

THE FEA AT THE LANDSDOWNE CLUB

October 17 2014

Immediate thoughts on where we go from here by Colin Tudge

Last Friday's meeting – the general buzz, the range of people and expertise, the presentations, and several conversations, have left me feeling that the sky's the limit. FEA's achievement so far is wondrous and – given that my own direct contribution is rather small! – I am very grateful to be part of it. Progress so far has shown that FEA really can change people's lives, or at least help them to overcome hurdles that might otherwise prove insuperable, and hence – since the initiatives we engage with are social enterprises – it can transform communities. As one of our advisers said afterwards, this is a very important venture.

I should leave others, closer to the coal face, to decide on the immediate way ahead for the FEA: how FEA might be financed (two of the delegates said we should find ways to be self-financing, for example); how quickly we can realistically grow; what staff we will need (the immediate priority must be to hang on to the present team); how many meetings we should hold (Quarterly? Half-yearly? Annually? Ad hoc?), and of what kind; how we can continue to build alliances (cooperation is all!); what more we can do to take our message to the outside world; and so on. Clearly, the foundations are strong and the immediate potential is already obvious.

But I would like to make one or two observations re the future – and to outline one further initiative that I believe is necessary in its own right, and will complement and underpin the FEA.

On the potential of the FEA itself

1: *Enlightened Agriculture must become the global norm.*

Enlightened Agriculture is not conceived simply as another form of “alternative” farming among several, nor as a mere gadfly. The concept of Enlightened Agriculture (EA) is rooted in the most fundamental principles that in practice shape the world (despite best efforts to override them). These principles are those of biology/ ecology and of morality based on compassion, *assisted* (not led) by a variety of financial and legal mechanisms that together form what has been called “economic democracy” (social enterprise, positive investment, ethical banking). As such it engages with or embraces other farming

initiatives of a benign kind, including organic agriculture, permaculture, biodynamics, and the many political/ social movements worldwide that seek to re-humanize farming.

The first step for FEA and our fellow travellers is to create a true alternative to the mainstream, as opposed simply to a niche. But the grand ambition must be for EA to become the norm. Farming that's rooted in sound principles of biology and morality really could keep humanity and the biosphere in good heart for the next million years (for starters), while farming founded in economic dogma, whether it's that of Stalin or Mao or of neoliberalism, always loses sight of the fundamentals – of what it is actually *for* -- and always ends in tears (as, spectacularly, the neoliberal kind is now demonstrating).

2: *FEA and Agrarian Renaissance*

The shift now required in agriculture is monumental: away from industrial, capital intensive, high-tech, minimum-to-zero-labour monoculture on the biggest possibly scale, totally oil-dependent and controlled by a small power-group, towards the precise opposite: low-input polyculture that performs complex and performs skills-intensive, in which there may be little or no advantage in scale-up, in which control is many-centred.

The evidence already indicates that the resultant farms – small, mixed, quasi-organic, with lots of farmers, plus appropriate markets and processors – could feed the world *easily*, and could do so sustainably through thick and thin, while the industrial kind do not and cannot. Indeed this observation, though precisely at odds with the main stream, finds support at the highest level – not least from the new United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Hilal Elver. In Amsterdam on September 24, in her first public speech since her appointment in June, Prof Elver pointed out that 80% of EU subsidies and 90% of research funds support “conventional” (industrial) agriculture. Yet "Empirical and scientific evidence shows that small farmers feed the world. According to the UN Food & Agricultural Organisation (FAO), 70% of food we consume globally comes from small farmers". But on present trends, by 2050 “75% of the entire human population will live in urban areas. We must reverse these trends by providing new possibilities and incentives to small farmers, especially for young people in rural areas."

Structurally the kind of mixed, small, skills-intensive farms that the world really needs may seem old-fashioned but conceptually they are far ahead of the industrial kind, rooted as it is in 18th and 19th century dreams of omniscience and omnipotence. Enlightened farms may often partake of the highest of high technologies and the subtlest science but the science and high tech are always geared to the needs of the farm, the ecosystem, and the community; not to the needs of those primarily concerned with overall control and short-term profit.

The practical task is to shift from big monocultures controlled from above to small polycultures controlled by networks of communities. Big governments and corporates are not going to make this shift. They are committed to the status quo. People at large, all of us, must do what needs doing for ourselves.

FEA is one of various initiatives worldwide that are helping to create the kinds of farms and related enterprises that the world really needs – though as far as we know it is the only one specifically dedicated to the (ethical) financing of small, appropriate farms and related enterprises. The point is not to attack the status quo for the sake of it, or simply to ask the status quo to change its ways, but to build the alternative *in situ* in the spirit of what can properly be called renaissance: a people-led Agrarian Renaissance.

