



PRIME MINISTER .

AGRICULTURE AND CONSERVATION

I much regret that I shall be unable to attend your meeting on 23 January about the proposals in Patrick Jenkin's minute of 30 November, because of a meeting of the Welsh Grand Committee that day. I have asked John Stradling Thomas to represent me at your meeting. It may be helpful if I, as a Minister with responsibilities for agriculture and forestry as well as for planning and countryside matters, make some comment in advance.

Like Michael Jopling, I strongly support the voluntary principle, and believe that we should not be deflected from it by a few, admittedly alarmingly expensive, cases. In my experience many farmers and landowners in Wales, large and small, are promoting good conservation in the normal course of events, and without our having as it were, to pay twice for it. Michael refers to taking account of conservation requirements in future farming support measures. I do not rule that out, but consider that decisions about the grant regime should be taken in the light of a more general appraisal among ourselves of agricultural policy in the long term (which no doubt will need to come before issuing a White Paper). I see little or no merit in moving against capital grants now specifically to achieve conservation objectives. The recent reductions in grant and the general change in the prospects for agriculture, certainly so far as marginal, upland and hill land in Wales is concerned, will in themselves greatly reduce the incentive to invest in land reclamation and new roads.



We should wait to see and observe the effect of these changes. In this context, Patrick Jenkin's proposal for a consultancy would be helpful, and I would go along with it.

In my view it is a fallacy to suppose that a sure way of reducing expenditure would be to impose planning controls over agriculture. This is merely likely to replace one form of economic distortion with another, which is bound to have some economic cost. It would also bring a substantial new administrative burden to local and central government.

That is not to say that planning controls should be ruled out entirely or indefinitely. There may be a case for using them to secure specific environmental benefits in especially sensitive areas. I would be prepared to consider proposals for that. But I am at present very sceptical. There are special sensitivities in Wales because, a very high proportion of the land area, compared to England, is designated in one way or another for conservation purposes. There are three national parks, one of which (Snowdonia) forms a very large part indeed of one county (Gwynedd). The imposition of restrictions on people making their living in those areas is very unpopular, and can give rise to political difficulties as we found when the Nature Conservancy Council sought to designate 53,000 areas in the Berwyn mountains, not in a national park, as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. I have little doubt that Patrick's proposal to introduce a landscape areas special development order will also be strongly criticised, and could be said to place a disproportionate burden on agriculture and forestry in Wales. It is not helpful that the proposal seems to be in a state of evolution. Officials proposed controls on roads and buildings in




national parks, but this was extended in Patrick's minute of 30 November to "other sensitive areas". William Waldegrave, in his letter of 14 January, wanted the control to apply not only in areas of outstanding natural beauty (as well as to national parks) but also to the siting and construction of forestry roads. This would be seen as a significant move towards much tighter planning controls in upland areas. Can we be sure that it will stop there? I doubt it. The gesture on its own may serve to whet the appetite for more. The obvious target would be the less favoured area, which now covers most of rural Wales. I need not dwell on the political effects of any concession of that kind. I am very far from convinced that we should now announce a proposal to introduce such an order.

As for the proposed landscape conservation orders, I have serious doubts about feasibility. How could so sweeping a scheme be dealt with without engaging expensive additional staff? How would it be intended to deal with local authorities or national park authorities that were reluctant to introduce such orders? What provisions would there be for compensation? What general effect would this move have on our wish to foster conservation through the voluntary principle? What would be the role of Ministers: would we not burden ourselves with many difficult decisions of detail? I must question whether these issues have been thought out carefully enough to warrant consultation, and I would strongly argue against any promise of such proposals or of legislation until some fundamental questions can be answered. Even Michael Jopling's counter-proposal for temporary arrangements seems to me to need clarification.

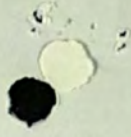


In short, I believe that our present policies are already moving towards a better balance between agriculture, agricultural development and conservation. The idea of a consultancy to clarify our thinking about covering conservation in future grant regimes and refining the management agreements to give value for money is good. But the case for extending planning or other controls is not made out, and I see risk that in taking small steps down that road we may find ourselves pushed hard to take much larger ones.

I am sending copies of this minute to members of H, to Geoffrey Howe and Sir Robert Armstrong.


RNE

27 JAN 1985



COPIES



10 DOWNING STREET

Prime Minister

You read these papers last
weekend, except for the
minutes from Mr Younger
(flag E) and Mr Edwards
(flag F) which arrived
subsequently.

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