Agriculture’s Seat at Big Policy Tables
by
Garnett L. Bradford, Clemson University

Abstract

Agricultural policy in the U.S. is examined in a metaphorical context. It is likened to securing a place at a large family dinner table. Until the early 1970s effective and relatively comprehensive agricultural policy shifts could be largely effected through the "USDA dinner table," (and its affiliates). Today, meaningful agricultural policy is crafted and implemented at a number of other big policy tables, e.g., energy and the environment, education, health and human services.

How should the agricultural community gain meaningful access and muscle at these other big policy tables? There is no simple recipe--at least not one that is feasible to be well delineated in this relatively short position paper. Even so, agriculturists need to begin by facing up to at least two present-day, economic-political realities:

(1) Many national economic and political leaders, traditionally sympathetic to agriculture, no longer consider agriculture to be a very important sector in the total picture, and (2) A small but significantly increasing number of academicians and elite political leaders see agriculturists as antiquated in their philosphies of society’s growth and equity.

The Family Dinner Table

When I was growing up in the 1930s and '40s it was always great fun to go to Sunday dinner at my Grandparents' home. Everyone in the extended Bradford family got a seat at the big table, in one of the eight chairs-- although for the youngsters this usually meant waiting until the "second or third table."

We didn't complain because we knew the adults came first (those were the rules), and we could do some playing before our turn came to eat. There weren't any side tables at GrandMa's house; she insisted that all the food for each table setting – 2-3 meats, 10-15 vegetables, and many desserts -- be on the one big table and that all the dishes be orderly passed around until everyone got their plate filled. First table, second table, or even the third or fourth table -- there was plenty for everybody. Age and gender lines were clearly drawn, well understood and never disputed.

Grandma Bradford's dinner table had a special status and privilege unto itself. Anyone who was seated and fed was "family or friend." And that was not any little deal; we were clearly a special part of that society, that establishment. But, like the agricultural economy of America in the 1930s and 1940s, even that of the 1950s and 1960s, it is history.

Agricultural Policy Dinner Tables
In a much larger sense, the home place for traditional policy making in American Agriculture can be likened to a seat at an extended-family dinner table. However, over the past 30 years this traditional setting has significantly changed. No longer is the bulk of meaningful policy affecting agriculture made only at a single big agriculture table (USDA and the like). There are now a number of important big tables, simultaneously in action. And the "game rules" continue to rapidly evolve.

We all know the current identity of at least some of the other big tables:
* Energy and the Environment
* Health Care and Demographics
* Human Services (management and labor)
* International Trade and Currency Rules.

What we don't know is how agriculture can clearly gain access and muscle at these other tables. And, even when we think we do know another table well, we often are frustrated in our efforts to get things done at them.

It is not uncommon to encounter instances where U.S. economic and political leaders dismiss agriculture as not a very important player, overtly or passively. Secretary of State Powell, for example, was seemingly uncomfortable with the cows at the G. W. Bush Texas ranch, etc.

An Ideological Divide

Perhaps the most serious wall impeding agriculture's place at other big policy tables is the growing ideological divide between leaders in agriculture and those dictating the agendas at other tables--both the practitioners and academicians (Fonte, 2001).

Agriculturists, in the main, tend to be Tocquevillians; and, as such, incline toward the traditional values of individualism, achievement through hard work, Judeo-Christianity and conventional patriotism. In contrast, an increasing number of the "non-ag." types (holding positions of power and influence at other big policy tables) tend to be present-day Gramiscians--followers, often unknowingly, of the early 20th century Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci. As such, they incline toward new age values of collectivism, equality of outcomes for all ethnic groups and religious faiths, and a so-called one-world order.

The Gramiscian view, according to several scholars (Fonte, 2001), is gaining special value in some high intellectual circles, particularly on some elite U.S. college campuses, e.g., Brown and Columbia Universities. The Tocquevillian view still predominates at most U.S. Land Grant Universities--thus, in the hearts and minds of
most agricultural academicians and policy leaders. Hence, it should not surprise us when Ag. and Non-Ag. Types stake out and promote separate, often-conflicting turf.

**Access at the Other Big Policy Tables**

What can we do to gain access to other big policy tables? This is a question I mostly leave for readers to think about, to conduct policy research on. When proceeding, here are three premises (contentions), borrowed from previous agricultural economics literature, which I contend should be incorporated in the research matrix:

First, as John Brewster so well established in his now classic 1950 Journal of Farm Economics article, farm and industrial production processes are fundamentally different. In farming, the job of transport is to carry operations to their materials -- to their processing operations (places). In non-agricultural industry, the job of transport is to carry materials to their processing operations. This difference is not very alterable by man, because farming mostly deals with living things--biological processes -- whereas, most processes in industry deal with lifeless, mobile materials.

Second, as Stewart Smith argued in his provocative First Quarter 1992 Choices article, in a value-added sense, farming is only a small part of U.S. agriculture, and is continuing to rapidly decline. What Smith calls "Input" and "Marketing" now comprise over 95 percent of total value added by the entire agricultural sector.

Finally, to examine a third premise albeit in a perverse sense, consider Steven Blank's 1998 book, The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio. I would label the content of this book, though cleverly written and provocative, as 99 percent fictional entertainment. In my opinion, it is patently nonsense to forecast that America is going out of the food business, something that is extremely unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.

**References**


