

Who cares about rural England's disadvantaged now?

The implications of the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities for the disadvantaged people and places of rural England (Preprint)

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Abstract

For more than 100 years, non-landed and non-Establishment interests in rural England were represented by a succession of three quasi-independent government bodies (quangos) whose roles embraced, to varying degrees, policy, practice, and advocacy. These were the Development/Rural Development Commission, the Countryside Agency, and the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC). In 2013 the British government closed the CRC, and absorbed aspects of its responsibilities into the civil service.

This paper explores the implications of the change for the disadvantaged people and places of rural England whose interests the CRC was created to represent. First, by way of context, the histories of the three quangos and the main farming and landed sector membership groups are described. In order to inform the discussion the views of the latter were sought (unsuccessfully), together with the opinions of people involved in one or more of the quangos, and, or, the civil service successor unit. These are presented and discussed. Conclusions relating to consequential "gaps" in independent policy and research are drawn.

The aim is to stimulate discussion about the implications for rural England of closing the CRC, for it is possible that the loss of this small organization may have unexpected long-term consequences. The eventual significance of this decision has yet to be determined.

Introduction

In 2013 the British government closed the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), ending more than 100 years of support for rural England's people and places. The CRC and its predecessors, the Development/Rural Development Commission and its various allied organizations, and the Countryside Agency provided practical, academic and policy advice to all governments, irrespective of political colour (Rogers 1999, CA 2000). All these organizations were paid for by, but were largely independent of, central government.

The paper reflects the writer's interest in the loss of independent advice and advocacy created by the CRC's closure, and the lack of prior debate, evidence and analysis. The writer was employed by the Rural Development Commission (RDC) and the Countryside Agency (CA), and worked, on a freelance basis, for the CRC.

The paper first outlines the history of the CRC and its predecessors. Following this, information gathered from interviews with people involved with one or more of the organizations are presented, and the implications of the closure of the CRC for disadvantaged people and places are discussed. One possible consequence is increased influence for lobbying groups such as those representing landowners; a concern in the 1970s when the protectionist nature of this class's interests were noted (Rose, Saunders, Newby and Bell 1979). Finally, some conclusions are drawn, with the aim of stimulating further debate.

The paper is written in a personal capacity.

Background

The CRC was formed, *"... to find better ways to identify disadvantaged individuals and communities and to address their situation."* (CRC 2005 p132). Although it, and its predecessor organizations, were influenced and directed by landowners and others with, for example, academic or agricultural interests, their responsibilities were broadly drawn; their work more than simply sectoral. Their relative independence from government allowed, indeed enabled and even encouraged, them to challenge and advocate policy, to research, and to provide advice to the private, voluntary and public sectors, as well as to local – community – groups. In this they differed from landed-interest membership organizations, such as the National Farmers' Union (NFU), the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), and the Countryside Alliance (CAI), and also from other preservationist interest groups, for example, the National Trust and the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). Put simply, therefore, the three quangos represented, at government level, the interests of those outside the spheres of influence of established, or Establishment, lobby groups and organizations.

The CRC's role was narrowly defined relative to its predecessors' remits. However, the requirement placed on it, *"... to have particular regard to people suffering from social disadvantage and areas suffering economic under-performance."* (CRC 2013 p6), enabled long-standing topics of concern, such as housing, transport and services to be addressed. Today, civil servants in the Rural Communities Policy Unit (RCPU) of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) are responsible for aspects of the CRC's work (RCPU 2014) and for, *"Targeted research into rural issues ..."* (Defra 2013 p6). Their duty, however, is to the departmental ministers leading, *"... rural policy from within the department."* (Defra 2012); not, as was the case with the "arm's-length" CRC, to the people of rural England (Shucksmith 2013).

This change is fundamental. Civil servants do not have the freedom that the CRC's staff had to delve into politically contentious topics such as disadvantage. For example, one component of disadvantage is poverty, which, *"... tends to be masked by the averages*

used in area-based statistics, such that poor rural people's needs are not recognised in policy." (CRC 2008 p160). The fact that, in 2014, "... more children in working households ... are living in absolute poverty ... than ... in 2009-10." (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2014 p.iv) during a period in which relative poverty declined (p.xxv), and with, "... 14% of households in rural areas ... in fuel poverty ..." (Howard 2015 p12), only adds to the complicated and contested nature of the topic.

The government is sensitive about poverty; for example, in relation to foodbanks. Chris Mould, chair of the Trussell Trust, a major foodbank charity, said, "... in evidence to the Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector ... that the charity ... had been criticised by the government for raising awareness of the need for foodbanks." (Civil Society Governance 2014). Such sensitivity is not surprising: the number of foodbanks in rural England has increased considerably in recent years (Downing and Kennedy 2014; Hutton, Poulter and Robinson 2014; Morris 2014). Consequently, the RCPU's civil servants are unlikely to discuss this subject (at least publically), or, indeed, any aspect of rural welfare related to government reforms (Milbourne 2011 p57).

