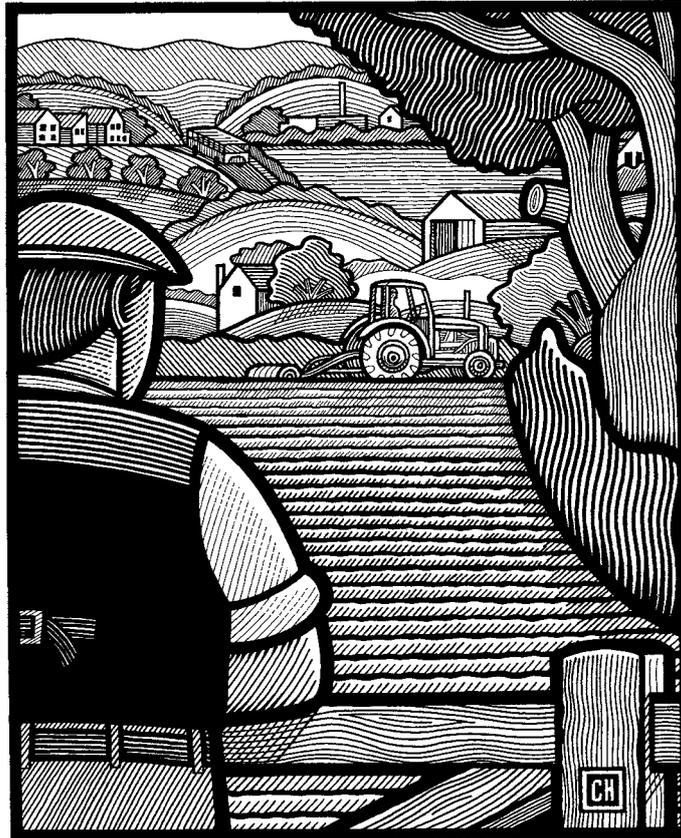


EQUALITY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

A RURAL MANIFESTO FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION

PRESS COPY EMBARGOED UNTIL 6 JANUARY 2016



The Land Magazine • The Land Workers' Alliance • The Family Farmers' Association



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EQUALITY IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

A RURAL MANIFESTO

At a time when the Labour Party is rediscovering its egalitarian roots, the parliamentary opposition needs to recognise that inequality is just as much of an issue in the countryside as in the city.

Although rural constituencies in England are Tory-dominated, opposition parties should not neglect rural issues.

The British countryside, and more particularly lowland England, is enjoying unparalleled prosperity. Newly-thatched cottages, gleaming Range Rovers, 300 horse power tractors, and rolling seas of subsidised wheat and barley testify that the countryside harbours a great deal of wealth. However this opulence is not shared by everyone who lives there; it masks an obstinate persistence of age-old inequalities, and a significant level of what is now termed “hidden poverty”.

People *living* in the countryside in lowland England on average earn about £90 per week *more* than people living in urban areas.¹ On the other hand people *working* in all rural areas earn on average about £90 per week *less* than people working in urban areas.² The reason for this apparent paradox is that large numbers of wealthy people who live in the country earn their living in the city. The countryside does not currently generate wealth, it imports it, and it imports the people who earn it.

The influx of wealthy incomers to the countryside is sometimes applauded on the grounds that they spread money around the local economy, and this is indeed the case insofar as they buy local foods, and employ local builders and services. However their wealth has also allowed them to buy up huge swathes of rural infrastructure, with the result that the price of houses, agricultural buildings and small parcels of land has rocketed out of the reach of many people who both live and work in the countryside, whose wages, despite the largesse of the incomers, remain below the national average. Young people born in the countryside often find they have no choice but to move to the city to earn enough money to pay for their accommodation.³

Moreover not all incomers are wealthy. Some migrate to the countryside seeking outdoor or manual work that they find more congenial than the predominantly sedentary jobs on offer in cities. Incomers dependent on low rural wages can be at an additional disadvantage, since they do not have the benefit of kin and community support, and they will not be eligible for affordable housing until they have been settled in a locality for some time. Such people often find themselves living in breach of planning regulations in

caravans, out-buildings or similar structures. Increasing numbers are buying small plots of land in an effort to engage with the natural world and stake a claim in the rural economy.

