

**Minutes of the conservative rural action group's Annual General Meeting
Wednesday 6th May at The Farmers Club, 1.30pm-2.30pm**

Attendees

Jim Paice (Ch)	Chairman
Lucy Moore (LM)	Administrator
Martin Jolly (MJ)	Treasurer

Regional Chairman: John Peake (JP), Roland Firby (RF), Malcolm Florey (MF), Peter Stevens (PS), Neville Walters (NW), Emma Moffett (EM)

Members: Penelope Bossom, Richard Crook, Simon Harris, R. G. Thorne, Rupert Best, Richard Benyon, Michael Brodie, Alan Clifton-Holt, Mr and Mrs Edgely, Nigel Finch, George Freeman, John Gardiner, Simon Hart, Mr and Mrs Goodbourn, Mr and Mrs Huxam, Charles Mann, Shelagh Marshall, Debra Murphy, Glyn Murphy, John Tamplin, Andrew Davis, Dara Jolly, Roger Foxwell, Gary Bosworth, Andrew David

1. Apologies for absence

Carola Goodman Law, Michael Lee, Bill Bradford, David Hutton, Virginia Taylor, Jennifer Castle, Finn Christensen, Roger Emmett, Simon Harrap, Hugh Oliver-Bellasis, Phillipa White, David Kinsey

2. Minutes from last meeting

3. Matters arising from minutes

4. Chairman's Introduction

Welcome. It is especially good to see PPCs in attendance, including Simon Hart and George Freeman.

5. May 2008 - May 2009 achievements and report

- Lost Lisa who is now the Defra press officer for the Conservatives. Post has been filled by Lucy who works half of her time for crag and half of her time for House of Commons. She is your point of contact.
- Continue to publish newsletter, *Country Matters*. Spring edition went out in February. It is circulated to members, PPCs, MPs, Lords, rural marginals etc. Would appreciate feedback about the content. Can it be altered/improved?
- 17 Rural Shows last year. The Game Fair was a great success. We raffled a hamper with produce from David Cameron's constituency.
- Party Conference – we held an event with the CRC and the Countryside Alliance. Again very successful and we hope to repeat the success this year.
- The Chairman has made lots of visits to various parts of the country, and has attended brainstorming meetings.
- Future – with the arrival of Lucy and Nick there have been a lot of new ideas and we have had a re-think about membership and crag. crag is not a sexy name. We will not be changing the name but we will now be campaigning under the name 'conservative rural action'. We will be re-vamping the website, making it interactive so that people can upload comments, present their views and policy issues. In addition, we will be launching an email newsletter, also to be used as a campaigning vehicle for PPCs, which will be available to anyone. It will demonstrate the 'action' part of our name and will be used to launch campaigns and policy ideas. E.g. Honest Food Campaign, launched at the NFU AGM – lots of interest. You can sign up for a newsletter on the website, we will have a stand at the Real Food Festival and will spread word that food labelling is a precursor to improved marketing.

George Freeman: Magazine is fantastic. Have we thought about Young Farmers; 4 groups are active in my region. 50 people turned up to the last meeting, half are involved in agriculture, that is an incredible resource. Not always political but I found out very quickly that it is possible to ramp up the party line. A very useful meeting.

Chairman: Agree. Had a meeting with their national office yesterday; although it is contact at local level with the young farmers which is important. Everyone can take this message away with them. The YFC need to be engaged in what we are doing.

Roger Foxwell: Could there be a link on the Conservative website to crag. Raised the issue of school milk, would like to see action in getting milk back into schools.

Chairman: you are not going to get the Conservatives telling every local authority what to do since their policy is to bring everything back to a local level.

Roger Foxwell: An MEP from Westminster Council said that if we actively promote school milk it would be at vast expense to the tax payer.

Chairman: My point. We won't tell local authorities what to do. If they want to pay for milk then they can.

Roger Foxwell: What about subsidy?

Chairman: I will take this away and look into it further.

