

“WHY FARMING MATTERS MORE THAN EVER”

--- and why the NFU has seriously lost the plot. By Colin Tudge

NFU president Peter Kendall sets the tone of the union’s latest report in his foreword – and a very strange tone it is: an amalgam of self-congratulation, appeasement, and bewilderment. Thus he tells us that “In 2006 the NFU made what seemed at the time to be an exceptionally bold prediction that ‘the era of cheap world food is drawing to a close’”.

It shocks me to the core that in 2006 – as opposed, say, to 1966 – the NFU should have thought this “an exceptionally bold prediction”. It could seem exceptionally bold only to people who had not heard of peak oil, who did not know that modern commercial farming depends absolutely on cheap oil, who had not heard of global warming, who did not know that for that reason alone Brazil and Africa could not be relied on in the future as sources of cheap food, who did not realize that China and India are now among the world’s leading economies who will soon have far more buying power on the world market than Britain has, and that if there is any cheap food out there to be bought then we, Britain, would not necessarily be first in line. No-one, in short, who had taken any serious interest in the world over the past few decades could possibly suppose that cheap food was anything other than an anomaly, a temporary accident in a turbulent world. This comment, then, is extraordinarily revealing.

For it’s clear that the NFU was not taking a serious interest. But neither, presumably, were the NFU’s confidants and allies, the government and the food industry. Actually, this really is shocking – what exactly is government *for*, if not to keep an eye on world events, and take account of them? Yet it is not really surprising. The lack of grasp among the powers-that-be of the nature of the threats that now face us, and of their gravity, is obvious at every turn. Nothing in this latest report, or anything that has emerged from Defra or from any of the three party conferences that have now limped querulously to a close, could lead us to suppose that there is.

Mr Kendall goes on to demonstrate his union’s exceptional prescience by reference to “the extraordinary price spikes of 2007/2008 which gave rise to real anxiety about future world security”.

What is so shocking here is that people *on the ground* – not just politicians and tycoons, and people who work for *The Economist* and the LSE, but practicing farmers – apparently judge the state of the world not by what is actually out there, the physical and social facts of the case that hit us in the eye, but by lines on a

graph. People starving? Well – they need more education. Amazonia trashed? It is a distant country of which we know little. Obesity, diabetes, heart disease? That’s the people’s choice – consumerism equals democracy. Global warming? Controversial. Mass extinction of fellow species? They have had their day. None of what is all too obvious in the actual world seems to register with them – none of it is *real* to them until there is a line on a graph which says that prices are going up. The market, which at best bears only a tangential, three-steps-removed relationship to the day-to-day events of the kind that affect people’s lives and those of our fellow creatures, is now, as “Man” was for the Enlightenment, the measure of all things. No wonder we are in a mess.

Money matters – but ...

I’m all for money. Money is useful stuff and good accountancy helps us to keep score. But I recall Jim Slater’s warning from the 1960s – do not put money into a company that has no accountant on the board; or into one that has more than two. He knew, as a proper tycoon (one of the last before neoliberalism took over) that if money ever becomes more than a pragmatic device – if it ever becomes an end itself, or indeed a commodity in its own right -- then the world is in trouble, because then the economy loses touch with reality. So of course the NFU is right, in its report, to talk about money. But to make it the central obsession, to begin the report itself with a sentence which accepts, as the adage has it, that farming is just a business like any other and should be judged on its ability to “compete” financially with hairdressing, football, and the arms trade, is surely to miss the point.

So I wish the report hadn’t kicked off by assuring us that “Farming is a major industry” which “responds to the needs of the market” and is the key player in a “rural economy worth £300 billion each year”, and that its continued growth while the rest of the economy slumped “highlights the long-term investment prospects”. This is all true no doubt but it really is not the point. The point is that agriculture sits right at the heart of all human affairs, indeed at the heart of all life on Earth, the thing we absolutely have to get right -- whether on paper it is worth £300 billion or three old francs and a trouser button. As John Maynard Keynes observed about eight decades ago (when British agriculture was once again torn between feeding people and the dogma of free trade), “A country which cannot afford art or agriculture is a country in which one cannot afford to live.”

Thus this report is on the back foot from the first paragraph: not telling the government and the world at large that farming is the key to all human aspiration and we have to take it seriously come what may, but keen instead to assure the government and the financiers that Britain’s farmers are toeing the neoliberal line. This is not what a key report at a key point of history should be saying. It is certainly not what a trade union should be saying.

The report goes on – rightly – to stress the importance of agriculture as an employer: at least there are 5.5 million people in the rural economy which has “farming as its centre”.