The root cause of the gap between urban and rural wages lies in the fact that the rural economy, reliant on the dispersed production of primary commodities, is vulnerable to competition from global markets and to aggressive price bargaining from cartels of processors and distributors (supermarkets) — whereas large sections of the urban service economy are immune from these forces. This explains why less than ten per cent of earnings from the UK food industry go to UK farmers and fishermen.⁴

Since the repeal of the Corn Laws in the 1840s neither liberal nor socialist governments have been keen to protect land-based industries from market forces, though for completely different ideological reasons. Only after the second world war, when food and timber security issues became paramount, was it felt necessary to support agricultural and forestry production through subsidies which in recent decades have been provided through the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Since then, CAP subsidies have helped the UK maintain a modicum of food production by compensating for exposure to a global free market.⁵ But they have failed to raise rural wages to the level of urban wages and have instead exacerbated inequalities within the rural economy.

Although they were originally linked to productivity, CAP subsidies are now doled out according to the acreage of



Equality in the Countryside

land owned, irrespective of whether or not it is being productively farmed. There is no mechanism within the CAP system, as applied in the UK, to ensure that payments are used to generate employment, or that it is the people actually working the land who are the recipients. On the contrary immediate beneficiaries are mostly landowners, while the ultimate beneficiaries are supermarkets who can use the subsidies to pay lower prices for the goods they buy. As profit margins on agricultural produce dwindle to ludicrously small percentages,⁶ farms have to expand to survive and subsidies are used to secure loans and invest in ever larger labour-saving machinery to cope with the extra acres. The bulk of the CAP subsidies, currently worth £3 billion,⁷ go to a diminishing number of landowners, around 40,000 of whom are estimated to own half of all the land in Britain.⁸ Meanwhile, innumerable small family farms have disappeared, swallowed up by industrially farmed holdings increasingly controlled by corporations.⁹

Since the second world war, successive governments have done little to halt the loss of family farms, or to question the blatantly inequitable flow of CAP subsidies. Rural policy under both Labour and Conservative administrations has been overwhelmingly influenced by the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) and the National Farmers Union (NFU). Both organizations represent the interests of a tiny number of people — considerably less than the one per cent that proverbially constitutes the capitalist elite — who between them own two thirds of Britain's land.

Any programme to reduce inequality in the countryside needs to recognize its two root causes, namely exposure to an unregulated free market, and the UK's stilted pattern



of landownership. That is not to suggest that either of these can be tackled head on through a programme of protectionist measures and compulsory land redistribution: the dogma of neoliberalism and the sanctity of property are currently too entrenched. Rather we propose a menu of practical steps which many people will find sensible and uncontroversial but which collectively add up to a radical shift in rural policy. •

STATISTICS AND REFERENCES

1. People living in villages and hamlets in lowland England earn on average about £90 per week *more* than people living in urban areas.

2. People working in rural areas earn on average about £90 per week *less* than people working in urban areas.

3. Although children under 15 make up about 18 per cent of the population in both cities and countryside, the proportion of 16-29 year olds in rural areas is only 13.5 per cent, whereas in urban areas it is over 20 per cent.

4. The UK's agriculture and fisheries industries combined generate less than 10 per cent of the total value added by the UK food industry. More than six times as many people are employed in catering and food retail as are employed in agriculture and fisheries.

5. The UK was 47 per cent self sufficient in food in 1956. This rose progressively to 78 per cent in 1984 since when it has declined to the current level of 60 per cent.

6. The gross profit for a farmer from a 110 kilo pig, sold at a farmgate price of £120, and providing perhaps £400 worth of pork is just £2.80. The gross profit on a 2.2 kilo broiler chicken is 30 pence. This is before fixed costs such as infrastructure costs, power and rent are deducted. The cost of producing a litre of milk is 27 pence, whereas the price paid as of September 2015 is estimated at 23 pence.

