

RECORD OF THE LUNCH WITH CONSERVATIONISTS HELD AT  
DOWNING STREET ON 25 NOVEMBER 1985

Present:

Prime Minister

Sir Derek Barber, Chairman, Countryside Commission

Mr. William Wilkinson, Chairman, Nature Conservancy  
Council

The Viscount Blakenham, Chairman of Council, RSPB,

Mr. Ian Branton, Director and Secretary, British Trust  
for Conservation Volunteers

Mr. Tom Burke, Director, Green Alliance

Sir Arthur Norman, Centre for Economic and Environmental  
Development

Secretary of State for the Environment

Mr. William Waldegrave

Mrs. Angela Rumbold

Mr. Hartley Booth

Mr. Mark Addison

Sir Derek Barber opened the discussion. He believed the prospect of a major change in land use was a key conservation issue at present. Up to six million acres, 40 per cent of lowland England and Wales, could be expected to come out of food production over the next 10-15 years. There needed to be a wider debate about how this problem should be addressed. Sir Arthur Norman agreed. The Government ought to have a clear policy on land use.

The Prime Minister noted that conservationists in the past had complained that the CAP was bringing more land into agricultural use; now some seemed to be complaining that the reverse was happening. They could not have it both ways. She pointed out that while the UK, under the influence of the CAP, might be producing surplus food, we were importing enormous amounts of timber. Forestation might therefore offer a possible use for land being freed from food production.

Sir Arthur Norman believed that Government policy on conservation should not merely respond to difficulties but adopt a more active role. The Government had failed to try and foresee the problems, for instance, arising from the impact of 20 million combustion engines on the environment. Planning and foresight was in the country's wider interest; conservation brought with it economic benefits too.

The Prime Minister said that the Government's record on conservation was a good one. No Government had done more. But she did not think the answer was for the Government to develop a strategy or plan to be imposed from the centre. After all, where the planning had been most intense - the CAP was a good example - the difficulties were often greatest. The important point was for Government to develop a framework within which farmers could adapt to change. Mrs. Rumbold agreed. History showed that plans based on today's analysis would soon get out of touch with tomorrow's problems.

Viscount Blakenham accepted that it was in principle undesirable to pay farmers not to plough up marshland, cut down forests, root up hedges and so on. But if this was the only way of preserving traditional and valuable aspects of the countryside, it was a price worth paying. The Prime Minister noted the possibility that such grants, however, could prompt farmers to threaten the very developments they were designed to inhibit. Mr. Waldegrave pointed to the practical difficulties of achieving the same objective by specific prohibitions. He also noted that the payment of such grants, eg, at Halvergate, also directly encouraged good land management; that was a valuable development.

Sir Derek Barber believed the resources currently going into agriculture could be better deployed. Mr. Burke agreed that less should be spent on price support and more on encouraging prudent land use. The Prime Minister said the Government had already had some success in controlling prices in Europe, despite intense opposition from the Germans. It was not good enough to blame farmers for reacting as they had

to economic pressures. The key question was how the smaller farmer could be helped to cope with any reduction in prices. Dealing in generalities did not help. The practical problems had to be addressed. The Secretary of State agreed that it was the farmer with, say, 120 acres in the West Country with whom the Government needed to be most concerned. The larger farmers would be able to look after themselves. But the smaller farmers, with say a modest dairy quota, often the backbone of their local communities, were the most vulnerable to change. Many already tried hard to support themselves through activities outside farming, e.g. holiday lets.

Mr. Burke accepted that difficult choices needed to be made. Some farmers might not be able to continue. But they could be helped to adapt. Tourism was an important way of supporting environmental conservation; the pressure on the most popular sites could be reduced as new, non traditional centres began to develop their tourist potential.

Mr. Ian Branton believed that if Government, environmentalists, voluntary bodies and the MSC could join together, an effective plan of action could be developed. Farmers were willing to cooperate; environmentalists were keen to help; voluntary bodies were ready to expand; and unemployed people provide a ready resource. This was a rich mixture and it should be used to the full. The voluntary sector was already making a massive contribution to conservation work; some 8 million man-days worked in a year. There was however a need to change some of the rules which at present inhibited the voluntary sector's contribution to conservation. For instance, restricting MSC contracts to one year only created uncertainty and discouraged the best people from joining schemes. Quality was all important.

The Secretary of State said there was a need to encourage the re-introduction of basic rural skills which were in danger of being lost forever. This would help conserve the rural environment, provide jobs and keep alive an important tradition. The voluntary bodies had a key part to play in

providing the training.

Viscount Blakenham accepted that resources which could be devoted to conservation were unlikely to increase. But they could be more fruitfully used to pump-prime new bodies and work. Mr. Wilkinson stressed the importance of Ministers and officials at all levels, in all departments, taking an active interest in conservation, being willing to work closely with conservationists, and helping them get their message across.

Mr. Burke thought that industry could do more in the conservation field; he noted that Mr. Waldegrave had done a good deal to encourage them already. Mr. Burke thought it would be helpful if the Prime Minister would consider making a major speech on the environment. The Prime Minister explained that her speeches generally had to go wider than one subject alone. She thought there was little to be gained by blaming the industry and farmers for short-comings in the conservation area. It was industry which provided the resources which were already being channelled back into environmental work. The key need was to get the message over to the public that environmental protection was not somebody else's concern. For instance, the major litter problem on motorways and main roads and in city centres affected every one. The Government needed to consider how that problem could best be tackled.

Sir Arthur Norman raised briefly a number of international conservation matters. It was vital that UK aid to overseas countries should be invested in environmentally sensible ways.

The Prime Minister closed the discussion by thanking all those present for the work they did in the cause of conservation and for their contribution to the discussion. There was much to be done and the task was complicated, particularly so far as the rural environment was concerned. But rhetoric was not enough; conservationists had to come up with specific practical ideas. The Secretary of State said he would consider further the points which had been made at the

lunch. He and his colleagues would bear them in mind as the Government continued to give thought to conservation issues.

MARK ADDISON

26 November 1985

SUBJECT  
cc Master.



10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

26 November 1985

**PRIME MINISTER'S LUNCH WITH CONSERVATIONISTS ON 25 NOVEMBER**

I attach a record of yesterday's lunch. I have imposed some, but not much, structure on the discussion which ranged far and wide and returned to the same track on several occasions. I think the note however records the main points made by each of the participants.

I am copying this letter and enclosure to Robert Gordon (Scottish Office), Colin Williams (Welsh Office), Ivor Llewelyn (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food), Leigh Lewis (Department of Employment), Mike Bailey (Mr. Waldegrave's office, Department of the Environment) and Barbara Jones (Mrs. Rumbold's office, Department of the Environment).

(Mark Addison)

Robin Young, Esq.,  
Department of the Environment.

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