If the work of the CRC and its predecessors demonstrated anything in relation to disadvantage, it is that there is a continuing need to understand, research and monitor, "... the changing forces which act unevenly upon rural people and rural areas." (Shucksmith, Roberts, Scott, Chapman and Conway 1996 p73). Although Paul Milbourne (2011 p57) asserted that, "... monitoring the impacts of government policy on rural welfare now rests solely with the academic community ...", the CRC's closure, and the end of its research programme, may well have created an academic, as well as a public sector, research "gap" relating to disadvantage.

The loss of the CRC may also have created another gap. It had close relationships with local authorities and voluntary sector organizations, such as Rural Community Councils (RCCs). The CRC provided, as did its predecessors, a link between local bodies and central government. The RCPU has these links, but, in view of its status, is not a direct replacement for the CRC. This distinction may explain why, even within parliament, there is concern that, "*With the demise of the Commission for Rural Communities, an independent critical voice has been lost.*" (EFRA 2013 p86). Related to this are worries about the ability of the RCPU, given its size and location, to consult with a sufficiently wide range of external bodies (p86).

Before considering the gap left by the CRC's closure, its role, together with the roles of its predecessors, are described, as are the histories, interests and influence of sector-specific groups. Following this the views of the interviewees are presented and discussed, and conclusions drawn.

Rural England's QUANGOs, 1909-2013

The Development/Rural Development Commission (1909-1999)

The Development Commission¹ (DC) was born of concerns about unemployment in rural areas, and related needs for investment in scientific research, education, communications and transport infrastructure. These concerns, in turn, stemmed partly from the impact on the rural economy of the long-running agricultural depression of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and subsequent calls to address concerns about unemployment by, "... some form of national planning." (Rogers 1999 pp3-4).

¹ In 1988 the Development Commission was merged with the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas to become the RDC (Rogers 1999 p136).

The creation of the DC was informed by three Royal Commissions. Two proposed the nationalisation and development of the canal system, and the development of forestry as a means of addressing unemployment and population loss (p4). The third reported on the 1905 Poor Laws, and the need for central government involvement in economic and welfare policy (p5).

Although the majority of Commissioners argued for the use of public works as a means of reducing unemployment, Beatrice Webb, a founding Fabian, objected to this (p5). Her objection, presumably, was made on the grounds that those employed on such works would effectively be involved in what would, today, be called workfare. This, in effect a subsidy for the employer, conflicted with the Fabians' support for a minimum wage. The argument is familiar:

"One thing is certain: five million persons insufficiently organized, improperly fed, clothed and housed, can never, by voluntary action, raise the material standard of their life. The one remedy for their lamentable state is larger incomes; the one effective means of obtaining that remedy is a national legal minimum wage." (TFS 1906 p13).

The three reports influenced the DC's work and priorities. The Commission was duly voted into being in 1910, with much cross-party support, including that of the then Liberal, Winston Churchill. Its remit extended to the whole of the United Kingdom (ie including the whole of the island of Ireland). The DC's initial emphasis was on innovation, experimentation, and demonstration covering diverse topics such as bee-keeping, tobacco cultivation(!), agricultural cooperation, forestry, rural transport, construction and improvement of harbours, and inland navigations (Rogers 1999 p19).

The development of much of the DC's work was *ad hoc*. Its support eventually extended to the Village Clubs Association, Women's Institutes, the Scottish Rural Women's Institutes' handicraft work, the RCCs, and, via the Rural Industries Bureau, to the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas (CoSIRA) (Rogers 1999 Ch. 6 and 8). In time this small, London-based organization eventually became the centre of support for a dispersed, disparate, wide-ranging collection of socially and economically-orientated organizations. These were often county-based, with local committees running local activities. There was much that was "localist", and even "Big Society", about this state funded conservative organization with its quietly radical and experimental instincts.

Whatever centralizing intentions and bureaucratic tendencies the DC had were kept in check, or at least challenged, by its partners. For example, the minutes of a meeting of the combined Somerset and Dorset Joint Rural Industries Sub-Committee in 1955 noted the following, in response to a report by the Director of the Rural Industries Board:

"This report had been fully discussed at a previous meeting ... [and] ... The Chairman said that he felt that the report excluded any opportunity for continuing a long term policy on the part of craftsmen in the region. He also felt that such a policy should not be dictated from London but arise through the aims of the rural areas themselves. ... The General Secretary felt that the proposed 5-year plan was not at all practicable in view of the Conditions of Grant." (S&D 1955 22 August).

The chairman of this group was H Rolf Gardiner, the well-known, if controversial, ruralist (Moore-Colyer 2001) and supporter of regional development centred on rural estates under the watchful eye of working aristocrats and farming squires (Gardiner 1943 p153). It was not unusual to have well-connected and influential people as members of the DC (and, later, the RDC) county committees. In terms of the committee's permanent

membership, excluding officials, "county" landed interests were well represented (which, in the context of this paper, is significant). For example, the Somerset and Dorset Joint Rural Industries Committee membership included, over time, the Federation of Women's Institutes, the NFU, the CLA, county agricultural advisers, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), the Dorset Farm Institute, and occasional attendees from social and youth employment services, willow growers', potters' and weavers' associations (the one consistent nod towards the wider rural community was the committee secretary, an RCC official). No doubt some in London regarded this as a two-edged sword, given the propensity of people to be loyal both to cause and county. Nevertheless, the DC held the purse strings, for, as also noted in the minutes of August, 1955, the committee members, despite some concerns, accepted the conditions relating to the DC's grant for the year 1955/56 (S&D 1955 22 August).

