

In Britain today only about 400,000 people work full time on the land. Of these 160,000 are hired workers, 200,000 are farmers (tenants, land-owners and managers) and the rest are members of the farmers' families. Thus Britain, with a total population of 56 millions, has a smaller proportion of its citizens engaged in agriculture than has any other country, be it industrialised or what is now called, optimistically or euphemistically, "developing".

Yet notwithstanding this tiny labour force, food production in Britain is greater than ever before. Were we content with the diet enjoyed by all but the greediest and most prosperous individuals a hundred years ago, we should already be more than self supporting in all foods except things like tea and coffee which do not flourish in our temperate climate. We could survive a seige better than in the last war, when we had a smaller population to feed and nearly three times as many people working on our farms.

Farmers are, however, worried, because the small number of workers means that the industry has little political power. There is probably no single parliamentary constituency in even the most rural part of Britain where the votes of farmers, farm workers and their families would substantially affect the chances of election or rejection of a Member of Parliament.

Thus my own constituency of Huntingdonshire is perhaps the one which is most dependent on agriculture. At the last election the sitting member, Sir David Renton (Conservative) had a majority of nearly ten thousand votes. In this area there are 1,391 farmers, smallholders and market gardeners, and about the same number of employed farm workers. A few of these are below voting age, quite a number are single, and the total strength of the voting force is probably under five thousand. We do not know exactly how these

Farming lobby



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people voted in the past, or how they will vote in the future. Large scale farmers are mostly traditionally Conservative, the workers trade union is to the left of the Labour Party, many smallholders are Liberal in their sympathies, so the farming vote is likely to be split. But even if 100% turned out for one candidate, the total would be less than half the present member's majority.

It is partly because their political power is so reduced that British farmers are making greater efforts to develop public interest and sympathy towards their problems. Many thousands of the general public attended the recent Royal Agricultural Show, where various entertainments were provided as well as displays of traditional farming activities. Up and down the country smaller county and district shows set out to cater for the non-farming public, giving them an enjoyable day out and a painless education at the same time. The town dweller at least learns that milk does not originate in bottles and tins, and that their daily bread comes from an arable crop which has its own pest and disease problems.

A recent development has been the organisation of "farm trails". On a Sunday afternoon in late June I went

along to a large arable farm in the fens near to my home. A conducted tour started off every hour. I joined about 150 miscellaneous men, women and children, from town and country. We mounted trailers to be drawn by enormous tractors around the fifteen hundred acre farm. The arrangements went smoothly, though the farm roads were bumpy, and one tractor (alas, the only British made model) broke down and its load had to crowd onto the four other trailers. We covered several miles on this totally arable farm. We saw fields of wheat, sugar beet, potatoes and green beans. At strategic points we stopped to be addressed by our guide, who explained what each crop was, and the main problems it presented. We were told why they kept no farm animals. We saw immense modern machines, for instance one to harvest beans (for freezing) which cost over £50,000 and was only used for about ten days in each year.

The crops, though not yet ready for harvest, were superb. It was obvious that yields would be greatly above the national average. Those who criticise large farms for being unproductive, in yield per acre, should have been there. Hardly a weed remained in the crops, though odd corners of fields were left uncultivated or planted with native trees and shrubs to encourage wildlife. Even a few hedges remained. This may be the "agribusiness" which many of my conservationist friends so criticise, but we could see how good farmers maintain and improve the fertility of their soil, and even care for the countryside and for the conservation of wildlife. In the depression in the nineteen thirties this farm was derelict, no one was prepared to work it even at the lowest rent. It is now producing enough food to feed all the population of a small town, and its yields continue to grow year after year. The demonstration was evidently an excellent exercise in public relations.

curtailed aid programmes to Uganda and Bolivia.

On the grounds of development alone, Vietnam is regarded by the US as well as Britain as being entitled to substantial aid. But there is little chance of the US supplying official aid in the near future. 1978 is an election year, and officials say that aid for Vietnam is too controversial an issue at present.

Vietnam and the US have not established diplomatic relations; both governments insist on certain preconditions before normal relations can be

restored. Senate officials have been assured, however, that unofficial links between scientists and institutions will not be opposed. Some US scientists are not convinced of the interest of Vietnamese scientists in such exchanges; offers of funding for study in the US have not aroused much response, and several scientists who visited Vietnam in the hope of studying the effects of herbicide spraying found the Vietnamese unhelpful. Such an attitude, however, is not without its political overtones (see *Nature* 271, 597; 1978). For this reason, some

scientists consider that it would be rash to prejudge the Vietnamese on their sensitivity over this issue.

US and UK attitudes to aid to Vietnam are unlikely to have disastrous consequences for Vietnam's current development programme. There could be problems, however, if more countries adopt similar policies. In this case Vietnam's scientists, desperately struggling to overcome the ravages of war on their research programmes would be some of the first to suffer. It is political decisions which will determine the outcome. **Alastair Hay**