

Country Matters



Chairman's Message

Welcome to the second bi-annual newsletter.

The first one was well received but we want it to fulfil your needs so please let us know if there is any aspect of style or content which you would like to see changed.

As you will see we have been very active both in Parliament and all over the country. With the summer show season starting the whole team will be visiting a total of twenty-eight shows. Although our programme is often arranged by the hosts there is always room to meet with CRAG members if you wish. Your regional chairman has the programme of visits.

I hope you enjoy this issue, please pass it on to someone else; there are plenty more copies available if you would like to distribute them.

Jim Paice MP,
Chairman of crag
Shadow Minister for Agriculture
and Rural Affairs

Supporting local produce Cameron and Paice step up pressure on Government for country of origin labelling

Jim Paice MP recently challenged the Prime Minister in the House of Commons over the Government's refusal to introduce country of origin food labelling. The Prime Minister was asked how his support for the CLA's Just Ask campaign squared with his Government's rejection of four Conservative food labelling bills; Mr Blair signalled his unwillingness to improve the labelling system.

Mr Paice later said: "When Tony Blair backed the CLA's Just Ask campaign he did so with staggering hypocrisy, for the Government has blocked legislation for country of origin labelling four times. The Prime Minister clearly has no intention of taking action against the misleading labelling which undermines our farmers and deceives British consumers."

Dame Deirdre Hutton, the chairman of the FSA, believes some consumers are being duped by the present rules.

She told The Times: "Meat from animals coming into the UK and then cured here, for example, can be described under the rules as UK produce. Most people would assume that the animal had spent its life here.

"The label "Scots beef", for example, may not be meat from cattle that have spent their whole life in Scotland."

David Cameron, speaking at the Oxford Farming Conference earlier this year, renewed the Conservative Party's commitment to clear country of origin food labelling that will allow the British public to support locally-grown produce.

Mr Cameron said "Food patriotism can help meet environmental goals as well as make the agricultural industry more sustainable. In order for

the public to support local produce, the Government must ensure food labelling is far more rigorous and transparent".

Mr Cameron also called on the British public to try to buy British, commenting;

"Buying local produce can help towards a healthier lifestyle, can uphold rural economies and enhance our environment. Local food, in more ways than one, can be the great sustainer."

The recent outbreak of avian flu in Suffolk has only emphasized this point. Most people were surprised that UK labelling laws would allow 'Bootiful Norfolk Turkey' to have originated in Hungary. It must be stressed however that Bernard Matthews denied that this happens ■



Shadow Minister for Agriculture & Rural Affairs, Jim Paice MP, presses the Government on country of origin labelling in the Commons.

Paice proposes new 'twinning' arrangement

Exciting plans to twin farms and schools have been proposed by Jim Paice MP in an effort to foster greater understanding of the countryside. See inside...

News from Westminster

Single Farm Payments

In March the Efra select committee produced as damning a report on a Government department as anyone could remember. After investigating the handing out of subsidies to farmers, under the EU's Single Farm Payment scheme it revealed senior ministers, including Margaret Beckett, enforced an overcomplicated system badly. She was strongly criticized for walking free from the wreckage. The Shadow Defra team continue to monitor and challenge those now in charge at Defra to ensure they get on with the job of making payments to farmers.

Post Offices

The government announced proposals to close 2,500 post offices in December last year. The consultation period lasted just twelve weeks, ending on the 8th March, something the conservatives criticised the government on. In May (after this newsletter has gone to print) the government will announce their response. The Conservatives have called for a raft of measures including sub-postmaster contracts to be freed up to allow them to compete for a greater proportion of contracts.



Climate Change Bill

The Climate Change Bill was welcomed by the Conservative Party. However, Shadow Secretary of State for Defra, Peter Ainsworth is calling for amendments to the Bill to include an independent monitoring body and year on year targets to ensure the UK remains on track towards a low carbon economy and to enable true accountability.

Bovine TB

Bovine TB now accounts for 22,000 cattle deaths and almost £100 million per annum. The Government consulted on badger culling in December 2005 but are yet to announce proposals. The Conservative's have called for a package of measures including: greater efficiency in tracing and testing cattle, the urgent trialling of vaccines and the PCR test (to establish which setts are infected), and targeted measures to deal with the reservoir of infection in wildlife.

Budget implications for rural communities

Following the tax hike on 4x4's announced in this year's budget, Jim Paice challenged David Miliband to find ways of exempting those who need powerful engine vehicles for their work. Mr Paice is now looking at proposals to put forward to Defra and the Treasury.

