

GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS ORGANIC  
FARMING: A HISTORY OF NEGLECT AND  
MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is an examination of the evolution of the British government's agricultural policies and their attitude towards the alternatives promoted by the organic farming community. What is revealed is a lack of foresight and inaction in the face of problems of overproduction within the European Community. As a result, an opportunity has been lost by the British government to develop an environmentally friendly agriculture and to influence the development of farming policy in Europe.

## INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s the debates on agriculture within the European Community (EC) concentrated on the limitations of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the need for reform. These limitations were principally an absence of measures to review policy aims and to assess the effects of agricultural practices and innovations on the environment. The result of these failures are continual surplus production of some foods, the increasing cost of maintaining the CAP and a growth in concern about the probable adverse affects of agriculture on the environment. Among the original aims of the CAP were the goals of raising farmers income, meeting Europe's needs for food and at a reasonable price to consumers. However, with time the farmers became large producers of agricultural commodities in response to a favourable price level and the demands of European Community consumers were insufficient to consume their output. Vested farming interests have lobbied hard and successfully to maintain the CAP's high prices.

These problems are not new to the agricultural debate. Dr. Sicco Mansholt recognised the potential problem of surplus production and its likely cost and in 1968 put forward reform proposals. In these proposals Dr. Mansholt pointed to the need for an increase the size of individual farms and a consolidation of fragmented land holdings. The response from some agricultural commissioners and lobbyists was to accuse him of being a peasant killer (Swann, 1986).

In the United Kingdom (UK) successive governments encountered problems with funding agricultural support policies. Between the years 1947-1973 support was paid under one of two systems: (the Guaranteed Price System (GPS) (1947-1952), and the Deficiency Payment Scheme (DPS) (1953-73). With the former, farmers were paid a guaranteed price on a specified number of commodities. Under the latter there was a linking of payments of grant, to farmers adopting specific practices and closer ties between the level of subsidies and world market prices.

The above examples show the extent of government intervention in agriculture in the EC and UK, their influence on determining development and the need for constant review of aims in a changing environment. Bowers and Cheshire (1983) and Munton (1976, 1988) emphasise that it was the development of the long term policies of agricultural expansion and price support which stimulated the agro-governmental complex to invest in research and development and the adoption by farmers of the new practices that have produced the substantial increase in production.

Advocates have suggested organic farming as a way of reducing the level of surplus production and reducing some of the environmental problems. Organic farming produces lower levels of output because inputs of inorganic fertiliser and other chemicals are eschewed. Organic farming combines the principles of crop rotation, use of organic fertilisers and maintaining the fertility and viability of the farming ecosystem. Emphasis is given to making greater use of farmyard manure, the development of resistance to pests and diseases

or only when necessary using naturally occurring products (e.g. pyrethrum) as alternatives to synthetic fertilizers and biocides. (Howard 1924, 1940; Balfour 1943, 1975; Body, 1983, 1987). However, in some instances the use of prescribed drugs is permitted but under strict conditions. The organic movement further argues that these methods are long-term in nature and the continual review of subsidy levels will be minimal.

This paper is concerned with the government's attitude towards organic methods of farming in Britain. By showing how influential central government has been in the development of current agricultural technology, we reveal the potential influence the government could have on the development of organic farming. The discussion will be in two major sections. Firstly, we discuss the role central government has had in influencing the development of modern conventional agriculture, in particular through pricing and incentive policies. Secondly, we examine the attitude of central government towards organic farming methods.

#### **PUBLIC POLICIES TOWARDS CONVENTIONAL AGRICULTURE**

##### ***Before 1940: laissez faire and paternalism***

From the repeal of the Corn Laws to the First World War the main thrust of government policy towards agriculture was "laissez faire". This reflected the shift in economic and political influence from the landed gentry to industrialists. This approach adopted in the UK differed from that of the governments of continental European countries who saw intervention as a necessary step towards protecting their farmers and farm-related industries (Tracy, 1964).

