

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE RELU CONFERENCE

by John Lloyd Jones

Firstly, there was a palpable sense of excitement amongst the research community that inter-disciplinary research was happening, and all sides could see a mutual benefit. A huge plus.

Secondly, it was vital that the Conference set out the Policy context. That was done well since you managed to persuade a number of interesting speakers to attend.

As a generalisation, CAP mid term reform will free up agricultural systems and lead to more individual choice as to what individual farmers will do with their land. However various Directives like the Habitats and Water Framework Directives will influence land operations, the balance between pillar one and pillar two money, especially the percentage allocations across the four component parts of pillar two will influence individual choice and the development of the rural economy. What appears to be minor details like the presumption against increase in woodland cover and the need to conserve permanent pasture, both driven by mainland European concerns, not necessarily British and especially not Welsh concerns! will be a further constraint. Therefore it was important that the Research Community had an opportunity to hear this debate.

A few other issues were raised in the general discussion: the distorting effect of public intervention in the rural economy on established businesses. The political reflex is often the social imperative of either supporting failing businesses or to encourage new and sometimes inappropriate industries, often in the face of economic rationale and sometimes to the detriment of existing concerns.

The contradiction of trying to stimulate an entrepreneurial culture through a bureaucratic system. The challenges of knowledge transfer within this new climate compared to the fairly simple historical systems of transferring greater efficiency and improved working methods within the old land based industries; (if I have good idea for a rural business why should I share that knowledge with my neighbour who may become my competitor within that immediate locality. The most lucrative business I ever had was supplying hay for gerbil owners at 50p a bag, unfortunately after three bales of hay, I had flooded the market!)

The conundrum of economically deprived communities living in areas of highest environmental value which are “cherished” by more affluent communities when the indigenous communities see their environmental designation as a barrier to their economic and social progress.

As to the section on Integrated Food Chains Research Reviews, I was heartened and excited as a potential end use “user” both from a policy and practical viewpoint.

However three points struck me during these presentations:

Are we giving sufficient weight within research projects to sustainable food production given that security of supply across all of society is a recent and not hopefully a temporary phenomenon confined to advanced countries.

Is the research community showing a “class bias” towards organic production given its relative unimportance within British food production.

Is there a danger that we simplify our individual action with the food supply chain and perceive it to be a constant. A “large” in both meanings of the population will continue to buy in a global market where price and convenience are dominant. A much smaller section will buy organic, local and traceable products through outlets like farmers markets. A growing number will flit in between, influenced by the weekday/weekend demands, time constraints and personal circumstances. The challenge is to move more of the first group towards the third group and to get the third group to behave increasingly like the second group.

Warmest congratulations to you all for a most stimulating event.