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PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
THIRTEENTH  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
OF AGRICULTURAL  
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The Economist and Farm People  
in a Rapidly Changing World

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## CONCLUSION AND REVIEW

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### STOCKTAKING

L. K. ELMHIRST

*U.K., Founder President*

WE have been busy at this our Thirteenth Conference sharing the wide variety of our ideas around the problem of 'The Economist and farm people in a rapidly changing world'. The very heart and foundation of our association, as of this meeting, is our need, and duty, to share and to digest these ideas. Why? Because new ideas tend to be disturbing to old institutions, to old establishments. New ideas are bound to be critical of events and of persons.

'Facts', says Acton the historian, 'must yield to ideas'. 'Ideas', says Whitehead the philosopher, 'won't keep. Something must be done about them. The idea must constantly be seen in some new aspect. The meaning of life is adventure.'

We have been faced for ten days with any number of new ideas as well as with old ideas freshly stated. 'Can the present runaway increase in the human population of the world be brought within control?' Perhaps! If we are sufficiently determined. Once its numbers and rate of increase are under control, can humanity be fed? Yes, if our new finds, in biology, in breeding, in the use of new pesticides, fertilizers, and machines can be brought into economic, healthy, and universal use.

In Bihar, in India, I met an Indian lady doctor engaged in promoting family planning among farm and village women. 'I was nearly stoned out of a village yesterday', she said. 'The women had heard about me. They shouted at me. "Don't come any nearer. You say we are not to bear children any more".—'On the contrary', I answered, 'I have come to tell you the good news that you can have all the children you want and no more, and when you want them, and that you need no special equipment that is not in your homes already. I am ready too to train all the village midwives in how to help you to use it.'

'But' they said, 'this is wonderful news. We have too many children, so many that our husbands stay out all night drinking or finding other women. Children used to earn. Now they go to school if we can afford to clothe and feed them, but there are too many.' 'What method do you use?' I asked.

'I researched', she said, 'into the methods used by our professional dancing-girls who cannot afford to have children. It works and with

reasonable care, is a hundred per cent successful, harmless and with no disturbance to the man.'

How right Mr. Virone is when he says it is on the farm and in the villages where the good news is needed and is still not available. Since nine-tenths of the women of the world in farm families are still beyond the reach of qualified doctors, why not, as this doctor said, train and use the village midwives? Every village has one.

Where then is the main obstacle to the building of a new world that might be fit to live in? In the mind, in our own failure, as many economists here have said, so to comprehend the working of the mind of the farmer and of his wife and of farm managers, that as yet we are unable to meet the legitimate needs and preferences of the farm family in a rapidly changing world. Are we, I must ask, in our sole pursuit of the productivity of labour and the improvement of credit and of markets, seeing our role as economists in large enough terms, whether the farm is 0.5 of a hectare or 5,000?

The emphasis here at Sydney upon hard cash as the sole criterion of human value and achievement for the farm family is surely significant. Hardly a hint has been given by anyone that there might be values and qualities for human aspiration, other than the search for gold, so deeply engraved in the history of this country. It is as though all the efforts, out of the past, by John Calvin, John Knox, and the Puritan Fathers, to save us from the flames of hell in the hereafter, had won the day and that the *sole* concern of farm people from now on must be as the old English farm song runs: 'to shear our lambs and ewes and rams, and gather our gold together'.

Are we narrowing unduly our horizon? Are we still flexible enough? Around what other profession but ours can nucleate all the ancillary services, farm people, and city people, need and demand from the land, services offered by the physical scientists, the extension men, the psychologists, the sociologists, the anthropologists, and the town and country planners? But to what ultimate end? Can the economist keep his eye on the whole ensemble and, like a good orchestra conductor, lead in each instrument at exactly the moment the rhythm of life requires? By our training and experience, it is we who are most accustomed to meeting, and to knowing at first hand, the individual farmer, his wife and kids, the 'farm people', on the farm and in the field. We, too, know something of the range of satisfactions in pursuit of which city people drive head to tail for hours and miles, at the weekend. In this rapidly changing world we are going to be challenged to apply what I shall term shot-gun economics in every kind of emergency, as in a shot-gun wedding, the effort to marry an urgent human need to a blessing from above.

In my thanks, at the opening to the Governor General of Australia, I referred to a time in August 1942, when the sound of General Rommel's guns could already be heard in Egypt, and when three of us, a Scot, an American, and a Yorkshireman, all agricultural economists, were flown out on a mission, urgently to visit every country in the Middle East and

to warn each government that their people must be ready to face famine conditions, unless they could quickly become more self-sufficient in home-grown foodstuffs and not dependent any longer on imports by sea from abroad.

In the first country, they protested: 'But we have never grown wheat before. We're far too near to the equator, so we have to import it.'