The intervention policies introduced between 1914 and 1939 were short-term in nature. The 1917 Corn Production Act, which subsidised farmers to bring pasture land into cereal production, was introduced to compensate for a shortage of imports because of the war. It was repealed in 1921 (Whetham, 1972).

The depressed state of UK farming during the 1920s and 1930s led to a change in the government's attitude towards agriculture. To reduce the problems faced by the rural community a more paternalistic approach was adopted. Farmers were given 100% rate relief and in 1931 tariffs and quotas on specific imports such as grain were introduced. In addition marketing boards for hops, milk, sugar beet and bacon were set up to raise and stabilise product prices and develop an element of quality control. The Agricultural Marketing Acts of 1931 and 1933 created selling agencies, which had the authority to regulate all sales of products, negotiate prices and resale terms. However, some concentrated purely on price stabilisation and did not introduce policies for marketing or production efficiency (Bowler, 1979). Because they were paid a guaranteed minimum price by the government, farmers increased production.

#### *After 1940: direct intervention*

The prospect of war in the late 1930s seems to have acted as a catalyst in making the government and its agricultural advisers aware of the need for comprehensive forward planning. To avoid the problems of food shortages experienced during World War I, policies to ensure secure food supplies were developed. The government took



a number of steps to reshape the agricultural industry.

To achieve this end the government developed a tripartite agricultural association consisting of government, chemical industry and farmers representatives. Central government provided farming with raw materials at subsidised rates and made available funds for public and private institutions to undertake research and development into farming techniques. The British chemical industry underwent rapid expansion and modernisation. To ensure farmers adhered to government wishes, the War Agricultural Executive Committees (WAECS) were re-formed and the National Farmers Unions (NFU) was closely involved (Bowler, 1979; Cox, Lowe and Winter 1986).

In 1939 two Acts were introduced which increased central government's control over agricultural production. These were the Agricultural Development Act and the Emergency Powers Act. The former Act made the Ministry of Agriculture (MAF) both the sole purchaser of agricultural produce and the director of the wholesale sector. In addition farmers were paid a £2 subsidy for every acre of permanent pasture or grassland ploughed up and encouraged to adopt a wide range of practices (drainage, liming and land reclamation) which would increase output of wheat and potatoes, even on hill and marginal areas.

The latter Act gave the WAECS stringent powers and sanctions over agricultural production. Being appointed by the MAF the WAECS interpreted their function as carrying out government's policies. Hollins (1986) explains that farmers were told to adopt particular

practices, and that failure to conform would lead to farmers losing their tenure.

The success of the tripartite agricultural collaboration led to the 1943 joint statement by the government and NFU concerning future agricultural policy. This statement was followed by the Agricultural Act (1947). This Act had two distinct parts for achieving the objectives to increase output and raising farmers income levels. Part 1 dealt with price and production. Part 2 referred to increasing efficiency through the reforming of the structures of agriculture (Holderness, 1985).

The comments of Bowers and Cheshire (1983) on the 1947 Agricultural Act highlight two significant statements which are often overlooked. These are the provision of price guarantees for "such part of the nation's food and other agricultural produce as in the national interest it is desirable to produce in the United Kingdom". Also increased efficiency was called for. What was meant by "the national interest" or "efficiency" was left undefined.

Embedded in the Act was the principle that the NFU had to be consulted, a role enjoyed by no other sector of industry. The acceptance of the NFU as a partner reflects the extent to which the government's attitude towards agricultural development had changed. The success of many of the products developed and successfully used in the war (such as organo-chlorine and organo-phosphate compounds) gave the chemical industry economic and political leverage. These products reduced the levels of loss from pests and weeds, and so contributed to increasing the output of food.

The above paragraphs show that radical changes could occur in the attitude of the British government towards intervention in agriculture, that long-term policies could be developed and that these could profoundly affect agricultural production.