3: *Land ownership: babies and bathwater.*

Many at the meeting stressed that although land ownership seems highly desirable, seeming to give a lifetime's control, it also has disadvantages and in general is not the be-all and end-all. Usufruct – “use of the fruits” – and security of tenure are more important in practice.

This is all very sensible but let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater. One obstacle to land ownership is the present price of land – around £10,000 an acre or £25,000 per hectare. Combine that with the modern industrial idea that farms need to be vast to be economically viable and the cost seems prohibitive. (100 acres was still big when I was at *Farmers' Weekly* in the early 1970s. Now it is definitely at the bottom end).

In reality, we know at least one market gardener in Oxfordshire who makes an apparently reasonable living from two acres. So two acres well managed and in the right place might reasonably be seen as the smallest viable unit. I like the idea of the community-owned village or neighbourhood market garden/smallholding – which, so a local planner suggests would be a very good way of protecting the now threatened green belt. A holding of five acres can make a huge difference to a village – the cuisine, the social life, the economy. That should cost only £50K – the price of an outhouse, and that, for a village, would be trivial. If every village and suburban neighbourhood in Britain had its own community smallholding, and especially if those village and neighbourhood holdings engaged and formed partnerships with the local farmers, that would become a significant presence in the overall farming scene.

On the grander scale, half of Britain's farmland is owned by well under one per cent of Britain's people. Even without getting too political, this does not seem to be in the spirit of democracy. Again, largely because of the price of land, a wholesale shift towards community ownership seems off the agenda – but again, simple arithmetic suggests that it need not be.

Thus, the area of land in Britain officially called “agricultural” is 18 million hectares. Given that Britain’s population is heading for 72 million (just to keep the arithmetic simple) this means we have 0.25 hectares each – which is easily enough to ensure that Britain could be entirely self-reliant (which does not mean totally self-sufficient. Trade is still worthwhile and necessary). With land at £25K per hectare this works out at £6000 per head – a trivial sum when paid back over a lifetime. Furthermore, we needn’t buy all of it. Some is already community-owned and some of what’s now in private hands is managed very beautifully – so we could probably achieve the shift that’s needed for £3000 a head. In short, any attempt to bring about a people’s buy-out of all Britain’s farmland would face many obstacles but price need not be one of them.

It would help, though, of course, to have a government sympathetic to democracy. Governments that treat land as a global commodity do not work in their people’s best interests.

4: From small time to big time

Two of Friday’s delegates in particular pointed to a big potential issue: the kinds of sums that FEA needs to support the small to medium-sized enterprises it favours are too small to interest big, mainstream investors. So it seems we are forever cut off from mainstream money, although we are told there is a great deal of money about – rich individuals and institutions looking for good things to do with it.

To be sure, the enterprises we favour *are* small. But if we put them all together, and think of the thousands and tens or hundreds of thousands of small enterprises that need to be set up asap, and which will become the norm, then the total financial potential is enormous; and as the oil dwindles and climate change becomes ever more obvious the world as a whole will see that nothing is more important than agricultural re-construction.

Can we not create packages out of FEA’s enterprises to attract the big time? This of course is part of the thinking behind the proposed fund – so FEA is already on the case.

A bigger potential obstacle is the low rate of return typically offered by the kind of enterprises we want to support. But if the world begins to realize that agriculture should not be treated just as one more route to short-term profit but is the sine qua non, the enterprise in the end on which all else depends, and we have to get it right, then perhaps the mind-set will change. In truth, too, once up and running, social enterprises can give good returns.

5: What else is needed? The College for Enlightened Agriculture

All in all, then, FEA is brilliant and its potential is huge. Nothing huger.

But it needs more underpinning. In particular, even the brief meeting on October 17 revealed great gaps in basic knowledge at all areas and, often, a lack of necessary mechanisms – technological, legal, financial, whatever. Where the know-how and the mechanisms do exist, there is a lack of communication (or at least we could do with a lot more). Glaring, too, is the lack of *people*. To install the kind of farms that should be the norm Britain now needs at least a million new farmers and a corresponding market structure – and right now they don't exist. Successive governments and the anomalously termed NFU these past 40 years have gone out of their way to *reduce* farmers and farm labour, in the name of “efficiency” (alas measured solely in cash, with no regard for biological or social reality).

To fill this gap in know-how and to help supply the missing personnel I suggest the world needs a College for Enlightened Agriculture. The proposed college – the CEA – is not vital to the wellbeing of FEA but it is the perfect complement to it. Plans for the College are in progress and I will write about it separately.

Colin Tudge, Wolvercote, October 19 2014