

A Day with Lord Curry **Monday 1 April 2019, Slaley Community Hall**

Contemporary Agriculture of the Future of Rural Communities **A Contextual Practiced Workop**

Donald Curry chaired the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food and speaks on agriculture and countryside issues in the House of Lords. He recently became President of Community Action Northumberland and has a wide influence over all our rural contexts.

The aim of the day, organised by the Rural Strand of the Diocese of Newcastle was to reflect on the contemporary issues confronting agricultural communities across the diocese, especially in the light of Brexit and to engage in a conversation about the future of rural communities themselves in our diocese.

At the end of the session the Revd. Jonathan Mason, the Bishop's Adviser for Rural Ministry gave a theological reflection on our local context and its implications for the rural strand of the diocesan strategy: growing church bringing hope. This is appended as a separate document.

Fifty people gathered from all parts of the diocese.

Lord Curry divided his presentation into three: Brexit, Agriculture and Rural Issues. As much a conversation as a series of presentations, it was a dynamic process with many questions and lively exchanges.

Questions and comments from the floor are shown in italics. As not every commentator clearly identified themselves, no names have been attributed to these contributions.

Brexit

Lord Curry expressed his anxiety about the conduct of government, which he described as appalling and dysfunctional and said that he felt the country was a 'whisker away' from potential violence and disruption if the situation is not resolved soon. He argued that there has been a lack of two principles: compromise and pragmatism and MPs have not emerged with much credit, but he forecast a disaster if the Prime Minister were to call a General Election.

He considered that the evidence of lack of investment in UK businesses caused by the Brexit uncertainty presents a very serious problem for the country: money is being withheld or invested abroad instead. An economic down-turn is inevitable – more because of the lack of clarity about policy than Brexit itself.

Would another referendum be a way forward?

No, it would be a waste of time. It would undermine the principle of democracy, he said. People may not have understood the consequences of what they voted for, but they voted to leave.

Lord Curry said that he had been a remainer, but now felt that a swift resolution was needed and the country needs to move on. He felt that we have ruined our relationship with the EU and it would now be hard to see how or why we could go back. We have always been uncomfortable partners –

playing the hokey-cokey with one foot in and one foot out. The Tory Party, he felt, will never agree on Europe.

Is there a role for the media to facilitate healing?

No, simply because it wouldn't sell newspapers.

Is a customs union a likely compromise?

At first it seemed the most likely outcome and would have solved the Irish border issue (without that conundrum we would have already agreed a deal), but a lot of views have since hardened. If we signed up to a customs union there would be a risk of a ring-wing backlash – there is a mismatch between constituencies that voted to leave and the views of their MPs. A customs union might also make it hard for business to commit to trade deals outside the EU. The European Court of Justice would remain a serious stumbling block.

Agriculture

Everything is on hold because of Brexit. It has become difficult for members of the House of Lords to manage their diaries because of the number of bills on hold, including, for example, an important fisheries bill. At the same time, the process of the implementation of EU instruments into UK law is happening without sufficient scrutiny.

The government is introducing an agriculture bill which proposes the most fundamental changes for many decades. It is still light on detail and Lord Curry believes that it can still be influenced. Its basic premise is public support for public good, based on the principle of natural capital.

Lord Curry suggested that outcomes resulting from the management of the countryside might include safe food, public access, water management and carbon sequestration; but which of these is there a market for? As there is no market for carbon sequestration the tax-payer must step in.

He asked the meeting to divide into groups to discuss what should be supported by government.

The responses, which were wide-ranging, included:

Are good outcomes always compatible?

How do we balance competing goods – for the planet and for the community?

There is a big problem in the UK because public needs and the needs of the farming community do not always connect.

We're besotted with cheap food, but some people live in food poverty and there is a balance to be struck between cheap food and ethical food production.

Can we achieve a better balance between extremes in farming: organic versus factory farming?

We need to be educate people about the need for carbon capture – perhaps by a popular medium parallel to David Attenborough's spotlight on plastic in the oceans.

Dormitory villages are a problem – people who live in the countryside but don't understand the needs of the more-established rural community.

It can be difficult to live a simple life in rural areas – it's hard, for example, without owning a car.

It can sometimes be acceptable to release land from agriculture – for example on flood plains.

It can be hard to get farmers to co-operate. Can this be encouraged more so that, for example, we can see the environment on a landscape scale?

There is a lot of unseen pollution, for example by fuel companies. The polluter should pay for the damage they cause and shouldn't be reimbursed by the taxpayer.