### *Price and production policies*

The previous section focused attention on modern conventional farming methods and our perception of the factors responsible for their development. This section is an examination of the extent to which the pricing policies (GPS and DPS) were successful in increasing production.

One of the main elements introduced in the 1947 Agricultural Act was the Guaranteed Prices System (GPS) which entailed farmers being paid a guaranteed minimum price on a number of review commodities. The levels at which prices were set depended on the annual review meeting between the agricultural ministers and the representatives of the farmers' unions. Bowers and Cheshire (1983) consider that the GPS was a failure. As the income levels of farmers increased, too much was spent on consumption instead of investment and the growth of output was small.

In an attempt to increase production the GPS was replaced with a Deficiency Payment Scheme (DPS) by the Conservative government in 1953. The review mechanism for setting support prices was retained, but the range of commodities covered by the DPS was reduced and support and world market prices were linked. Under the DPS whenever the average market price was less than the agreed support price all British farmers were paid the difference. The linking of

agricultural support to world market prices became a major problem, however, as any sudden drop in world prices would lead to increases in funding from the Exchequer. This problem occurred in the early 1960s when the cost of funding rose from £151.2 million in 1960-61 to £225.3 million in 1961-62 (Bowers and Cheshire, 1983).

Direct subsidies were also used by the government to encourage farmers to adopt methods of increasing output. In 1951 the first production grant was paid to farmers to use phosphate fertilisers. In 1952 this was extended to other fertilisers and the basic rate of aid was increased. From 1942 to 1952 annual expenditure on fertiliser rose from £27 million to £54 million; in 1952-53 (post aid period) it was £70 million (Bowers and Cheshire, 1983).

A further major factor which stimulated production was the policy in the mid 1960s to grant capital gains tax relief to industry and city institutions on investments in agriculture (Munton, 1976). During the late 1960s many British firms and institutions increased their agricultural investments because of the prospect that Britain would become a member of the EC in early 1970s. In the EC farm support was provided through a guaranteed prices system akin to the GPS and through export subsidies. The response of British farmers was to increase output.

### *Structural reform policies*

The requirement in the DPS that farmers adopt new management techniques was an early attempt to encourage structural reform. However, this did not necessarily lead to increased efficiency. In order to achieve this there had to be an increase in farm size (in

1965 61% farms were less than 20 hectares in size). The 1967 Agricultural Act (England and Wales) was introduced to achieve this (Hirsch and Maunder, 1978). The Act had three features which the government hoped would act as incentives for the amalgamation of farm holdings: (1) grants for voluntary amalgamation of holdings; (2) voluntary sale of land to the State for amalgamation; and (3) payments for farmers who decided to give up their uneconomic holdings for amalgamation. The success of this policy was limited mainly because of the lack of support from small farmers. The financial incentives were too small to entice farmers to abandon farming.

#### **PUBLIC POLICIES TOWARDS ORGANIC FARMING**

The aim of this section of the paper is to assess the government's attitude towards organic agriculture and the significance of agricultural policies in the development of these methods of production. We first offer a definition of organic agriculture and then discuss government policies towards the sector.

##### ***Organic agriculture defined***

The system of farming to be discussed is that described as Organic Farming and is based upon the broad principles defined in the United States Department of Agriculture Report (1980):

"Organic Farming is a production system which avoids or largely excludes the use of synthetically compounded fertilisers, pesticides, growth regulators and livestock feed additives. To the maximum extent feasible organic farming systems rely upon crop rotation, crop residue, animal manures, legumens, green manures, off-farm organic wastes, mechanical cultivation, mineral bearing rocks and aspects of biological pest control to maintain soil productivity and tilth, to supply plant nutrients and to control insects weeds and other pests".