But again, there’s an air of appeasement in all this – “Didn’t we do well?” – when a farmers’ union in the present state of farming should surely be burning with anger. For of the 5.5 million, the report tells us, only 531,000 are involved “in primary production” – a mere 1.7 per cent of the total workforce. Of these, 343,000 are self-employed farmers plus “partners, directors, and spouses” while a mere 188,000 are employees. This means, says the NFU, that most people in farming “invest their personal assets into their business”.

Where have all the farmers gone?

Many now argue (it is certainly a prime theme of this blog) that 1.7 per cent of people on the land is no-where near enough. The principles of biology and sound husbandry suggest that if agriculture is truly to be resilient in the long term, and especially during the next few uncertain decades as the climate changes, then it has to be maximally polycultural, able to shift this way and that as circumstances alter. A polycultural system is complex, almost by definition. It requires intricate husbandry. So it requires a lot of hands-on expertise. Britain has lost about 90 per cent of its farmers over the past half century under government-backed commercial pressure, and the NFU has gone along with this in the name of “efficiency” (although it is strange for a union to act so compliantly as a government agency). Now, in a hurry, we need about five times if not ten times as many farmers as we now have.

There is no hint of any of this in the NFU report. There is no acknowledgement that the present stripped-to-the-bone labour force can manage only a simplified, hyper-industrialized system, and no suggestion that this may not be appropriate. There is no mention of the huge and increasingly essential role now played in British agriculture by imported labour, both immigrant and migrant – with commensurably huge injustice both to the visitors and to British workers. The age of Britain’s present farmers is not mentioned – the fact that they now average around 60. There is no hint, in fact, that anything at all is amiss. We have, apparently, exactly the industry we need – efficient, mechanized, profitable, ready for anything. Somehow this does not square with any of the conversations I have had with practicing farmers this past two decades. Even the rich ones are far from happy.

Is it really good, too, that the chiefs – the self-employed farmers – should so far outnumber the workers? It is very hard to become a self-employed farmer – there are obstacles at every turn. Farm worker, on the other hand, *ought* to be a good job

– and for many people, probably most, a good job without the hassle of being a businessperson, is all they really want (and why not? Why do we all have to be like Alan Sugar?). At present in Britain three million are unemployed. In traditional economies that have actually functioned well over the past two centuries and more since the industrial revolution, there has been a nice balance of rural and urban workers. Now in Britain and increasingly in the rest of the world there is no such balance. The rural option has gone. The reality of what is left, on the other hand, is frequently ghastly: one worker on 1000 hectares of Lincolnshire, with nothing in his life but a tractor cab and a pair of headphones to drown the noise. The sociality of farms that many still remember and is such a feature of western literature has all but gone. It is a recipe for depression and suicide, which indeed is rife. But then – it is part of a £300 billion industry, so that’s all right then. Again, surely, this is not what a union ought to be saying.

Ah – but modern British farmers make their lives more interesting by diversifying! Again, the NFU is up-beat about this. Fifty-one per cent of farms in England “have diversified beyond their core farming activities” while in Wales, “total annual income from diversified activities was £19 million”. Again, we might expect some anger – that the people who carry out the world’s most important material pursuit should need to take on another job, or two or three, just to keep afloat. But for the NFU this is evidence of “innovation and entrepreneurship”. This again is the language of appeasement, intended to keep government happy and impress all those powerful people with striped suits and bonuses. Some would say that appeasement is never appropriate, and others might point out that it’s the striped suit and bonus brigade who have landed us in all this trouble – the last people on Earth with whom to identify.

But it is on the grandest issues of all that the report is most feeble. We should be asking, as a matter of urgency, what should world farming as a whole really be trying to achieve? Do we really want to feed humanity, or are we content with triage – catering for a few and allowing the rest to go to the wall, which is what is happening now? Do we really care about our fellow creatures, or are they merely for decoration? What is the nature of the task? What is the magnitude of the task? What are the possibilities? What can/ should be the role of Britain, which is medium rich and has a decent apportionment of fertile land, and plays a disproportionate role in world affairs because of its former empire and its links with the US? The report alludes to these issues, since it could hardly not, but comes nowhere to addressing them. Always it is concerned primarily to demonstrate that British farmers are doing a good job, and are happy to plug themselves in to the status quo: big industry, high tech, and, above all, the neoliberal economy.

What a shock!

