

Letter from Henry Plumb to James Prior (18 June 1971)

Caption: On 18 June 1971, President of the British National Farmers' Union, Henry Plumb, writes a letter to British Agriculture Minister, James Prior, requesting more precise information on the progress of negotiations on the United Kingdom's accession to the European common market.

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Letter from NFU President Mr. Henry Plumb to Minister of Agriculture the Rt Hon James Prior, 18 June 1971

During the course of a prolonged debate in my Council yesterday on the Common Market, it became clear that before they declared their position on the outcome of the negotiations they would wish to have more precise information than has yet been made available. My Council were anxious that I should put on record some of the more important matters on which they would wish to have specific assurances. This I think is clearly brought out in the resolution which they adopted and a copy of which I enclose.

I would like first to refer to the Annual Review. The Council is, of course, already aware of the provisional agreement reached between the Government and the EEC and has noted Mr. Rippon's view that the arrangements '... would ensure effective contacts with producers ...'. My Council would be grateful if you could enlarge on this. Would you interpret the provisional agreement to mean that the enlarged Community would adopt a price review procedure broadly analogous to that currently operating in the United Kingdom? The Council would hope to have an undertaking that the Government intend to press for a Community regulation under which the Price Review procedure would be given formal status.

There would thus be a specific commitment under which the Commission and the representative producer organisation (an enlarged COPA) would examine the economic conditions of the industry each year before the Commission draws up its proposals on prices and general farm policy. Economists of the farm organisations would be consulted on the collation of the statistical data on which the joint examination would be based. Further - and this the Union regards as being of the utmost importance - farmers' representatives would have an opportunity to make their views known directly to the Council of Ministers before decisions were taken for the following year.

I should perhaps add that the whole subject of the Annual Review has been discussed by us with the Praesidium of COPA and that our views have their unqualified support.

Secondly, my Council is most concerned about the future of our producer marketing boards. You have told me that in the course of the negotiations, the representatives of the Six have had the opportunity on a number of occasions to raise any objections they might have over the continued operations of these boards and that, in fact, no objections have been lodged. We also note the assurances that have been given over certain of the important functions now carried out by the Milk Marketing Boards. Although we welcome these assurances, the nature of the boards has never been raised directly with the Six and while I appreciate that there has been much good sense in this approach, it inevitably leaves an area of doubt as to whether the boards would in fact be able to continue to operate as statutory boards with disciplinary powers. My Council regard this as crucial to their effective functioning.

I should like therefore to have your assurance that the Government share this view and that, should the position be challenged in the future, the Government would defend the maintenance of the boards' existing powers. Incidentally, we believe that the composition and function of the boards is still not fully understood either by the Six or by the Commission. We did our best at our meetings with COPA this week to explain the position and found that they were in agreement with us on the fundamental principles.

My third point covers the production grants. You are already fully aware of the vital importance of our present hill and upland grants and I trust that after the forthcoming round of UK/EEC negotiations you will be able to give us a firm assurance that they will be continued either as they stand or in some other form of direct income support. There are, in addition, many other grants essential to the well-being of the industry. In our view these are generally compatible with the common agricultural policy and I would welcome your confirmation of this opinion. My Council's anxiety here is that the Government might possibly seek to make savings so far as some of these grants are concerned in order to help offset the cost of contributions it will have to make to the Community's financial fund. I should like to hear from you that these fears are unfounded.

Perhaps here I should refer to the problem relating to wool. As we understand it, since wool is regarded as an industrial product in the Community and therefore not susceptible to the rules covering the common agricultural policy, there could be no objection to the continuance of the existing price guarantee arrangements. Would it be the Government's intention to take advantage of this situation in order to help maintain stability in this sector?

I now turn to the arrangements for the transitional period. My Council would like to have a clear assurance that the Government will be free to make use, promptly and effectively, of the safeguard measures which have been agreed in general terms with the Ministers of the Six. In particular we would like you to confirm - what we believe must have been the intention that our Government could act initially on its own initiative in the same way as the national governments of the Six were empowered to act during their transitional period. Obviously this is of the utmost importance so far as perishable products are concerned where producers could suffer severe damage if safeguarding measures had to be delayed pending consideration by the Community institutions.

Unfortunately, whatever safeguard measures are taken in the transitional period farmers and growers in some sectors of the industry would be likely to face a serious loss of business as a result of United Kingdom membership of the Common Market. My Council regards it as only right and proper that in such cases the State should pay adequate compensation. I hope that the White Paper will make it clear that this is the Government's intention.

There are of course other issues, especially affecting commodities which have not been the subject of discussion between the Government and the Six during the negotiations for EEC entry on which we would like to have your views. I refer specifically to the arrangements for Community preference during the transitional period. While we appreciate that the mechanism has not been fully worked out for individual products it already seems clear that the technique so far envisaged could produce many problems; we are particularly concerned about the implications for producers of eggs and table poultry. I hope that these matters can be explored initially in the very near future through discussions between my people and yours so that I can refer to you any outstanding matters of major concern.

It may well be that the White Paper will provide much of the information and many of the assurances which my Council seek. However, as the White Paper will no doubt be concerned with a wide range of subjects, it is doubtful that it could cover agriculture and horticulture in great detail. I would be most grateful, therefore, if you would supplement the White Paper by a letter which would enable me to satisfy the Council on the matters I have outlined.