The term organic agriculture does not refer to one system of farming but to a number of systems. In these methods of farming the use of some fertilisers and artificial substances to treat outbreak of diseases or pests is restricted and under the strict control of the organising body. In the UK organic farming has been practised at Haughley Research Farms Trust (Suffolk) since the late 1930's and by members of the Soil Association (SA) since 1946. The Soil Association awards members who adhere to its strictly organic principles the right to attach the SA symbol to their produce. However, since the mid-1970s there has been a growth in the number of organisations advocating organic farming. British Organic Farmers, Organic Growers Association (BOG/OGA) adheres to the SA standards. Organic Farmers and Growers Ltd. (OFG) recommend practices close to those of the Soil Association, while the Guild of Conservation Food Producers are less strict in their exclusion of chemical inputs in the farming process. There are also farmers who do not belong to one of the organic associations but who still use low inputs of artificial fertilisers.

#### *Government policies toward organic farming before 1984*

The attitude of successive governments towards the organic sector since 1939 has been consistent in totally overlooking the existence of the organic sector when policies are being developed or grants are being made available for research and development (Balfour, 1975). Official institutions (Agricultural Research establishments, Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS), Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF)) place little

emphasis on organic methods (Jollans, 1985), and when asked, direct the enquirer to the organic associations. However, there is evidence that these institutions are aware of publications and research on the subject. Hirst (1978), in a bibliography of organic farming compiled for the period 1970-1978, makes reference to a number of works undertaken by MAFF, Agricultural Research establishments or ADAS. MAFF has also compiled a list of research works on organic agriculture (MAFF, 1985).

*Government policies toward organic farming, 1984 and after*

The rise in interest in organic farming methods and foods during the mid-1970s was supported by a growth in the public's awareness of and concern about the possible adverse effects of conventional high-tech agricultural practices on the environment and health. The following sub-sections examine the government's response to the problem of overproduction and the issues involved in the production and sale of organic foods.

*Community-wide concern with overproduction.* In 1985 the House of Commons Agricultural Committee published the results of its investigation of government policies towards overproduction and alternative forms of agricultural production. The British government's strategy for solving the problem of overproduction favoured altering the CAP's price mechanism. This would lead to a reduction in the number of farms, as small and inefficient units would become redundant. Some EC partners preferred to examine alternative methods of farming as possible solutions.

One section of the above report concentrated on low-input/

low-output methods of agriculture including organic aspects (Hayes, *et al*, 1985). The evidence given by academics informed the committee of the advantages and disadvantages of organic methods. The advantages were that organic farms were more diverse in their produce types, operated at levels sustainable in the long run and produced far less environmental pollution. The major disadvantage of organic farming was a decline of around 10% to 30% in output. The lack of funds to undertake needed research and development was given by Hayes and others as a probable cause for the lower levels of organic output. Sir Richard Body in 1986 raised the question of research funding in Parliament. In reply the Minister of Agriculture, Michael Jopling MP, stated that there were grants available for research into some aspects of the subject. However, he proceeded to explain that there were no proposals to use governmental research farms as organic research stations but emphasised that, if the industry was willing to provide the necessary funds, the MAFF would be willing to undertake any research (Hansard 1986).

In 1987 Michael Jopling informed Parliament that proposals were being considered for alternative land uses which would reduce surplus production of cereals and encourage farmers to diversify (Hansard, 1987a). Lean (1987) identified extensification of cereal production by farmers as one option being considered by the department. Output per acre would be reduced by decreasing inputs such as fertilisers. The minister's statement on alternative land use, farm diversification and the production of novel crops seems to signal a radical change in the government's attitude towards alternative



agricultural methods. However, careful examination of the statement and other publications from House of Commons papers shows a lack of enthusiasm within the Ministry and contradictions in policy statements. Mr Jopling's statement overlooked the results of the 1985 House of Commons Agricultural Committee investigations.

