

Farming Fallacies and Follies

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YOU lucky taxpayers, you will be delighted to know that on tins of imported fruit you pay 12.8 per cent of the price at the port.

Now why, in the hallowed names of Fred List and Joe Chamberlain, is it 12.8 per cent? Why not 12.7 or 12.9? Who chose the figure? When did he choose it? Is it still the best figure, or would it be wise to slip it up or down by a decimal or so? Who benefits? Obviously the British farmer, with his groves of pineapples, who would otherwise be forced out of business by the relentless pressure of coolie labour. On such a basis, far more is built than the tax on tinned fruit; indeed, on this kind of basis is erected the whole vast system of agricultural supports and taxes.

Yes, but which British farmer benefits? The man who grows barley wants the stuff to be expensive. The poultry farmer wants it to be cheap. Who, then, decides between them? Presumably it was once somebody at the Ministry of Agriculture, but it is now increasingly someone at Brussels. Splendid—but to whom does he listen for advice? The farmers. Yes, but which farmers? Once I was candidate in an agricultural constituency. The big farmers sat swigging whisky and chatting National Farmers' Union business all afternoon of market day, in the best hotel of the town. The little chap was working all hours trying to squeeze a living. So who, kind friends, is likely to get the ear of the bureaucrats?

Such arguments have long been currency among radical town-dwellers. How significant it is that Tory farmers are now beginning to talk the same language! At least, one Tory farmer is doing so—and a Tory M.P. to boot: Richard Body, who sits for Holland-with-Boston. Dick Body won high praise for his great campaign against the Common Market a few months ago. Now again he stands forth as a great and courageous fighter for economic freedom, as author of a short but splendid

pamphlet. *No Way to Feed a Nation* is the title, and it is produced by the "Selsdon Group"—a group of people who came together three years ago "to ensure that the case for the free market economy had its fullest hearing within the Conservative Party." All those arguments which we have mainly directed at urban audiences are now shown to have at least as much force when they are set before farmers. Declares Richard Body:

"My purpose is to show that politician and farmer should keep apart from each other: it is to the advantage of everyone

—housewives, country-lovers, taxpayers, exporters and importers, our friends abroad, *everyone*—that politicians should stop goading, exhorting and subsidising farmers to produce more food, and farmers should stop listening to politicians and taking the largesse they offer."

These are splendid words, and the whole pamphlet is crammed with economic logic and straight talking. If Mrs. Thatcher will listen to people like Richard Body, she need have no fear for the next election. That is, unless Mr. Wilson and Mr. Thorpe happen to be listening as well

LAND & LIBERTY
MARCH-APRIL 1976