7. The 2.9 billion pounds handed out in CAP subsidies in 2014 represents 54 per cent of all the profit made by UK farms. It is more than the 2.4 billion pounds paid in wages to agricultural workers.

8. The top 40,000 landowners in the UK (1 in 1,500 people) own 28 million acres between them, nearly half the country.

9. In 2000 the average UK farm was 169 acres, by 2010 it was 226 acres — an increase of one third. The average for the whole of Europe is 36 acres. Over the same period, 47,000 farms disappeared, a 20 per cent decline. UK farms are bigger than in any European country except the Czech Republic.

REFERENCES

1. ONS *Rural and Urban Areas, Regional Trends 43*, 2010/2011)
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8. Kevin Cahill, *Who Owns Britain*, Canongate 2001, p 18.
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RECOMMENDATIONS

ACCESS TO LAND

Carry out research into the effects of the UK's pattern of land ownership.

Policy Objectives

Scotland has already embarked upon a process of land reform. Inequalities of land ownership in the rest of the UK are not as stark as they are in Scotland, but concentration of land ownership remains very high. The average farm holding in the UK is more than 6 times as large as the average holding in the EU. 35,000 members of the Country Land and Business Association own around half of England and Wales. The initial policy objective should be to determine what effect this skewed pattern of landownership has on rural people's lives.



Action Points

- England, Wales and Northern Ireland governments should appoint Land Reform Review Groups, similar to that operating in Scotland, with a brief to examine land ownership concentration, the amount of wealth and power this confers on an elite minority, the extent to which lack of access to land may cramp people's aspirations and opportunities, the impacts upon employment and the rural economy, and ways in which access to land, both rural and urban, could and should be improved.
- The Land Registry should not be privatized. The register of who owns which land should be completed, and made easily and freely accessible on line. A cadastral map for each municipality should be made publicly available at council offices, as it is in countries such as France and Spain.
- The sell-off of county farms should be halted (except where county farmland can be sold for development and the proceeds used to acquire more or better land). Local authorities should be re-empowered to acquire land for rent to small-scale farmers and new entrants where there is a proven need. Some county farms currently selling produce at farm gate prices could be subdivided and converted into smaller farms, processing and selling directly to the local market.

AGRICULTURE

Support human-scale farming accessible to a wider section of the population.

Policy Objectives

Family farms are declining in numbers, commercial farms are becoming larger and increasingly corporate, entry into the industry is becoming increasingly difficult and the average age of farmers is worryingly high. All these trends need to be combatted by policies that promote a sustainable, human-scale farming industry, accessible to a wider section of the population, providing more employment for people who like outdoor, physical work, and supporting a more varied and flourishing rural economy. National planning policy and local development plans should recognize the value and potential viability of small-scale farms employing agro-ecological methods and promote them through supportive policies.



Action Points

- Common Agricultural Policy direct subsidies should be capped at €150,000 per individual farmer, releasing an estimated £4million. The ceiling should be lowered progressively over time to a level that supports a wider range of thriving family farms.
- The government should implement Article 28(2) of Regulation EC No 73/2009 which allows member countries to refuse direct payments to landowners or occupiers who are not “active farmers”, ie “whose agricultural activities form only an insignificant part of [their] overall economic activities”. On the other hand direct subsidies should be made available to active farmers who farm less than five hectares in the UK, who are currently excluded (in contrast to farms of equivalent size in most other European countries).
- The government should implement the EU Redistributive Payment Scheme which allows member states to redirect 30 per cent of total CAP payments to the first 30 hectares of any farm; and the Small Farmer Scheme which provides further support for smaller farms.
- A proportion of Pillar 2 funding should be directed to measures and infrastructure that support small-scale and family farms, eg local processing co-operatives (such as are widespread on the continent) local abattoirs, and centres providing agro-ecological advice and services to land managers.
- Where farmers are vulnerable to aggressive pricing by an oligopoly of processors and supermarkets, as for instance in the dairy industry, the government should seek to regulate prices, for example through an agency analogous to the former Milk Marketing Board.
- Where UK farmers’ viability is threatened by imports of cheaper identical produce from abroad, and especially where environmental, animal welfare or workers’ rights standards in the exporting countries are lower than in the UK, the government should seek to maintain prices through the use of tariffs and similar mechanisms. Where this conflicts with EU regulations or trade agreements, such as TTIP, the government should assert its sovereignty and (re)negotiate agreements that safeguard UK rural livelihoods. By the same token the UK should not seek to maintain the viability of its farming industry by exporting or dumping subsidised produce that undercuts farmers in developing countries.
- The thrust of policy should be against the development of unsustainable over-sized factory farms, particularly where livestock are kept in cramped or inhumane conditions. In planning applications for mega-farms, adverse social impacts should be a material consideration, including the likely impact upon the viability of smaller farms and the resulting impact upon the rural economy.
- Improve public procurement of good quality local food. Extend the Healthy Start food vouchers scheme into a wider and more extensive programme similar to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the US that provides people on benefits with access to fresh dairy, fruit and vegetables direct from farmers or retailers.
- Work towards formulating a cross sectoral, national food policy, which would address the varied aspects of our food supply: price, health, farming and access.