Voluntary modulation

The agreement struck on voluntary modulation means English arable farmers will be nearly £30 per hectare worse off than their counterparts in Europe. The UK is the only member state in the EU to have voluntary modulation, except Portugal. This means that the extra income farmers would receive from the Entry Level Stewardship Scheme is effectively eliminated. We would prefer compulsory rather than voluntary modulation to ensure a level playing field across Europe.

Team visits

Jim Paice spent three days in Germany meeting Agriculture Ministers and officials to discuss the German system for paying the Single Farm Payment, a system very similar to the English one but which paid well ahead of the EU payment closing date. Jim's trip included visiting bio energy plants producing gas from maize, energy from wind and heat from biomass – all because of active support from their government ■

The Conservatives are launching a new Tourism Task Force to develop policy proposals ahead of the next election. One area the task force is seeking to promote is family holidays in Britain. Crag has started the ball rolling listing some ideas of where to visit in rural Britain.

No place like home



Noss Mayo, south west Devon

Noss Mayo is said to be amongst the most attractive and un-spoilt villages in Devon. The River Yealm and nearby coast offer activities including sailing, boating, fishing and walking and the surrounding landscape is home to an array of wildlife. The village itself has a maritime history stretching back to the 14th century when ships from the Yealm took part in the siege of Calais.



Pembridge, Herefordshire

Pembridge lies in the heart of Herefordshire making it a picturesque base for day trips. The Black and White trail, a circular meander through some of the most unspoilt villages and churches of North-West Herefordshire passes through Pembridge, and just a short drive away is Offa's Dyke path. Other activities in the area include horse riding and cider drinking, but preferably not at the same time!



Llyn Peninsular, North Wales

The coastline of the Llyn Peninsular provides a host of activities from sunbathing to bird watching. One of the best places for spotting wildlife including grey seals, shags and curlews is Bardsey Island, and for a real Welsh experience visit the former miners village of Nant Gwrtheyrn where you can have a go at learning Welsh.



Robin Hood's Bay, North Yorkshire

Millions of years ago, the land upon which Robin Hood's Bay is situated was once a deep sea. This charming Seaside town offers a selection of activities including bowling, tennis and fishing, as well as an insight in to the history of the area at The Old Coastguard Station and Museum.



Constable Country

Walking and cycling are ideal ways to see the countryside made famous by the artist John Constable. Attractions include museums and historic houses, such as Orford Castle, Flatford Mill and Minsmere Nature Reserve.

For accommodation ideas visit www.farmstayuk.co.uk

and to find local food suppliers visit www.bigbarn.co.uk

Some good news for the dairy industry

The recent announcement by supermarket giant Tesco to raise the price some dairy farmers receive for their milk to around 22 pence per litre, four pence more than the average farmgate price, was welcomed by the Conservatives.

Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs Jim Paice commented: "We very much welcome Tesco's decision to give farmers a fairer share of the retail price of milk, particularly the recognition of dairy producers' costs and the need to take them into account on such a regular basis. The additional premium for locally sourced milk is another positive development which will tap into growing consumer demand for local produce.

"I sincerely hope that other retailers will follow this example but also that Tesco will look at the other half of the dairy market and seek to source far more of its high value dairy products from the UK industry. We must not forget that half our milk is processed – that is where we need



Bill Wiggin MP and Jim Paice MP join protesters outside the Houses of Parliament

to fight back against imports."

Earlier this year Jim, Bill Wiggin MP and Neil Parrish MEP met young dairy farmers from the South West who delivered a petition to 10 Downing Street. Sally Dare, who organises the campaigning arm 'The Great Milk Robbery' and other members of the organisation are worried that if action isn't taken now many of them will be forced to leave the milk industry.

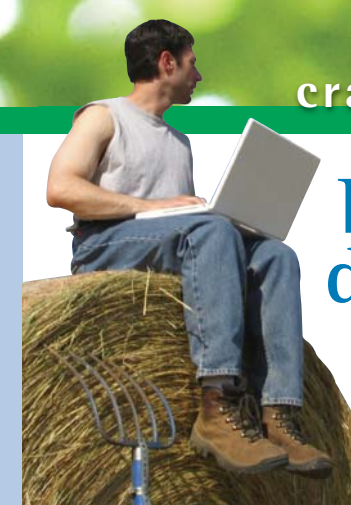
Blair era 'among darkest decades' for countryside

Commenting on the 10th anniversary of Tony Blair's premiership, Shadow Agriculture Minister Jim Paice said:

