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## **Agrexite – the phoney war**

**By Thomas Lines**

In this phoney war of Brexit, we remain in a state of expectancy. The action will begin soon, of course, but it is hard to guess at its character or consequences.

In agriculture, however, people are looking for a new departure, to put an end to an agricultural policy that the country would frankly never have chosen of its own accord. In 1973 the CAP was there, ready made, obliging Edward Heath's government to abandon the national policies which had operated very well for a quarter of a century. In the rising food prices that followed, after more than a century of cheap food, are found the germs of the great decision of last June 23<sup>rd</sup>.

A new departure, then. But where to? That is what we don't know. There are ideas, proposals, a sense that the first decisions will count for a lot, but nothing clear either in the Government or anywhere else. There can be no return to the post-war system: neither the intervention or, indeed, wholesale replacement of markets which it included, nor the dependence on its historical suppliers are possible any more.

### **55% of farm income**

What, then? Maybe recreate the free market, get rid of the rules that constrain farmers and go for an American scale of operation? 'Most farmers do not want to have a subsidy' – this is the well-judged opinion, quoted by the *Financial Times*, of Minette Batters, Deputy Chairman of the only major agricultural union (the NFU) and tenant of a beef farm near Salisbury. She voted, like many farmers, to leave the European Union.

But how can we live without subsidies, when the CAP in 2015 provided 55% of UK farm incomes, in free fall with a real decline of 24% in one year? That would bring a whole host of farms to their knees, when their number had already reduced by 4% from 2010 to 2014.

Some would be quite content to see the death of a large number of the farms, permitting the countryside to return to a state of nature. After all, British agriculture represents only 0.7% of GNP and 1.1% of employment and provides only 60% of the country's food needs. A good many inhabitants of these islands – urbanised for generations past – see in the countryside merely an agreeable place for walks, second homes and country pubs.

### **Agrexite remains confused**

Others recommend the promotion of organic or conservation agriculture, a far cry from the productionism of the CAP. The Oxford Real Farming Conference, an expression of this line of thought, has quickly become the largest agricultural get-together in the country, with 850 participants. However, these ideas attract little interest at the highest levels of the NFU and the Government.

At those levels, there is also little enthusiasm for another change that would certainly find a popular echo: if subsidies continue, concentrate them on small farms rather than big ones. But that is of no interest to the landed aristocrats or the agrofood companies, not to mention the NFU, which mainly represents better-off farmers. Nine months after the referendum, 'Agrexite' remains as confused as Brexit in general. George Eustice, the minister responsible for agriculture, born into a farming family and a former UKIP candidate, no longer seems very confident in his dreams of a scorched earth policy. We seem to have entered a phoney war which could go on for a while yet...

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