Agricultural Policy and the National Farmers’ Union, 1908–1939

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In 1901 E.H. Howard addressed a meeting of farmers in Lincolnshire, one of the events that was to lead to the formation of the Lincolnshire Farmers’ Union in 1904, and thence to the creation of the National Farmers’ Union (NFU) four years later. Howard told his audience that, with economic conditions continuing to be adverse, especially for arable farmers, it was time for them to combine and defend their interests. ‘We have a perfect right’, he said, ‘to demand with the rest of the nation’s subjects a living wage. We must co-operate into a united body called the British Farmers’ Union . . .’. The new union’s role would be to influence the political world. Thus the purpose of the NFU was clearly defined. The NFU was to be a political campaigning organization from the outset, a creature of the modern world of the twentieth century, in which governments were coming to develop policies covering almost all aspects of life. The Union stated that ‘its principal object is so to influence legislation and the administration of the laws, both national and local, as to protect the farmer against exploitation and to promote the prosperity of his industry’.

The Union’s means of fulfilling its ambitions were a mixture of the old and new. Many of its early efforts went into the lobbying of members of Parliament and parliamentary candidates with its parliamentary programme. It appointed a political lobbyist in 1913. The parliamentary programme was fairly modest in its ambitions, in line with the farmers’ concerns and agricultural policies inherited from the late-nineteenth century. Parliamentarians were thus asked to support increased grants under the Agricultural Rating Act of 1896, increased Exchequer grants for education and roads, amendments to the Agricultural Holdings Acts, and the ending of ‘preferential’ railway rates for foreign agricultural produce.
The NFU declared its neutrality in party politics. All political parties were to be lobbied. In 1913 the Parliamentary Committee proposed that all candidates should be asked to give a pledge that ‘on all agricultural questions they will act independently and free from party’, and that they would join an all-party committee of MPs watching over the interests of agriculture. ‘There should be a great effort on the part of the Farmers’ union to put a stop to the attempt that is being made to put us between the two parties. We want first a party in the House independent of either party.’ The theme of political neutrality was rehearsed with regularity throughout the years. The Union’s President, E.W. Langford, told the Glamorgan branch in 1926: ‘the Union had no politics. The moment it became a political organization … it would begin to decay and go down.’

This was to lead the Union down some blind alleys, notably the attempt to establish an all-party agriculture committee in the House of Commons, the direct sponsorship of MPs, and, worse, the chimera of an independent agrarian party. The Union’s constitution included the aim ‘to secure the representation of farmers by practical men in the Legislative and Administrative Councils of the Kingdom’. Like other groups that had come before it, the NFU wanted to see agriculture represented in Parliament by real farmers rather than the self-appointed ‘farmers’ friends’ from among the gentry members. A parliamentary fund was opened in 1909. When the Executive Committee agreed to open this fund, one of the members urged that ‘the time had come for the Union to look for direct representation in parliament’. The theme was repeated in the following years. Colin Campbell told the annual general meeting in 1917 that they must get ‘some direct representation in Parliament at the earliest possible moment’. This was essential if the enhanced standing of agriculture as a national industry was to be retained after the war. The aftermath of the repeal of the Agriculture Act of 1920 led to a resurgence of interest in parliamentary representation, which reached its peak in the general election of 1922. As the election approached, union leaders continually reminded their members in the branches that the government’s about-turn on its agricultural policy made it imperative for agriculturalists to want a greater say in ‘shaping of their destinies by Parliament’. The Union’s efforts met with some success, for, of seven union members directly supported as candidates, four were elected: F.N. Blundell (Ormskirk), Robert Bruford (Wells), J.Q. Lamb (Stone, Staffs.) and E.W. Shepperson (Leominster). However, the fact that the elected members stood as Conservatives, whereas the unsuccessful