"The trouble with Tony Blair and the Labour party is that they don't understand the countryside. They think it is full of very wealthy people, that farmers are all subsidy junkies and that the landscape would be fine if it wasn't for farmers messing it up. The reality is that after 10 years of a Blair Government 1 in 5 rural people live in poverty, our self sufficiency in indigenous food has fallen from almost 82% to 71%; our food trade deficit has risen by half as much again whilst meat imports have more than doubled. The average income for everyone in the farming industry has fallen from

nearly £28,000 to less than £14,000. Tony Blair told farmers that supermarkets had them in an armlock and has done nothing whilst allowing rural post offices to close at a rate of 4 a week. As Prime Minister he appointed Margaret Beckett who treated the countryside with ill disguised contempt and then promoted her when she had failed so miserably by costing the taxpayer perhaps £350 million in EU fines.

"Never before has the countryside and those who live there been so neglected and their traditions and values been destroyed. A Gordon Brown Government offers more of the same or even worse. Instead we need a Government which understands the dynamic nature of rural communities, their desire to be allowed to get on with their lives and the intricate fabric that interweaves the relationship between farming, local businesses and the natural environment. For rural people access to public services such as health and education are real problems made worse by the decline in rural transport. The message from the countryside is that Tony Blair's premiership has been amongst its darkest decades."



Rural economies deserve a progressive vision

Rural economies have done well, but are threatened by the lack of a progressive vision says Neil Ward

New Labour's rural policy is ten years old. Its 1997 manifesto had little to say about rural issues, and the promise of a hunting vote and right to roam looked more like 'Old Labour' than New.

Labour only stumbled across rural policy as a suitable case for its modernisation project in 1998. The Rural White Paper, published in November 2000, set out a progressive vision for rural areas and contained several interesting pieces of machinery of Government reforms such as rural proofing and a rural services standard. However, within weeks Foot and Mouth Disease had derailed the White Paper and in its aftermath rural affairs fell apart under Defra. Overhauling Defra's approach to farming and the countryside was not helped by the Prime Minister assigning leading agri-business figures to 'sort out' Government policy. The result was lots of reviewing, consulting and then shuffling institutional deck-chairs at a time when the Government should have accelerated implementing the White Paper.

In aggregate terms, rural economies have been doing relatively well. In the growth of jobs, businesses and sales from firms, rural areas outperform urban. Agriculture accounts for under three per cent of rural employment and more than ten times as many net new jobs have been created in rural areas as have been lost from farming. There has also been an explosion of home-working in rural areas, with more people now working from home in rural England than the entire workforce of

Birmingham and Glasgow combined. Interestingly, this trend has gathered pace without any aid from Government or business support agencies.

However, a real threat comes from the idea that rural areas are inherently unsustainable. This is now the prevailing view among many urban and regional planners, and Regional Spatial Strategies are now planning to constrict development in rural areas even more, under the mantra of combating climate change. The risk is that rural areas become stereo-typed by urban-centred politicians and planners as quaint places of (highly protected) landscape and habitat – set is aspic rather than as living and working places.

The Regional Development Agencies have been a disappointment in promoting rural economies as active contributors to economic development and quality of life in the regions. The knowledge economy can render rural locations highly attractive and competitive, but regional economic planning is becoming ever more focussed on the so-called 'city-regions' – although few seem clear on what these are and how they work.

The time is ripe for a much more progressive vision of our rural areas and rural economies – one which celebrates rural enterprise and innovation. Rural areas can be successful locations for all sorts of businesses – not just farming and basket-weaving ■

Professor Neil Ward is Director of the Centre for Rural Economy at Newcastle University. See www.ncl.ac.uk/cre for details.

Paice proposes 'twinning'

Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Jim Paice has proposed that schools be 'twinned' with local farms to foster greater understanding among young people of farming and the countryside.

Welcoming the Year of Food and Farming, which will take place in the next academic year, Mr Paice said: "Introducing young people to farms and teaching them about the origins of their food is a vital step towards increasing awareness about – and responsibility for – the environment, animal welfare, and the importance of healthy eating.

"One-off visits are fine as far as they go but if children are really to understand they need to follow the whole cycle for crops and animals. By twinning schools with farms and using digital technology it can all be done by 'virtual visits' – taking the farm in to the most urban inner city school."