Within four months of the alternative land-use proposals (reviewed above) the existence of a research report on organic farming undertaken by MAFF was leaked to the press (Norton-Taylor, 1987). Mr. John Gummer, the Junior Minister of Agriculture, commenting on the findings, suggested that only farms on the best quality lands or large owner occupied farms would stand to benefit from such methods. Mr. Gummer's statement on the benefits seems a total contradiction of promises made in 1986 following his visit to the SA offices in Bristol, referred to earlier (BOF/OGA, 1986).

In addition, the minister's statement seems to overlook the findings of Claude Hill's report (1986) on British consumer demand for organically produced foods, which concluded that the organic sector of the agricultural market had considerable growth potential and stressed the need for investing in researching into all areas of the industry. Only 30% of the market was supplied by home producers. Since Hill's report a number of others have been published supporting his findings (Elm Farm Research Centre, 1988; Lampkin, 1990; Ends, 1990).

In 1987 the European Commission issued regulation 1760/87, which was revised and passed as 1094/88 (BOF/OGA, 1988). The aims of the regulation were to reduce the levels of cereal output and to reduce

the pollution produced by farms. To achieve these aims two strategies were specified: extensification and set-aside. Under the former emphasis was given to reducing output per hectare, while under set-aside a specified number of hectares were to be taken out of production for a set number of years. The compensation paid to farmers was to be based on the option chosen, number of hectares submitted and years undertaken (Soil Association, 1988). The ministers of a number of member states also indicated their intent to examine and support alternative methods of agriculture, in light of the EC Commission's intention to develop a single standard for EC farmers.

The MAFF, in an unusual step, invited organic organisations to give their views on the two strategies. This approach to obtaining the views of organic groups is a change from previous policy direction. The MAFF decided to adopt the set-aside option but only if all the member states were willing to adopt these measures (Woodward and Stopes, 1988).

At the Elm Farm Research Centre (EFRC) a study of the two policies was undertaken (Woodward and Stopes, 1988). This put forward views about the organic options as requested by the government. The conclusion of Woodward and Stopes was that set-aside was unlikely to be successful as a policy on its own as farmers simply intensified their efforts on the remaining land still in production. Their view was supported by the American experience of the Acreage Reduction Programme which has been in existence since the mid-1930's and which is generally regarded as a failure.

Adoption of the extensification scheme including the organic option seems to offer the best prospect for achieving the twin goals identified in the EC agricultural policy, but emphasis must be given to introducing the organic option. As highlighted in the EFRC study, extensification on its own will be ineffective in reducing output.

***The first signs of concern about organic standards.*** Since the mid-1970's there has been a marked growth in organic producer organisations and consumer interest in organic produce. However, a major problem which has come to the fore during this period is the absence of an agreed set of standards that define what should be accepted as organic methods and products. Although these organisations are involved with the British Organic Standards Committee (BOSC) which oversees and accepts the standards and guidelines of the different organic producers, adherence to these is on a voluntary basis.

Renshaw and Kemp (1986), writing on the growth of the organic sector, drew attention to the absence of an agreed set of standards and the potential problem of consumer fraud perpetrated by dubious producers. In an attempt to clarify the situation they contacted the Agricultural minister Mr. John Gummer. Mr. Gummer stated in reply that he was aware of the potential problem and assured them that top priority would be given to preventing consumers being sold phoney organically certified foods.

***Moves to set up standards: Food From Britain (FFB), United Kingdom Register of Organic Food Standards (UKROFS).*** The EC Commission's statement of intent to establish a single set of standards for

organic produce seems to be the solution to a complex problem facing producers in the Community and world-wide. The response from British advocates of organic farming to the EC policy was favourable for two reasons. First, this would be confirmation of organic farming as a set of viable alternative agricultural methods. Second, the view was taken that, since the standards of the BOSC and the SA are often identified as being among the most comprehensive in Europe, the British government would recommend these as a benchmark and negotiate to persuade the rest of community members to follow suit.