All in all, the report tells us – as Mr Kendall hints in his foreword – the world’s present setbacks took everyone by surprise: “Until 2007, few would have believed that food security was anything but an issue for the poorest, least-developed countries in the world” But in July 2008 oil prices shot up to \$147 per barrel, and the price of wheat leapt from £66 per tonne in January 2006 to £180 in March 2008, “with similar trends in maize, soya, and rice”. It was this, and only this, the report assured us, that “turned the orthodoxy on its head”; and no-one in the whole world could possibly have seen it coming.

Except that my own shelves have been laden since the 1960s with books predicting precisely this – that if we carried on as we were, gearing farming purely to cash and oil and utterly dependent on high tech, disaster was inevitable. Rachel Carson might be said to have started the new awareness with *Silent Spring*, first published in 1959. Gerald Leach warned us in the 1960s about dwindling energy. The 1960s and 70s saw books among others by Frances Moore Lappe, Susan George, and Paul Ehrlich, pointing out the injustices, warning of future food shortages, and showing how agri-business was making things worse. My own first book, *The Famine Business*, published in the wake of the somewhat shaming World Food Conference in Rome in 1974, which I attended, discussed just this. Graham Harvey’s books of more recent years have been bang on the button. Various periodicals including *New Internationalist*, *The Ecologist*, *The London Review of Books* and, recently, Simon Fairlie’s excellent *The Land* have done much to track the true state of the world. High-profile organizations including Earthscan, the Soil Association, and Compassion in World Farming have been pointing out the many shortcomings of the status quo, and suggesting alternatives. In parallel with this ran a huge and infinitely depressing literature on the decline of wildlife worldwide – largely caused by over-exuberant agriculture; and another huge literature on the shortcomings of the present economy, not least by Nobel Prize-winning economists, Amartya Sen and Paul Krugman.

It is true that the powers-that-be, with whom the NFU has somewhat anomalously aligned itself, have ignored this literature, and derided many of its authors. But it is disingenuous in the extreme to suggest that no-one in the world saw what was coming. Mervyn King and Alastair Darling took the same line when defending their utter failure to anticipate and forestall the collapse of the banks. Why do we let them get away with it? How come they are still in charge?

Can the world really produce enough?

The broadest issue of all is that of total human numbers and our ability to feed ourselves, and here the report quotes Thomas Malthus. At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th Malthus pointed out that the human population was expanding exponentially, while food output could increase only

arithmetically, so that sooner or later and probably sooner human numbers must outstrip our ability to feed ourselves, and disaster must follow.

The NFU report tells us that “Malthusian prophecies have been made before about the inability of the world to feed itself, but at each stage in world history, agriculture has responded”. But, it continues, “As we stand today, issues of global food security appear to be ones of distribution rather than production. Yet to see this as a long-term outlook, we believe, would be dangerously complacent”.

All this at first glance sounds accurate and sensible enough. Agriculture has indeed responded to increasing numbers this past two hundred years, both by collaring new land, and by a whole range of technologies and breeding that have hugely increased yield. But yes, we certainly should not be complacent. Right now the human population stands at around 6.7 billion of whom a billion, according to the UN, are chronically undernourished (though another billion are too fat). By 2050, the UN demographers tell us, world numbers will reach 9.5 billion. Whatever way you turn the figures, it seems a damn’ near-run thing, and Malthus seems highly pertinent.

Yet there is still a huge “but”. Malthus, an Enlightenment cleric and a good social observer, was describing the world of his own time. His overall assessment of demography can now be seen to be wrong. The populations of some animals do seem to operate on boom and crash – exponential growth and then collapse – but this is not the norm: certainly not among sentient creatures that get some feel for the conditions and adjust their breeding accordingly. Typically, population follows a sigmoid – S-shaped – curve. At first numbers rise in an exponential fashion, as they did in Malthus’ times, as the industrial revolution was getting underway and Europe was expanding its empires. But then, after a time, the demographic curve starts to level out – not because of disaster, but because the individuals within the population begin, as it were of their own volition, to reduce their birth rate.

The human demographic curve is now past the phase of exponential growth. Numbers may still be rising by an ever-increasing *absolute* amount each year but the percentage rate of increase is going down. Thus in the 1960s the annual growth rate over the whole world was above two per cent, meaning that the total was on course to double every 40 years – as indeed it more or less has done. But the percentage growth rate now is only about one per cent and according to the United Nations, by 2050, the annual percentage increase will be zero. In other words, by 2050, when we have reached the enormous 9.5 billion, the human population will achieve stability – for the first time since large-scale agriculture first began about 10,000 years ago; the best news for the Earth’s ecology since the end of the last Ice Age. If the demographic curve is allowed to continue on its own sweet way – no more pro-natalist bursts from governments, such as we saw in Mao’s China and Ceausescu’s Rumania and in recent France – then the percentage should fall below

replacement, and total numbers should steadily diminish over the next few centuries.

