

PRIME MINISTER

7 December 1984

AGRICULTURE AND CONSERVATION

Patrick Jenkin has provided a well-documented paper which offers a range of feasible options. The problems we face are:

- (1) The voluntary principle of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981 is landing us with hefty bills (£18 million this year) whose growth (£49 million expected in 1989/90) is likely to be high. Although £49 million is not a high price to pay for our landscape (less than we spend on arterial drainage) its growth needs to be limited in some way.
- (2) Payments in return for not doing something is repugnant to most people, particularly when the recipients happen to be prosperous.
- (3) Capital grants for environmentally harmful farming operations are red rags to the large and growing conservationist sentiment; they also drive up the cost of "compensation".
- (4) The present arrangements simply do not provide adequate, and in the last resort, assured protection for the countryside. Farm buildings (below a certain, large size) and farm roads are totally exempt from planning

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controls; they are not covered by management agreements, either. Land use in designated parts of the country is covered by these agreements, but in the last resort, if money fails to dissuade farmers, there are no powers to restrain them doing as they please with their land.

Planning controls over all aspects of agriculture - buildings, roads, land use, farming operations such as drainage, afforestation projects - would solve all four problems. But they would create others - administrative costs, wasted time on enquiries, inefficiency. They would be deeply unpopular with farmers and could forfeit their goodwill towards conservation, on which any conservation policy ultimately relies. The officials' paper offers planning controls as an option but Patrick Jenkin discards this in his covering letter, quite rightly in our view.

Selective planning controls and reserve powers make much more sense however. The paper offers two suggestions:

- (1) planning controls over farm and forestry buildings and roads in sensitive areas;
- (2) powers to apply Landscape Conservation Orders (LCOs) by local planning authorities, in consultation with the Countryside Commission, as a long-stop.

The first is a sensible extension of planning control. It is anomalous that farmers are free, under present

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arrangements, to blight landscapes by insensitive positioning of buildings and roads just because these have a farming function, whereas non-farm building is closely controlled.

The second measure would be able to resolve situations like Halvergate where the Broads Authority is having to pay up to £160 an acre per year to conserve the characteristics of a landscape which is internationally famous. The Authority is having difficulty in committing these sums, with 75% or even 90% grant aid. The local authorities which constitute the Broads Authority balk at paying wealthy farmers substantial sums for "doing nothing" at a time when LAs are having to make savings by, for example, reducing teaching posts.

The key decision at this stage is whether to go down the selective controls and reserve powers route, or whether to throw more money at the problem. MAFF will resist the controls option and argue that it is the thin end of a long wedge, which will threaten the voluntary principle. In our view, there has to be some reserve power to guarantee uniquely attractive landscapes. Because we are powerless to guarantee the preservation of landscape, we are failing to gain the credit we deserve for the Wildlife and Countryside Act, which is having a beneficial effect on farming attitudes and which contrasts to Labour's complete indifference to the trend towards prairie farming in the 1970s. Reserve powers will also condition and limit the cost of management agreements, which will remain the standard approach, which will increase in number and which can be excessively costly individually

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(around 40% of the gross revenue from an acre of good cereal land).

Agreed We recommend that you chair a short meeting, at which you could, if you agreed with the approach above, steer the Departments concerned firmly along the limited planning control route. Without this steer, H could get bogged down on this issue, and there is not time for this. H could then deal with the arrangements for extending the holding operation on Halvergate on the basis that reserve powers would be available from 1985-86. Without this prospect the costs of preserving Halvergate will be that much higher, if indeed it is possible at all. We will brief in more detail prior to the meeting, at which you may also wish to give a steer to two other live conservation topics:

- making capital grants more environmentally sensitive (unanimous agreement here in principle by the Countryside Commission, the National Farmers Union and the County Landowners Association);
- the Government response to the Countryside Commission's thoughtful policy document "A Better Future for the Uplands".

Nicholas Owen
NICHOLAS OWEN

Hartley Booth
HARTLEY BOOTH

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10 DOWNING STREET

Prime Minister ①

Agree to take this
forward as recommended
on page 4?

AT

2/12



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cc MAFF
FCO
Capt Gen at Arms
CO
CDLO
PGO
CS, HMT
DTRANS
CWO
DM

WO
SO
NIO
DES
HO
DHSS
LCO
LPSO
LPO

From the Private Secretary

10 December 1984

Agriculture and Conservation

The Prime Minister considered over the weekend your Secretary of State's minute of 30 November, with which you circulated a report by officials on the subject of agriculture and conservation.

The Prime Minister agrees that these issues need to be considered by Ministers collectively, and she wishes to take the chair herself at an initial discussion. Because of the Prime Minister's forthcoming overseas visit, it will not be possible to arrange such a meeting before the New Year. We will be in touch with those concerned to identify a time.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to members of H Committee, to Colin Budd (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Ivor Llewelyn (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

David Barclay

Andrew Allberry Esq
Department of the Environment.