Is beef farming in the UK compatible with the need to combat climate change?

Should we produce more food in the UK?

How do we balance welfare standards with the move to strike trade deals with non-EU countries, especially the USA?

Could visits of children to farms be further encouraged to inform people better about agriculture?

How can we balance the need for national consistency with the need for regional variation?

We can't plan for everything and need to make room for experiments.

Lord Curry responded:

One of the big questions that is never answered properly is that of whether food security is a public good. It surely is, but politicians won't pay for it.

We should try to process more food locally in the North East rather than doing, as we do now, which is to ship it out to be processed elsewhere. Our production costs are already high.

The EU has had the capacity to police countries that export food to us, but one consequence of Brexit is that we will find it very hard to do that on our own (US chicken and beef is a big problem).

There is a strong case to be made for carbon sequestration and to make base payments for farmers who plant trees etc. - this it may attract government support.

The questions surrounding dairy farming are complex. The poor ruminants are seen as the culprits, but a hundred years ago cattle were slaughtered older and both beef and sheep production was two or three times less productive than it is today. Milk production is also massively more efficient now – fewer cows produce more milk. This means that emissions per unit of food have reduced dramatically. (The number of animals farmed today is very similar that when recording began over a century ago.)

There are three strategic challenges for us:

- Despite the improvements mentioned above, we can still improve productivity. The 1990s were a bad decade for research and the UK still lag behinds some competitors.

- We can improve the environment – habitats and emission levels. Can we achieve carbon-neutrality by 2040?
- We need to improve the nation's health by lessening the incidence of obesity etc. which places huge pressure on the NHS. This is a major challenge.

2021 to 2028 will be a period of transition with a decline of 15% governmental support each year as the principle of public support for public goods is phased in. Defra may allow farmers to apply for support beyond a base level if they address specific environmental concerns.

Each area of Britain has specific issues and species of flora and fauna particular to it. How can we tailor schemes to give us the outcomes we wish in each location, for example for the Tyne Valley or for Weardale?

Can farmers learn to co-operate better? There are pilot schemes for working on a landscape-scale with specific agreed outcomes. These include inviting children to farms, public access – all this represents a massive opportunity for the bill to enable the public to understand the countryside better. A landscape approach can also be the best response approach to address the problem of who pollutes water courses – something that can be difficult to decide and determine.

Supply chain relationships have to become more transparent especially where supermarkets, which have a tendency to abuse their power, are the main customers. How do farmers get a better deal in the market place?

Lord Curry re-emphasised that we face a decade of change and probably turmoil that will challenge the ability of farmers to change. This will be particularly hard for older farmers who typify the industry in stock-rearing areas in upland regions. What help will they need? How can they learn to grapple with concepts like natural capital?

There is question about the government's capacity to cope with the necessary changes needed in IT and its capacity to cope with trade post Brexit.

(Lord Curry joked in an aside that in the Old Testament story of Lot, Lot might be seen as a Remainer. Should we say, 'Off you go and don't look back?!')

In the new bill it would be good to add the word 'appropriateness' in relation to the use of land. Nature and production must go together.

Lord Curry responded by saying that whenever governments intervene they tend to mess up. Natural capital should help inform what people do; but if people are to be rewarded for what they do, logic suggests that it should be for what they do well.

Other public bodies, such as County Councils and Natural England also complicate things to the extent that no-one truly takes ownership for, shares or agrees plans of action. In this context, might Brexit prove a catalyst to address such long-ignored issues?

'Can wool become a speciality of the area again?'

Lord Curry agreed and said that the Prince of Wales has encouraged wool production. Lord Curry added that we should try to see what we can do, but we face stiff competition from cheap, imported alternatives to wool.

'Have we something to learn from the New Zealand experience, where subsidies were scrapped and space was left for the expansion of other agricultural sectors, including viticulture? [N.B. Wine production is not yet a viable proposition in Northumberland, despite climate change! Ed.]

Lord Curry commented that the experience was painful for many in New Zealand. 10% of farms went out of business or were declared bankrupt, but a significant devaluation in the NZ dollar cushioned the blow. A national flock of around 70 million sheep was reduced by over 50%, but the number of dairy farms increased and there was an increase in the production of kiwi fruit, as well as the growth of viticulture. There was a re-focusing aided by science, new products and improved skills. There was an improvement in productivity aided by knowledge within the farming industry of global markets.