This new demographic perspective puts a whole new slant on our perception of our own food problems – or at least it should, if we took any notice of it. For it means that for the first time in 10,000 years, we can see that the problem of feeding ourselves is finite. We need not seek to increase output year after year, indefinitely. We can assess, coolly, how much we really need to produce, and then ask how, and then go for it. A maximum of 9.5 billion seems to be the answer – not forever, but for a few hundred years.

This should certainly be do-able. We already produce easily enough to feed 6.7 billion and even with present-day technology, we surely could produce enough for 9.5 billion. The three factors that really matter are hardly touched upon in the NFU report, and certainly not discussed in any depth. First, as everyone knows (and the report does acknowledge) the world's food problems seem worse because there is so much emphasis on meat. But the prime solution to this is neither to cave in to “market forces” and strive to produce more and more of it, nor to preach austerity, which won't work, because nobody wants it. Instead, the world needs above all to encourage traditional food cultures, because all the *great* cuisines of the world, from Provence via Southern Italy through Lebanon and Turkey and Iran to India and China, make only very sparing use of meat. In the greatest traditional cooking, meat is used only for stock, garnish, and feasts, as and when it is available. What we mainly need is to re-learn how to cook. The trouble begins when governments hand over our affairs to the food industry, with instruction to make as much money as possible – whereupon the industry sets out to suppress traditional cooking and to maximize meat in the name of “value adding”.

Then again, as Graham Harvey discusses in his latest *The Carbon Fields*, we need to re-emphasise the value of grass (and we could add browse) – stop feeding half the world's grain to livestock as we do now, and are on course to do increasingly in the future.

These two shifts of emphasis alone could probably achieve what is needed over the next crucial half century, with a following wind. Insofar as further yield is required, then the prime route is not via high tech. We do not, as a the mantra now has it, need a second “green revolution”, based on GM. As Professor Bob Orskov says (and again we hope to discuss on this blog), most of the Third World farmers in whose company he has spent much of his career could double or triple their output right now *if only the prices were guaranteed*. They do not invest in the inputs needed to raise yield not because they are “ignorant” of the pertinent technologies or have no access to them, but because they cannot spend money on fertilizer and the rest unless they can be sure that they can recoup at the end of the season. If, like

now, farm prices are simply allowed to track “the market”, which of course to a large extent means the price of oil, which in turn is affected by every political glitch and whim the world over, then they must be cautious, and spend as little as possible. Unregulated farm prices are bad enough for western farmers, but westerners at least can bale themselves out by borrowing against their collateral (their land), which indeed is how many now survive in Britain. But for farmers with no land and no borrowing power, the “free” market, far from encouraging “enterprise”, is a total block.

None of this is in the NFU report. The report does not suggest that Malthus’s analysis may be out of date. It does not acknowledge that the problem of feeding people should no longer be seen to be potentially infinite, but is finite and measurable – which is the greatest shift of all, though curiously unrecognized in all official circles. Of course, too, it takes the neoliberal economy as a given, almost as a God-given edict, as if the merit of farmers and of farming strategy must be judged by their ability to plug into the global market, which means to the ambitions of the corporates and super-powers.

Overall we have dumb acceptance: that standard perceptions of the status quo are correct -- that we must race forever to stay ahead of Malthusian predictions -- and that the only way to achieve this is to gear our endeavours to the market. So we are told that “On the plus side, high prices in 2007/2008 already appear to have generated a short-term supply response”. We are assured, too, with more of the almost miraculous prescience for which the NFU is famed how “Medium term forecasts suggest that global commodity prices will remain higher than in the previous decade. This in turn may stimulate investment in agricultural research”.

More of the same will not do

So what does the report recommend in practice, to take us through the next few perilous decades and into the great beyond? More of the same, is the answer. It speaks, as has become conventional, of a “new green revolution”. Specifically, “The commitment at the G8 summit in Italy in July 2008 to dedicate \$20 billion to agricultural research in developing countries in the next few years is welcome”. To be fair, the report no-where promotes GM directly as the government has been doing, or tells us as the government often has why we will apparently starve without it. But the NFU must be aware that “agricultural research” these days does typically mean “biotech”, and that Britain’s and the US governments are committed to GM in particular, both because they seem to think it is vital and because it is profitable, and hence the source of GDP, and so can continue the illusion of “economic growth”. The report authors must be aware, too, of all those speeches by Gordon Brown et al, about the crying need for “foreign investment” in Africa in particular. There has been no mention at all that I know about of the need to build

on the agriculture that is already out there in Africa and Asia, which is often brilliant, superbly adjusted to difficult conditions, and needs only a helping hand. In short, research per se need not be a blessing – far from it – and \$20 billion are not necessarily welcome unless they are spent on the right things. But on all this the NFU is silent.