'You have an experiment station', we answered, 'still and in spite of the war, fully staffed with natural scientists who tell us that the local farmers are always clamouring at their door for new things before the final tests are finished. See what you can do.'

By the end of the next growing season that country had ceased altogether to be an importer of wheat.

The next government had, in spite of the war, decided to double the acreage of cotton and to store the lint or fibre against the day when peace would be declared, hoping then to sell it at a premium. 'But', said they, 'how can our farmers exist unless they grow this cotton? Their only fuel comes from burning the stalks, their only cooking-oil from the crushed seed, on the oil-cake their working buffaloes survive and with the fibre they pay their rent. And they must have their imported nitrates, so *you* must guarantee the arrival of our nitrates by sea. This is not our war.' 'Promise', we said, 'in the coming season, to reduce by one million acres, your land under cotton, and plant them with wheat. If you agree we will see what we can do to get you your fertilizers.'

The farmers met the challenge.

'In an average year', said another government, 'we grow plenty of grain on our upland plains and have a surplus for export. But last winter was exceptionally severe. We not only have no surplus at all, but our transport system has broken down and we are not able to move such grain, as we managed to save, to the people who stand most in need of it. Though neutral in your war, we still have a frontier to guard and an army to feed. We need an import of at least 160,000 tons of grain or we shall face famine conditions. In fact we shall starve.' Did they really need or expect as great a tonnage as that? How severe a winter had it been? Why had their transport system broken down? We were given ten days only in which to travel round, make our inquiries and to decide what to advise in Cairo, London, and Washington.

An old fellow student of mine of twenty years before on the agricultural campus at Cornell had returned to this his home country, to work in extension, to teach and to farm. Could we track him down and ask him to tell us the facts?

By this time in 1942 the British and American Governments had jointly established an organization—the Middle East Supply Centre—for buying up all the rural surpluses in the Middle East, as Joseph did for Pharoah in the Bible, and for holding them against the needs of the civilian population, so as to prevent famine breaking out. From this surplus store, never considerable, a sudden demand for 160,000 tons would have strained the larder to the limit. At some risk we carried out our inquiries and at

last located my old Cornell friend. He confirmed all our own findings, but said that he thought it would be sufficient to release some 60,000 tons, less than half of what had been demanded. This grant was made and proved sufficient to save the situation. 'But', said the officials in the next country, 'you cannot intend to cut us off from our annual import of disease-free potato seed from Scotland. We are absolutely dependent upon it for our next potato crop. Our most recent order has just been shipped and is now on the ocean.' 'Yes', we said, 'and it may never arrive.' The ship was actually sunk the following week. 'What are we to do?' they asked. 'Under your very noses', we said, 'there is a group of your more enterprising farmers which has extracted the refrigerator unit from a domestic "frig" and has installed it in a shed made of straw bales. They are storing their potato seed at a low but even temperature, till it is wanted for planting.' 'We cannot', said another Ministry, 'owing to the war, market our orange crop. What are we to do?' 'Use this as a golden opportunity to tear out your many acres of diseased orange and citrus groves and grow vegetables instead. Silage your surplus oranges for milk production as some of your inventive farmers are already doing.'

'Our total barley crop', said a neighbouring country, 'is being attacked by a bug that hibernates in winter under the oak leaves but in woods the other side of our frontier. The bug returns just in time to suck the barley grain in its milk stage. What are we to do?' 'There is still', we said, 'one entomologist in the Middle East who might be ready to help you. He is an expert at dealing with this very bug. But he happens to be a Jew and your farmers are all Muslims.' 'Never mind', they said, 'if he is ready to come, send him along. We shall probably surname him Mahomet, and thank heaven, he's already circumcized. But can you this winter get him to the other side of the frontier and into the oak forest?'

Two days later we got the promise of a welcome for him and a passport from the Minister of Agriculture in the country next door.

May I suggest to you that the time is almost ripe for the application of this M.E.S.C. idea to the world and to the need of humanity as a whole. By this, I mean the common-sense storage in reserve and timely distribution by an appropriate corporation of all rural surpluses up to universally agreed amounts, but so that all nations take a fair share in a rural surplus insurance system, not so different from the one Lloyd's operates for all the shipping of the world.

M.E.S.C. may not have been wholly an Australian invention, but it was Australians who made it work.

The challenge that met us then is liable to crop up at any time today. Are we to leave it entirely to the luck of the market to achieve a sensible balance between us, the consumers of rubber in all its forms, and the producers, whether synthetic or natural in South-East Asia? Where does the farm family come in in the luck of the draw?

