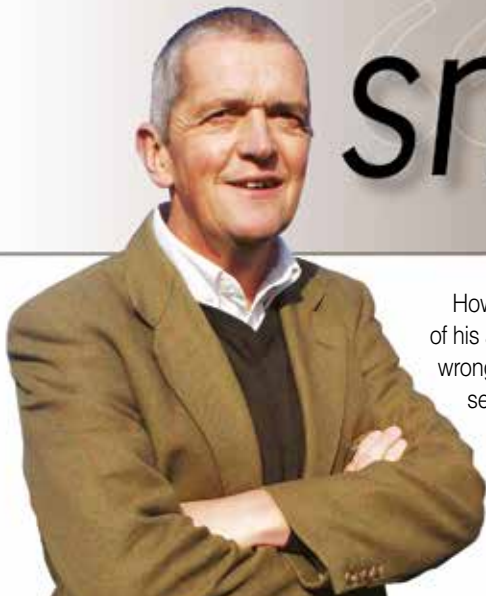


smith's soapbox

by Guy Smith



En marche

I suppose I grew up in the age of the 'demo'. In the 1960s, black and white television screens appeared full of news reports of people gathering to protest about an issue. In our living room, the commentary that usually accompanied these images was mainly my dad's withering remarks along the lines that those attending were, by and large, 'layabouts who ought to get a job'.

However, these strong views of his about the rights and wrongs of demonstrations

seemed to take a u-turn

when in 1971, we waved him off from Colchester Livestock Market along with a coach-load of other farmers.

They were all off to march around Central London to complain about the Labour government's most recent and most measly farm price review. In those days, the annual farm price review determined the value of the main farm commodities through a device called the deficiency payments scheme. The 1970/71 settlement was viewed as unacceptably derisory by most farmers.

That evening, mum and I switched on the six o'clock news in the hope of catching

a fuzzy glimpse of dad among what looked like a mass tumult of placard-wielding farmers streaming through Whitehall.

Wind the clock on 50 years and there I was amidst a soggy throng of farmers in much the same street making our views known about the current Labour government and their plans to abandon APR.

The crowd probably wasn't as great as the turnout in the 1970s, but by modern standards it was impressive enough to make a statement and attract attention. We have to remember here, there are far fewer farmers than there were.

As usual, there was a discrepancy between the official crowd numbers – that being 10,000-15,000 according to the Met Police, compared with the 40,000-50,000 claimed by the organisers. From my vantage point behind the cenotaph, I tried to compare the crowd to the one that turns up at Portman Road now Ipswich Town is in the Premiership. It wasn't exactly a rigorously scientific method, but I thought things seemed comparable at 30,000.

But the key debate about numbers wasn't the size of the crowd in Whitehall, it was the number of farm businesses impacted by the change in BPR and APR. According to the government it's 25%, whereas according to the NFU it's 75%. If you want my explanation as to why these figures are so different, it's fairly simple – the government uses ridiculous metrics, namely the number of registered farm holdings whereby they think there are 210,000 farms in Britain.

If you talk to machinery dealers they'll tell you there are less than 20,000 commercial farm businesses buying farm machinery in the UK. As those of us who've witnessed first-hand the changes in commercial farming in our respective



Farmers on the streets of London in 1971.

parishes during recent decades will relay, the matter of who farms the land has changed dramatically. More importantly, the number of acres required to form a viable farm business has increased dramatically.

The 200-300acre farms that used to characterise the countryside in the 1970s are largely gone. The fact is, this isn't reflected in the official figures because single farm businesses buy up multiple holdings.

If the government knew their onions, they'd realise the £3M cap they've put into place protects smaller units which aren't genuine farm businesses, but rather people protecting wealth from inheritance tax. Meanwhile the 500acre farms find themselves in the eye of the death duties storm which will leave many family farms on the rocks.

Guy Smith grows 500ha of combinable crops on the north east Essex coast, namely St. Osyth Marsh — officially the driest spot in the British Isles. Despite spurious claims from others that their farms are actually drier, he points out that his farm is in the Guinness Book of Records, whereas others aren't. End of.

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