The newly appointed Secretary of State for Agriculture, Mr. John MacGregor, said, in a statement to the House of Commons, that FFB (a government established and funded organisation, with a close working relationship with the food manufacturing and processing sectors) had informed him that their council intended to set up a board. The board was to establish on a voluntary basis a UKROFS. The aims of the board were as follows:

- (1) to set production standards for organic produce tied to a UK organic logo and a voluntary code of production practice;
- (2) to consider applications from organic sector bodies to check that their standards met such minimum standards and were supported by adequate inspection arrangements;
- (3) to establish a register of individual organic producers whereby registration provided a right to use the logo; and
- (4) to arrange for adequate monitoring of inspection arrangements and for the inspection of farms of those producers not linked to a recognised organic sector body (Hansard, 1987b).

The establishing of the UKROFS as the sole body responsible for defining and setting organic producer standards is a great improvement on the previous situation. Those who wish to sell their produce as organically grown must conform to the standards in the UKROFS document as these are mandatory. However, although the UKROFS was established by FFB as stated by Mr. Macgregor, Llewellyn (1988) identifies Mr. John Gummer as the person responsible the idea of a producers register.

**Evaluation: how serious is the concern?** The setting up of the UKROFS under the aegis of the MAFF and its administration by FFB (Llewellyn, 1988) raises the question of how serious is the level of concern within the MAFF. Four years after the EC Commission first stated its intention to negotiate the establishment a single set of organic standards, FFB published the UKROFS (1989). A review of the aims and standards reveals a number of similarities with those of organic organisations. This shows that by wanting to do it their way MAFF has wasted time overseeing a duplication of existing standards. These years could have been spent ironing out the problems in the SA standards and persuading the other EC member states to follow along these lines.

A number of questions can be raised concerning this governmental activity. Firstly, why did Mr. Gummer ask FFB to organise a UKROFS which duplicates already existing standards?. Secondly, for over a decade the SA have been trying to persuade the MAFF to adopt a single set of standards to which British organic farmers must conform. How do Mr. Gummer and the MAFF justify FFB's role as the agent with the

responsibility to inform and persuade farmers of their aims for establishing the UKROFS, when their experience of organic farming is limited to the report produced by Claude Hill in 1986. Finally, although FFB has informed the minister of its intention to set up the UKROFS the responsibility for funding resides with the existing organisations and producers.

## CONCLUSION

The points highlighted in this paper show that in Britain conventional and organic agriculture have developed on an *ad-hoc* basis.

The discussion in the first section emphasised the role of central government in influencing the direction and rate of agricultural development. Agricultural development during the pre-1945 period was influenced by a policy of non-intervention on the government's part. However, when it was necessary to introduce a policy of some nature, this was on short-term basis and to solve a particular set of problems, particularly in 1917 and the early 1930's.

The economic crisis of the 1930's and the prospect of World War II saw a change in the attitude of the government towards intervention. To avoid the experience of 1917, the government began to develop specific policies with longer-term aims. In addition, the government undertook the central role which brought together all the different sectors of industries involved in agriculture. The result of these steps was a stimulation of confidence leading to increased investment and funding for research and development. Since 1945, agricultural development in Britain was guided by policies based on nationalist,

political and economic vested interests. This is reflected in the policies developed to support farmers by offering subsidies for certain produce.

The years since 1984 have seen the development of government policies on agriculture with an organic element included. However, these are vague and leave questions concerning the true aims unanswered. To state with certainty that there is a policy would be an overstatement. As the examination of MAFF literature on organic agriculture shows only a limited amount is directly published by the department.

The search for and development of a British organic policy and strategy only became a serious feature when the EC Commission and agricultural ministers of the other member states explained their intention to establish a uniform set of standards for organic farming and produce. However, the lack of a clear policy with long term aims has led to a situation where this sector is presently underdeveloped.

The British government's inability to change its views on agricultural policy has led to a situation where an opportunity has been missed to influence the future development of EC agriculture.

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