Shelagh Marshall: I think that new members would like to have brief statements on issues such as the CAP changes, sheep tagging.

Chairman: That is what we will be using the website for. Sheep tagging is EU legislation, which the present Government have tried to stop but it has gone through. I wrote to Hilary Benn asking about derogations. There are those who think we might get rid of it.

PS: On the matter of school milk it is down to each local authority. A procurement programme must be the way forward.

Roger Foxwell: On the issue of sheep tagging. Who feels strongly about it in the EU?

The idea of sheep traceability was put forward by commission and is supported by countries it won't affect.

Chairman: There is a minimum, any country with less than a certain number of sheep does not have to comply. The large countries that do have sheep i.e. Spain are in favour, other countries are questioning it but we would now need a majority to overturn the legislation. The Spanish say that it works well so what is the problem?

Roger Foxwell: If the Spanish are happy then let them keep it.

Chairman: I am pushing the government to do all that we can.

6. Treasurer's report and presentation of annual accounts

Martin Jolly: Accounts for 2008 – ended on 31st December. Approved by the executive and logged at Central Office. Exactly the same excess as last year, budget not good. Membership is declining, in 2007 there were 36 patrons, and in 2008 there were 32 patrons, this year 13 patrons have not renewed. Membership is down from 120 to 102. We need to be careful how much we spend and claw in as much as possible. We need to promote the Conservatives and we need more money, so lets make the connections and get on with it. These accounts, to satisfy Central Office, need to be approved at the AGM.

Roland Firby: seconded

Chairman: All in favour?

All: Agreed.

Charles Mann: I'm not sure whether I renewed my membership. Do you chase membership up or not?

MJ: I send Lucy a list every month with all members who haven't renewed in red ink.

Chairman: Those who pay by direct debit, obviously make the effort to stop doing so. For those who pay by cheque, we send renewal letters, perhaps we should send them again if we don't hear back. I'm delighted you raised this question. Two of you walked by who were red listed on Martin's list. There is a bigger issue; it is the general election next year and an election campaign will start next March. There is £11,000 in the bank account; I take the view that we should use all this money for campaigning, since it is not doing anything sitting in the account. We have prepared a budget which includes shows, running expenses, paying Lucy, the new website etc and we have a shortfall of £7000 between what we have in the bank and what we are expected to spend. More fundraising is needed.

7. Fundraising report

John Peake: My picture is the same. I'm surprised that more people have not signed up, people should be more enthusiastic. I have one event at Minterne in Dorset and that is well attended. We have had Neil Parish and Oliver Letwin to speak and there have been receptions after meetings like this one in the spring and there was one in the autumn. I hope to have a date in the late autumn when Nick Herbert could attend. I know a lot of people and ask them for a fighting fund with a letter asking do you want to help rural matters or not? We need to define points of policy and we could do things such as go to point to points and say 'vote for Tories'. There are others things we could do. Use this money before general election. We need more and I will do my best to get more. We need long-term planning of dates. Suffolk crag patrons/Herefordshire patrons, lets have a go. Banker's orders are the way forward. There are 40 in my village, Corscombe, who have standing orders.

Chairman: Thank you John, you made the point that I'm trying to make. We should use the money we currently have and a bit more that is yet to be raised. For an event

in the autumn we must get a date in the diary. There is a change in House of Commons rules, we can't hold receptions there anymore, so for Patron's receptions, it will have to be the Farmer's Club and we will need to find a date. We need to raise some money on a local level and point to points are a good example. There is help from the centre but there is no way Lucy can be doing it all.

PS: I'm conscious that we are selling a similar message to the Countryside Alliance and Vote OK. As with the old agricultural advisory committees we can facilitate access to ministers. That is our unique selling point. We must emphasise that and build on it; that we have an access route that no one else can provide.

Chairman: That is fine for the moment but we cannot suggest that we will grant preferential access to ministers in the future in exchange for support now.

PS: We need guidance how to steer clear of that and yet facilitate it.