Suddenly, your horizon is widened for you, whether you will or not. It is becoming, as Mr. Virone has said in his excellent summary, increasingly dangerous to go into any rural area with a single new skill or technique, as

if it were a kind of cure-all, without previous reference to the economist. Tractors and machinery may be introduced by pressure salesmen but only serve to induce erosion. Dams are built by engineers before the fields are ready, or they are filled up with silt almost overnight by overgrazing and for want of soil conservation and forestry higher up the slopes. Fertilizers, pesticides, and new varieties are applied that leave only negative results behind. The same one-leg approach can operate on farm people with negative effect because of the complete lack of the appropriate social, political, transport, credit, or marketing infrastructure for giving the farmer a fair return for his investment. The specialist gets busy and applies his nostrum far too often before any over-all assessment of the problem has been made. Who else is to make this over-all assessment but the agricultural economist, if and only if he has retained his intimate contact with the farm people in their homes and on their fields? But, does he still retain this intimacy of contact with farm people, or does he, as one speaker has claimed, employ helots to collect the figures he needs, whilst he operates his shiny computer, in the hope of raising his academic stature. The computer can and will be a wonderful servant, but it is an incompetent master.

In Britain we set up an Agricultural Research Council in 1930 with ample finance. The natural scientists made a quick grab for control and immediately threw out the one agricultural economist on the board as redundant. Too many natural scientists I suspect, with expensive institutes, as Colin Clark has suggested, still run loose without check, while too many agricultural economists are now beginning to huddle around their computers without always knowing the true significance of the figures they feed into them. This will not do. Combined operations on a much broader front and under the economist's eye are needed for the true service of farm people, and of the countryside.

Few natural scientists, economists, or planners, seem yet to concern themselves with the need to find some more workable balance between the urban sprawl and the depopulated countryside. Father de Farcy made an eloquent appeal for more silence, more quiet places of beauty, for cleaner air and purer water, for peace, and for the delights of being alone, perhaps in the forest.

Rabindranath Tagore, for whom I worked in India more than forty years ago, insisted that without the help of science from the West, steady progress towards peace and stability in Asia would be impossible, but that India had always taken for granted that human feeling, emotion, aspiration, and longing for fulfilment, had also to find a constant and lively outlet by re-creation and by individual expression through the Arts. The means to accomplish these ends and to find ever new patterns of delight must be allowed for especially among farm people and village communities, as in the ancient past, through colour, music, dance, drama, poetry, and design.

In the northern part of the county of Devon where I live, rural depopulation today proceeds apace. Farms, thanks to the efforts of agricultural

economists, are becoming larger and more mechanized every day and families smaller. But there are still some ten to fifteen thousand people in the region all mobile. Farm people came to me and my fellow trustees and said, 'When our children leave school, they have no longer any prospect of a job in this area. They disappear to the city. Higher education has opened their eyes and their minds. They can see neither the means to fulfil themselves, nor the opportunity whereby to earn a living, raise a family, or to express in this neighbourhood their individual, social or cultural aspirations. Could you not introduce some light industry?'

After much market research, the trustees decided to erect and to staff, in the main market-town, a new glass factory and to man it for the time being by volunteer craftsmen from Sweden. The meat trade at the same time opened a new abattoir in the same town. But the trustees also bought up an old vicarage and started a centre for the practice of the Arts. In the latter people, and especially young farm people, attend evening classes in a wide variety of the creative arts. They make pots, dye and stamp cloth, discuss taste, they draw or paint or sculpt, they play recorders or sing and dance, yes, to Beatle music. In the nearby town halls, churches, and feudal mansions, concerts, plays, and recitals are given by local amateurs and by city professionals. Are we wrong to pursue the Arts in this way with farm people?

In western Bengal how anxious and worried were those Hindu and Muslim farmers so cursed by monkeys, malaria, and mutual mistrust, and how carefree and happy their primitive tribal landless labourers who seemed to earn only so as to eat and drink and, at full moon to dance, for two or three whole nights and days together—men, women, and kids.

I asked my wife, Dorothy, one of the founders of this Association, how best I could express this idea of hers and of Tagore's that farm people in many parts of the world are still, and will always remain, hungry for some kind of self-expression through the Arts. 'I see Art', she said, 'as a process of continuous discovery, of discovery about ourselves, and about life. Art is always a bringing together. That is why we need it so desperately in this age of division, of the division of knowledge and of life into ever-smaller pieces.'

Our task as agricultural economists is rightly concerned with earning, with, as Dr. Mellor says, the productivity of labour and with objective analysis. It must be. But to what further end? To escape with Calvin and Knox the flames of hell in the hereafter, or to leave this world a trifle more happy and a shade more livable and more beautiful than when we were, not always willingly, thrust into it! Can we begin to think of bringing our varied human skills into some kind of cultural focus? As we contemplate all of our well-gathered and well-digested facts, we shall find that new ideas keep welling up. But ideas will not keep. Something *has* to be done about them, or we drift.

This Conference has been one attempt to deal with ideas on a world scale, to stop the drift. Our meeting was established as an exciting adventure in the field of ideas. May it ever remain so!