Roughly three quarters of the population live in our cities and even many people in rural areas now have no link or real understanding of farming. Introducing young people to farms and food production will enable the reconnection between food production and consumers, a vital step to improve healthy eating. Farmers will be able demonstrate the high standards inherent in UK food production, the work they do to preserve and enhance the natural environment and perhaps even inspire some youngsters to get their wellies on for a living.

Recent research has highlighted the need for better food education. One survey found that a number of children believe cows lay eggs and bacon comes from sheep. Another revealed 6/10 children think potatoes grow on trees. While organisations such as LEAF and FACE are already working hard to educate consumers but the year of Food and Farming will give an opportunity to move things forward ■



Regional round-up

Since the last newsletter the chairman has been very active.

Jim Paice MP toured England and Wales during the beginning of this year to inform rural communities of Conservative activities within parliament, listen to the issues affecting each area and help local candidates with their campaigning ahead of the next General Election.

- Jim's first visit took him to meet farmers from Mid Wales. National issues including country of origin food labelling, regulation and farm-based energy production were discussed, along with the more regional issue of hill farming subsidies.
- In Hereford Jim addressed farmers at a locally sourced farm breakfast organised by local candidate Jessy Norman. Jim went on to meet more local people at Hereford cattle market on market day.
- In the South West Jim hosted meetings with Conservative candidates in Stroud and North Devon where he met local business leaders to discuss the wider issues affecting rural communities. Jim was keen to lend his support to the North Devon Journal's 'Use It or Lose It' campaign which is fighting to save local businesses, including the region's Post Offices. Other visits in the South West included two farm breakfast meetings in Taunton and a lunch with local dairy farmers in Somerton and Frome.
- More recently Jim joined Romsey candidate Caroline Nokes (pictured above) to address business leaders and non-party political organisations about farming and devolving local decision making.

During the summer all members of the Shadow Defra team will be out and about attending a large number of shows all over the UK.



Jim joins Caroline Nokes, parliamentary candidate in Romsey, to talk to local business leaders.

Shadow Defra team



Peter Ainsworth MP
Shadow Secretary for Defra



Jim Paice MP
Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs



Bill Wiggin MP
Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries



Gregory Barker MP
Shadow Minister for the Environment

Shadow Ministers (Lords)



Baroness Byford
Shadow Minister for Food and Rural Affairs



Lord Dixon-Smith
Shadow Minister for the Environment



Duke of Montrose
Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs

crag half day conference

A panel of four Shadow Ministers led a debate on rural affairs in Westminster earlier this year. Speakers included Peter Ainsworth MP, Jim Paice MP, Shadow Minister for Business and Enterprise, Mark Prisk MP and Shadow Minister for Local Government, Robert Syms MP.

The key message from Jim Paice was that rural communities need Government support. He said; "It is important that we recognise there are many different strands interwoven in the rural community, and none of them are frozen in time. But we have to make sure the needs of rural communities are recognised, and that we have a responsibility to make sure that they thrive. They need a Government which understands them and which does not seek to impose its own vision on communities which have survived for hundreds of years."

Mr Paice is calling for decision making to be devolved to local communities and not micro-managed from Whitehall.

On rural housing Robert Syms spoke of the need for more affordable homes. The Conservatives are calling for organic growth in hamlets, villages and towns equal to their size, built using local materials and in keeping



Shadow Secretary of State for Defra, Peter Ainsworth MP, addresses the conference, with Jim Paice MP looking on.

with local communities. Furthermore, ideas such as shared equity and devolving planning control to local communities are being considered as ways to solve the affordable housing issue.

The growing home start-up business sector, increasing by 2000 people each week, should be supported by sensible policy according to Mark Prisk. The opportunities for rural areas arising as a result of technology are not properly recognised by this Government and if encouraged could have a significant, positive impact on the rural economy. Instead, the Government have increased the number of directives by 52 per cent over the past ten years, stifling small businesses.

The meeting concluded with a fiery debate on climate change. Peter Ainsworth commented; "People who say that mankind is not contributing to climate change are setting themselves up against well-established, internationally recognised scientific opinion. I have no time for climate change deniers. There is a moral duty on politicians, of all persuasions, to work together, with urgency, to tackle this most serious threat that we face. It is the biggest challenge facing this generation of politicians."

How to get involved

Contact your regional chairman – Our regional chairmen organise meetings across the UK with various speakers including members of the Shadow Defra team, other Conservative MPs and industry and subject specialists. Contact crag to find out where and when they are taking place.

Send us your letters – If you have local issues and policy ideas let us know.



Recruit your friends – a thriving rural economy is a thriving countryside

Lisa Thomas
crag administrator

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