HOUSING

Facilitate affordable, self-build and low impact housing on the edge of rural settlements.

Policy Objective

In 1999 a Labour government Cabinet report on Rural Economies noted that “large parts of rural England risk becoming the exclusive preserve of the more affluent sections of the population.” Since then rural housing prices have rocketed, while the provision of council housing and affordable housing has been minimal, and well below even the low levels seen in urban areas. Many young people cannot find affordable accommodation in their native village, and many low income people can only find rural accommodation by living in breach of planning regulations, typically in an unlawful caravan or outbuilding. The thrust of planning policy should be to favour affordable, low impact housing in the countryside and to prevent existing rural buildings being converted into unaffordable luxury dwellings.



Action Points

- Increase investment in council housing and social housing in villages.
- Measures should be taken to ensure that recently introduced government support for self-build housing is focussed on affordable housing, and not luxury housing. Single plot exception sites for self build affordable housing (already a policy in some local authorities) should become a national policy.
- Rural exception sites should not (as at present) be allowed exclusively for local people, although local people applying should have priority.
- Low impact and/or “one planet development” policies (currently in force in Wales) should be extended to the rest of the UK. Low impact co-housing projects with access to some agricultural land should be permitted on the edge of settlements. The “country house” exception policy in Para 55 of the NPPF should be adjusted to allow outstandingly sustainable developments, whether grand or modest.
- Barn conversions and removal of agricultural ties on dwellings should only be permitted for affordable housing.
- The definition of “affordable” (currently 80 per cent of market price) should be lowered and linked to minimum wage levels — ie to the ability to pay, rather than to the market.
- Council tax on second homes and very high value homes should be increased, as part of a rebanding process. Where a proliferation of second homes is causing problems, development plans should be permitted to take measures to restrict them.

ENERGY

Work towards a sustainable decentralised energy system based around community renewable energy schemes.

Policy Objectives

The countryside is the source of most of our renewable energy, and therefore has a key role to play in the drive to reduce carbon emissions. However the profits derived from such installations have so far mostly benefited private landowners (often very wealthy ones) while the costs, in terms of landscape impact, disruption etc are borne by the local community. Rational decisions about renewable energy installations can only be made when the community which bears these costs is also a beneficiary of the scheme.



Action Points

- Funds currently allocated to subsidising nuclear power generation should instead be invested in (a) appropriate renewable energy technologies (including energy storage solutions) which can bring economic benefits to all localities, and (b) energy efficiency measures, including retrofitting insulation to rural buildings.
- All rural local authorities to set targets within their area for the reduction of carbon emissions through renewable energy generation, including solar, wind and micro-hydro — especially community schemes; and through energy saving measures such as insulation of buildings. Government renewable energy subsidies to be linked to the attainment of such targets.
- *The Localism Act* to be amended so that land identified in neighbourhood plans as an appropriate site for renewable energy installations may be listed as an asset of community value, subject to a right to bid, a right to buy, or in certain circumstances, a compulsory purchase order.
- As in many other countries, the UK should introduce a moratorium on fracking, as this technology increases the total amount of fossil fuels available for extraction, and is incompatible with pledges made at the Paris climate talks.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Reward workers, not landowners, for managing land ecologically and productively.

