The Group Politics of Farming

‘O farmers excessively fortunate if only they recognised their blessings.’ (Virgil)

Introduction

The sphere of agriculture presents its own specific problems for the comparative analysis of pressure groups. There are differences in the legal relationships of people to land, there are vast differences in institutional structures, and there is an array of cross-cutting cleavages within the agricultural sector. In liberal democratic states there are a number of competing interest groups claiming to represent the interests of the farming community, while in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe there is even doubt about the collective consciousness of such interests, and there are few organisations designed to express the views of those engaged in working the land. The opportunities of the peasant community for expressing their views and making demands on the political leadership appear very few indeed in the socialist states, while in liberal democracies farmers are highly politically active and very visible. Thus while in other chapters we have found it useful to compare and contrast the types of groupings and their resources and strategies, in this instance the contrasts are far more fundamental, and similarities are hard to detect. Thus we shall treat the two general categories of liberal democratic
and socialist states separately throughout most of this discus-
sion.

We can immediately see important areas of contrast if we
look at the relative position of agriculture in the economies of
the capitalist and socialist states. In liberal democracies those
who earn their living from the land form a very small
percentage of the total economically active population, and this
number continues to fall. In the United States at the turn of the
century half the population worked in agriculture; today
farming engages about 3 per cent of the American population.
This figure is comparable to that in Britain and West
Germany. In Italy the figure fell from over 40 million in 1945 to
just over 20 million in the 1970s or about 12 per cent of the
workforce, which is high by comparison to Northern Europe.
In France the proportion is currently about 7 per cent. The fall
in numbers engaged in agriculture has been accompanied by
increased mechanisation and more capital-intensive methods
of farming. As one would expect, this has meant a growth in the
average size of farms, with a tendency for crop and animal
specialisation. The small producer is less and less important
and the rural exodus continues.

The socialist states by contrast retain a substantial agricul-
tural population, although its numbers have been falling
extremely rapidly. Government emphasis on industrialisation
has meant prospects of urban employment, particularly
attractive to young people. Nonetheless there remains a fairly
large rural population; only the GDR and Czechoslovakia are
comparable to Western Europe, with about 8 per cent of their
respective labour forces engaged in farming. In Romania it is
about 44 per cent, in Bulgaria 29 per cent, in Poland 28 per
cent, in the USSR 14.5 per cent, and in Hungary 13 per cent.
There have been similar processes of mechanisation and
intensification, although they are not nearly as far advanced as
in those states with longer histories of sustained industrial
production.

As in the industrial sector, agriculture in the socialist states
was brought into public ownership, a difficult and often violent
process. It entailed not only the legal appropriation of land by
the state, but the forcing of the peasantry into collective modes
of production as opposed to individual, household units. In the