intensive farming uses will become more worthwile - just as long as the land is not finally lost to urbanisation while urban dereliction elsewhere grows. There will be some additional development - there must be. But the readjustments in farming which are

inevitable must not be used so to relax the planning system that our achievement of avoiding the dire predictions of unconstrained megalopolis, made by H G Wells and others in the 1930s is now betrayed.