Policy Objectives

Environmental payments should not be made to landowners for doing little or nothing to their land, but to people actively working on land, especially in a manner that is both productive and environmentally benign.



Action Points

- In the less favoured areas (hill farms) subsidies currently supporting an excess of extensive sheep farming should be redirected to a wider range of activities that support a more benign ecology and a more vibrant local economy: eg sensitive afforestation for quality timber and fuelwood, renewable energy, land improvement, hill crops, local-scale horticulture and dairying, land management for wildlife and water conservation, ecotourism and rewilding.
- In lowland areas, subsidies should be structured to encourage farms that use labour-intensive practices to combine high levels of productivity with ecologically benign management.
- In National Parks, AONBs and other protected areas, planning policies should provide more readily for the residential and structural needs of farmers and smallholders managing land in a manner consistent with the type of landscape being preserved.
- Planning policies should prioritise or allocate land in green belts around metropolitan areas for small farms, market gardens, dairies and forestry enterprises providing fresh local food for city-dwellers and facilities where they can learn about farming, food production and nature conservation.
- Much organically produced food and animal feed is not labelled as such because the costs of certification are too high for small-scale producers. The burden of labelling and certification should instead be borne by farmers who employ chemicals or other ecologically suspect practices, rather than by organic farmers. In other words, food products that have been produced using artificial fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides or genetically modified materials should be clearly labelled as such.
- Biodiversity offsetting should not be used to legitimise development that would not normally be permitted, especially on ecologically sensitive or locally valued land.

EMPLOYMENT

Increase opportunities for land-based and ancillary livelihoods.

Policy Objectives

The rural economy is distinct from the urban economy in that it is land-based and largely a provider of primary commodities. Over the last century there has been a severe decline in the number of jobs in the primary commodity industries (agriculture, forestry, fisheries, mineral extraction etc). To some extent this has been offset by other land-based activities (conservation land management and rural tourism). But some areas have experienced rural depopulation, while in others so-called “rural regeneration” has involved colonization of agricultural infrastructure by footloose urban enterprises, and the spread of “dormitory villages” where the majority of residents commute to nearby towns. One result has been a severe shortage of employment for those people, especially young people, whose aptitudes and inclinations are more suited to outdoor and manual work. Policies should be designed to increase opportunities for land-based livelihoods, and ancillary processing facilities, which in turn would support a wider range of rural services and a more vibrant and self-sufficient rural economy.



Action Points

- The term “rural worker”, as used in the National Planning Policy Framework to justify isolated homes in the countryside, should be clearly defined as referring to people carrying out jobs that are land-based: ie of necessity carried out on land in the countryside.
- Rural exception site policies should be extended to include live-work premises combining a residence and employment facilities on the edge of rural settlements, for self-employed people whose work is not land-based.
- Support should be provided for the creation of “village service stations” in rural settlements that combine retail provision of food and essential goods with post-office and banking services, car-hire and minibus services, etc (see also under *Transport*).
- An Agricultural Wages Board should be reinstated with a brief to ensure that wages in land-based industries, including seasonal work, remain commensurate with urban wages and with the cost of accommodation and other living expenses in the countryside.
- Forestry policy in the past emphasized cheap pulpwood, and left the UK heavily reliant on imports of quality timber. More recently there has been an overemphasis on amenity woodland. Forestry grants should be focussed on getting small and neglected woodlands back into productive use. New plantations should focus, where feasible, on high value timber crops (eg hardwoods planted at timber spacings, larch, Douglas fir, western red cedar and productive fuelwood) providing a wider range of forestry jobs.
- Fishery policies, and negotiations with EU members concerning the Common Fisheries Policy, should focus on increasing quota and opportunities for the under-10-metre sector, and defend the interest of local fleets against the monopolization of quota by fishing corporations.
- Most dimension building stone is imported even though the UK has ample reserves in many areas. Mineral development plans should identify localities where there is a need for and a resource of local stone (and other traditional building materials) and include policies that make it easy and attractive for small scale quarries supplying vernacular building materials to re-open.

