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PRIME MINISTER

18 January 1985

AGRICULTURE AND CONSERVATION

Is Further Legislation Needed?

There is a danger that further legislation would encourage even closer scrutiny of our conservation policies and provoke a clamour for more measures than we want to undertake.

How anxious need we be on these two counts? We have a good story to tell. Even the nature lobbies grudgingly accept, if pressed, that our policy is protecting natural habitats pretty well. More generally, farmers are being won over, often at no cost at all, to conservationist practices. The NFU and the CLA have both proposed changes in grant regimes in order to defuse the provocative question: why subsidise operations damaging to our heritage, in order to produce more unwanted food?

On the positive side, legislation could solve the main difficulty about our arrangements:

- their success in protecting natural habitats underscores their failure to protect landscapes
- Planning Authorities, and ultimately the Government, can be held to ransom by a few obdurate and greedy farmers who, in the last resort, cannot be stopped from destroying cherished features of the landscape
- the long-stop power is the missing element in the structure. Its absence prevents us getting the credit which we deserve for our conservation policy.

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We could also head off arguments for full-scale planning controls on agriculture.

Landscape Conservation Orders (LCOs)

These were recommended by the Countryside Commission when the Wildlife and Countryside Bill was being passed. With hindsight, it was perhaps a mistake not to take this advice. LCOs need not, as Michael Jopling fears, lead to major interference with farming practices if the experience with Nature Conservation Orders is any guide. Only five of these have been imposed but their existence has a useful effect. The National Park Authorities who have these powers find that farmers are more cooperative and the costs of management agreements are reduced because farmers know, in the end, that they have to strike a deal.

One defect in the LCO proposal is that they would be restricted to areas 'specified by Ministers'. What about those many pockets of landscape close to towns and villages which are precious to local residents? Don't we want to give local planning authorities some freedom to protect these landscapes, without the need for Ministerial approval in each case?

Costs

Retaining the voluntary principle, we will have to pay more to preserve our landscape. But it is worth it because so many people care deeply about the landscape. The additional costs could easily be met by any of several ways within agriculture and forestry. Wasteful arterial drainage schemes in rural areas (£60 million) could be lopped back. Public funds are badly misapplied here, and are justified with largely specious "cost-benefit" analyses commissioned by Water Authorities and Inland Drainage Boards. Alternatively, we could discontinue funding new planting by

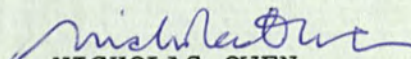
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the Forestry Commission, which has no economic point at all. Or reduce or abolish the contentious field drainage grants, (32½% in the lowlands, 50% in less favoured areas).

Halvergate Marshes

If LCOs could be agreed in principle at your meeting, Patrick Jenkin could plan his holding operation on the Marshes, confident that help will be on its way. This is for H, but you may wish to express a view. We are doubtful about grazing grants. Grants of this kind are difficult to remove and easy to extend. They would be made available to many farmers with no intention of converting to arable. Why not let the Broads Authority deal with the hard cases with 90% grant aid from DoE? No precedent would be set. We already give 90% grant-aid to protect Exmoor.


NICHOLAS OWEN

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