Lord Curry felt a parallel change could not happen here. In New Zealand the turn round was aided by less consumer pressure and a less vocal animal welfare lobby.

He emphasised again that older farmers will, however, need help to change and some should think hard about whether or not they should carry on. The right skills are crucial and the decision to take up agriculture as a career can't be a last resort, instead it needs to be presented, he argued, as exciting and linked to a striving for excellence.

In the UK the problems of the 1990's were partly caused by a cutback in applied research. This coincided with a decade of food scares and disease: BSE, e-coli and Foot and Mouth. Lord Curry argued that there were few if any young soil scientists being trained – and attracted to train - and the public reputation of science was low – evidenced by reaction to GM experiments.

How do we protect Council Council farms that allow tenancies to be available to young people who wish to have a career in farming?

Lord Curry emphasised the need to encourage young people to study agriculture and wondered if it is now time to establish a professional body in agriculture and horticulture that encourages career progression and organises continual professional development. He said that starter farms have disappeared because they were not economically viable. There is a need to persuade large corporate bodies and land owners to subsidise them - The National Trust and Duchy of Cornwall estates have shown this is possible.

Rural Issues

Lord Curry, who is chair of the Prince's Countryside Fund, began the third part of the conversation by saying that there is renewed concern for rural issues in the UK, for example in thinking how the Government's industrial strategy will relate to rural issues. He also cited The Prince's Countryside Fund's own report: Recharging Rural, which looks into what can make rural communities in the UK sustainable in spite of the adversities they face. He has more recently contributed to a House of Lords Select Committee report on the rural economy which is to be launched formally later in April. He urged the meeting to read the whole report when it is published and not just the summary. The Rural Services Network has also published a recent report: 'It's Time for a Rural Strategy.'

Rural areas have an aging population with more older people moving to the countryside. Rural living is seen as a reward, a change of lifestyle, but rural areas face a change in public services. Banks are closing and there are fewer cash points; where there are new housing estates there can also be infrastructure problems; roads are riddled with pot holes; digital connectivity is poor; market towns

are losing their high streets; there is a lack of affordable housing. Doing nothing is not an option. Lord Curry therefore posed three questions:

1. What is the role of national government?
2. What is the role of local government and local enterprise partnerships (LEPs)?
3. What is the role of local communities and parish councils?

Discussion followed about the role of national government:

Is there a need to increase funding – to effect rural proofing?

We've centralised governmental structure over the last forty years. Does central government now need to get out of the way? The Glendale Gateway Trust is an example of local action that can make a difference.

Is it time for an English or Northern Irish parallel to the Fairer Scotland Duty (interim guidance for public bodies published by the Scottish Government)?

Will devolution really remove divisions?

Rowan Williams has argued that we need to rediscover the idea of the 'common good' – but our adversarial system of politics does not help.

Lord Curry agreed with this last point. He argued that David Cameron's 'big society' idea was fine, but the then government failed to back it up with any meaningful action.

He argued that the government needs to have a rural strategy and suggested that this represents a major challenge for government to work across departments. We should become enthused about what we can do in rural areas, the 'digital village', but adequate broadband cover is essential.

The Shared Prosperity Fund is set to replace EU funding, but as yet there are few details about how this will work. It will be administered through the LEPs. How, he asked, can we come up with local solutions?

Better communication across tiers of government, though austerity has made this even more difficult.

Central government gives powers but not enough money to carry them out.

There is a need for two-way communications if LEPs are to really know their patch.

Money, even for rural roads, is controlled by the centre. Like a Caribbean country funds are released only at election time.

Village halls need to be used more effectively.

Better mental health support is needed in rural areas.

Some local organisations work well (e.g. The Glendale Gateway Trust), others do not – for example, Seahouses Community Trust. We need to learn more from best practice.

In funding applications the loudest voices win; we need a more equitable way of distributing funding.

The Key Performance Indicator for LEPs is to get rid of money – it's easier for them to give to big players.

Lord Curry agreed that we need to improve communications between public bodies and within government and need better vehicles to do so. The House of Lord's report will draw attention to this problem. There is, he said, a lack of understanding about LEPs and what they do. Some do a very good job (they work especially well in the South West and the North East is better served than many areas), but better engagement is still needed at the local level in rural communities.

There is always a risk that when there is a change of government there is an associated change in structures. Different parties have different models of working. It is crucial that rural areas have their due share of funding, even if this is spent on a myriad of small projects. Key Performance Indicators need to be extended to look at community resilience etc. – with different metrics from urban investment.

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