It is keen on biofuels. “The UK biofuel market is developing quickly”, it tells us. “Two new bioethanol plants are under construction with a potential to produce 400 million litres each from around 1 million tonnes of UK wheat”. Elsewhere the report speaks of the need to grow more of our own food, but it sees no conflict here. After all, the dry distillers’ grains that are the co-product, are protein feed for livestock. So with wheat for biofuel and distillers’ grains on the side it will be business as usual: suvs and steaks all round. The report is keen, too, on the hybrid form of *Miscanthus*, primarily a tropical grass but with some forms that grow in temperate climates, with an annual yield of 25 t/ha dry weight. It mentions biogas.

No-where, though, is there any sign in this report of the radical thinking that is now so obviously necessary; no recognition of any of the alternatives to present-day practices and conventions that some farmers and scientists are now working on, which really could make a difference. So the report mentions short-term rotation coppice, primarily willow, as a source of biofuel – but the word “agroforestry”, which can include permanent, coppiced fuel trees and a lot more besides, does not appear. Yet, as again must be discussed on this blog, a farm with well-managed agroforestry really could provide plenty of food *and* be self-sufficient in energy *and* be wildlife friendly.

The report acknowledges that we must reduce overall carbon emissions but warns: “One energy use that should not be replaced is nitrogen fertilizer (normally produced by natural gas) since the energy multiplier effect is in the region of 6 to 1 (every 1 unit of energy used in the production and application of fertilizer produces 6 units of energy in the form of higher crop yields)”. Good point – but it does not mention the conditional clauses: that the 6 to 1 ratio cannot be achieved except within strict limits, and only of course when nitrogen is indeed the limiting factor; that added N *suppresses* natural fixation for example by clovers; that (Graham Harvey’s point) a good, unploughed ley will fix more carbon than a fertilized field of cereal that is used to feed cattle – and we should really be comparing the overall performance of fertilized cereal (or grass) against well-managed grass-clover leys. In short: put the arithmetic in context, and it looks very different. I like the idea though, which alas the report does not expand, that artificial N could and should be produced using renewable energy. On-site solar-powered Haber processing plants could surely be quite an asset.

The report mentions soil structure and dynamics – but at no point does it acknowledge the existence of organic farming, for which the soil is the central obsession, and surely has a very great deal to offer. It mentions minimum tillage, but at no point acknowledges permaculture – which surely at least deserves a nod. Indeed, although the report does not mention GM either, it's clear that for the authors of this report, “minimum tillage” really means Round-up ready rape.

Fellow creatures

The last third of the report is about farming and tourists, and farming and wildlife. Again, we are assured, a string of far-sighted government policies these past few decades, assisted by the NFU, has ensured that all is well. You might indeed conclude from this report that every hedgerow (all 460,000 km of them in England and Wales) is bursting with the songs of linnets and yellowhammers, and the murmuring of bees; that the ads for British butter with their buttercups and cowslips really do reflect the way of the world.

In truth, historically, wildlife has flourished in Britain, up to a point, only when agriculture has been depressed or consciously run down – in the 1930s, until the panic stations of World War II; and briefly in the 1990s during set-aside. We have never managed to create a Britain in which productive agriculture and wildlife could truly flourish in harmony, or at least not in the past two centuries, and we are certainly not achieving this now. This is not for lack of good people or good intentions. There are plenty of excellent scientists and dedicated lawyers and activists on the case. But we can never reconcile agriculture with wildlife so long as we allow our farming and conservation strategy to be twisted this way and that by the political dogma of the day, whether it's the dogma of the EU or of the WTO – or, as now, by an ill-matched combination of the two. Neither can we achieve this ideal so long as we treat our fellow creatures simply as stage scenery, a backdrop to tourism. To reconcile farming with wildlife conservation worldwide might reasonably be seen as the number one concern of our age – essential for humanity and for all other life on Earth. A farming trade union, which should by its nature keep its distance from government and big business, should be a key player in this.

Overall, present-day thinking in high places, as is so evident in this report, lacks the necessary gravitas. What now passes as “realism” in truth is an exercise in triviality -- party politics, economic fashion, market trend. We need to take John McEnroe's advice: “Be *serious!*”