EDUCATION

Reconnect young people with the natural environment.

Policy Objectives

Many schoolchildren are ignorant of where their food comes from, while for school-leavers, qualifications and employment in land-based activities are accorded a low status. The current urban bias in education needs to be addressed and greater emphasis placed on sustainable land management in the National Curriculum.



Action Points

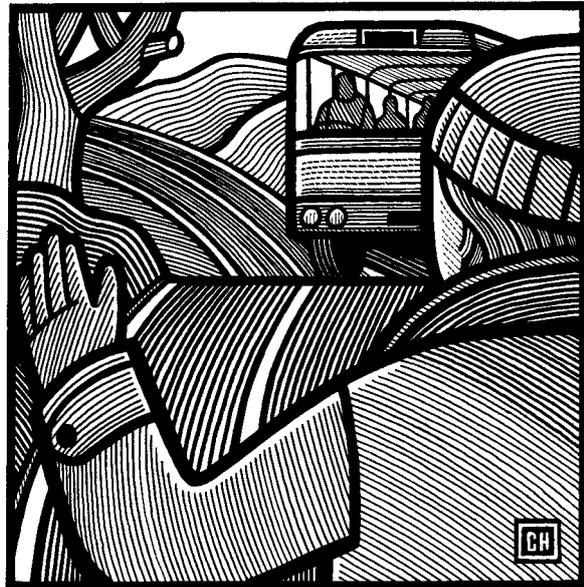
- Introduce measures to support small rural schools, and prevent their closure.
- Ensure that nature study and understanding of the farmed environment is part of the curriculum in both rural and urban primary schools. Encourage schools serving a rural area to make links with local farms, especially county council farms, and where feasible to take on land, livestock and equipment for producing food. Encourage urban schools to make links with city farms, and farms in the green belt and surrounding areas.
- Include land management (horticulture, arable crops, animal husbandry, forestry etc) as a subject at secondary schools on a par with academic subjects. Reintroduce the agricultural and horticultural GCSE. Reinststate the status of Land Based BTECs in respect of school league tables.
- Support the provision of horticultural, farming and forestry activities for young people and adults with special needs, in correctional institutions, and as a therapeutic activity.
- Reinststate government supported agricultural extension services providing advice to farmers, especially new entrants (privatized under the Thatcher and Major Governments).

TRANSPORT

Invest in the rural public transport network, in particular through re-establishing tributary services to arterial rail and coach networks.

Policy Objectives

Public transport in rural areas is worse than it was 60 years ago, leading to an undue reliance on private motor cars, the social exclusion of those who do not drive (especially the young and the old) and excessive per capita carbon emissions for many rural residents. The policy objective should be to reduce private car traffic, fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, through provision of a wider range of attractive and affordable public transport options.



Action Points

- Reintroduce the fuel duty escalator, a ratcheted annual increase of carbon tax on petrol and diesel, including red diesel, with the proceeds earmarked for public transport provision.
- Scrap HS2 and divert the money towards reopening and improving branch lines, and bus services and increasing capacity on the existing network (through longer platforms, double-decker trains, scrapping first class carriages.)
- Pilot, promote and support village car, van and minibus pools, based in village garage/petrol stations, enabling people to live in rural areas without reliance on a privately owned car — and providing a hub for rural employment. Provision of car pools (in combination with access to regular public transport services) to become a planning priority for larger rural housing developments.
- Pilot, promote and support electric car and bicycle hire services at railway stations serving rural hinterlands.
- Best and most versatile agricultural land, and areas of high environmental or landscape quality should not be sacrificed for unsustainable transport schemes (whether roads, rail or new runways) whose effect will be to generate more traffic.



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Published January 2016

by

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