Roger Foxwell: Has the law changed to prevent that happening? I thought that access to ministers was the whole idea behind a Conservative government.

Chairman: It is attitudes that have changed not the law

Roger Foxwell: That is more or less the point of any local party's event.

Chairman: Ministers speaking at events is okay but access to ministers to influence ministerial decisions is not okay. It was not meant to seem like that. Access to spokesman, speaking at meetings is fine, but the insinuation that people are buying something that you cannot get for nothing must be avoided. So no preferential access to the minister's private office to influence and bend his ear.

RF: Access to hear them speak?

Chairman: That is fine.

8. **Regional reports:**

Neville Walters: Not very much to report. We have been attending shows for a long time. Royal Welsh is one of the larger ones. Jim Paice and David Cameron have attended and there are a lot of farmers there. Last year was a wash out, but there were some successful events and the shows are a good means of contact. Another thought is to ensure that we have enough literature at shows including membership forms. We hope to do a bit better this year. I have the banners at home.

Chairman: It was a good stand at the Royal Welsh that David Cameron and I attended and the banner was in Welsh.

PS: Maintained contact with Vote OK and Countryside Alliance. I have been exploring the cost of footage for stands; it seems much more pro-active to visit stands and to introduce ourselves. We are having a re-organisation of crag in the Eastern region and will have an event at Great Thurlow, at the end of the month. There has been a good bit of interest for this. I have explored with Lucy the idea of emailing possible attendees and the secretaries of conservative associations to catch a wider audience. I look forward to a busy meeting. Lets hope that the crag re-launch might ignite some enthusiasm for the re-launch of agricultural committees in a more modern form.

Chairman: Thank you and for all your hard work.

Malcolm Florey: I'm the regional secretary in the South West and have set out to re-motivate crag in the region. We have had our AGM, with 45 members. In the last 12 months we have had three meetings; the first was attended by Neil Parish, the second by David Fursdon and the third by John Penrose. Each meeting has been attended by about 25-30 people. Since crag has re-formed in the SW are the numbers up? It would be great if we could get a list as to who the paid-up members are and whether we could receive updates as the membership changes. We have also met with Young

Farmers in Devon and at Bicton college and old farmers and all were useful meetings. Key issues that arose from those meetings were: health and TB, food security and labelling, lack of research and development, improving the image of agriculture, opportunity for regulatory reform. I send a copy to Jim of all the minutes, I don't know whether he reads them.

Chairman: I do read them.

RF: I don't have anything to report. I paid for one meeting and no one reimbursed me and I was disillusioned by the whole thing, until I heard of the website today. I envy the enthusiasm of those who are attending shows. I think that if people are going to vote they will vote for the party that they are going to vote. The best thing to do is to help candidates and ensure that they do not embarrass themselves when they come to NFU meetings.

Chairman: We must ensure that candidates do not make a fool of themselves. I would say that there is a limit to what we can do from the centre. I get frustrated too when nothing happens.

9. Election of Officers

Chairman: Virginia Taylor is withdrawing from her role as deputy due to family commitments.

Jim Paice was proposed and seconded for chairman.

RF, MJ, JP: seconded

All: Agree

Chairman: I propose Peter Stevens for Vice Chairman.

John Gardiner: seconded

All: Agree

Chairman: Peter Stevens is re-elected as Vice Chairman. Shall we leave the second vice chairman office vacant for now?

All: Agree

10. AOB

Brian Edgely: Asbestos cement. For the last two years the business of calling it hazardous waste is a complete farce. The Health and Safety Commission published a report in 2006; I will pass several copies around. Blue/brown asbestos is dangerous, but white asbestos is fine, if you get it in your lungs it is dissolved within two weeks. I have followed this up with Paul Goodman and other MPs including Ian Duncan Smith and Philip Dunne. I would like the support of crag behind this so that Philip Dunne can see this. We would like general support to call for asbestos to be used for a membrane on the ground and hope that this action will call for derogation from the EU.

Chairman: Thank you, I will take this issue away with me.