Although, over time, the priorities and (some) topics addressed changed, the emphasis on research, demonstration, innovation, and specific support, for example, for small businesses and craft training, was to remain constant to the end (eg CoSIRA 1973, RDC 1990, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1997a). The RDC's approach was, as described in the next section, broadly adopted by its successor organization, the Countryside Agency (CA), which continued to test rural development methods, and to experiment anew. Although it eventually closed its craft training and engineering prototyping centre, and moved from county to regionally-located offices, the CA maintained an interest in rural crafts, in training, and in continuing the D/RDC's Establishment connections. For example, a collaborative project with, amongst others, the Prince of Wales' organizations, resulted in a report about English country crafts. The Prince wrote the foreword (CA 2004).

The Countryside Agency (1999-2006)

In 1999 the government closed the RDC as part of its move towards a more regional, integrated, and specialised approach to the countryside (DETR/MAFF 2000 p14). Some staff transferred to the newly-formed regional development agencies². Others, with backgrounds or interests in social and community matters, joined Countryside Commission staff to form the CA. It was not a single-sector organization. The Board members' interests and expertise complemented those of the economically-orientated RDC and mainly environmentally qualified Countryside Commission staff³. Consequently, this blend, together with the policy and programme directions given in the contemporaneous rural white paper (DETR/MAFF 2000), resulted in the creation of an essentially integrated rural development organization; albeit one which quickly attracted criticism.

For example, Michael Sissons (2001 p174), whilst not wholly negative, stated that the CA's second annual report (CA 2000a), "... offered a bland and reassuring picture, skirting around most of the difficulties ..." associated with the concerns raised by Sissons and his co-contributors. These included threats: to the landscape from urban and industrial development; to habitats from pesticides and over-exploitation; to farming from free trade, supermarkets and over-regulation; and to rural pursuits and values from class war (Skidelsky 2001 p8).

Although Sissons found the CA's statistical summary useful (p174), Nigel Curry questioned the way in which the CA interpreted and presented data about economic performance and the number of businesses in rural England (Curry 2011 pp100-101).

² The emphasis of the work of these eight organizations, together with the London Development Agency, was on economic development: <http://tinyurl.com/os2lobu>.

³ The Board was eclectic, its members including, academics, clerics, an ex-CLA president, an ex-Chief Executive of the CAI, a landowner, an estate manager, National Park representatives, a retired civil servant, an economist and ex-civil servant, environmentalists, and the General Secretary of the Open Spaces Society.

There were also questions about whether, *"the Agency suffered from 'initiative-itus': grabbing headlines, raising expectations, but not leaving in place a sustained programme of support."* (Derounian 2006 p5).

Nobody, however, has ever suggested that integrated rural development approaches would be any less controversial than sector specific ones. As Curry and Moseley noted (2011 p7), rural Britain is not homogenous. Its people, their interests, influence, wealth, prejudices and challenges are as varied as the landscapes in which they live. The CA, like its predecessors and successors, could never satisfy every interested constituency, or constituent.

The demands and expectations placed upon it, coupled with the breadth of its activities, saw the CA grow rapidly (Derounian 2006 p4). Its activities covered social, economic and environmental aspects of rural life; its work supported and informed by extensive research and, in effect, experimental developmental work. Perhaps because of this the CA's demise was attributed to a tendency to rattle, *"... too many cages ... [it] ... was seen as too big for its boots ... [i]n particular the monitoring activities - rural proofing & those of the rural advocate maybe got up bigger departments' noses. For example the CA pointed to variable progress in the extent to which national policy making by Government departments has taken account of the rural dimension. In this case 'Goliath' stamped on 'David'."* (Derounian 2006 p9).

Although attention seeking and, more positively, ambition may have contributed to the CA's rapid rise and fall, officially its closure was a consequence of the changes to the machinery of government following the foot and mouth outbreak of 2001. This involved the closure of the long-established Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), and its replacement by Defra, which, significantly, incorporated "Rural Affairs" within both its title and area of responsibility.

Irrespective of this additional responsibility, however, the aftermath of the outbreak quickly saw the needs of agriculture – and related expenditure – prioritized over other rural people and enterprises (Curry and Moseley 2011 p11). This amounted to a reassertion of traditional, land-based, priorities.

The CA's short life makes it difficult to assess the impact and effectiveness of its work. The speed of the changes meant that not all programmes were evaluated (CA 2005 p4, Morris 2012), and those that were, were done under conditions that were far from ideal. They took place during the last few months of the organization's existence, when people were applying for jobs, or preparing for redundancy⁴.

Consequently, the opportunity was lost to determine the potential of the agency's **integrated** rural development work. This was trialled in the Forest of Dean (FoD 200?), and could, if time and politics had permitted, have built on earlier work relating to this rural "holy grail" (Newby 1988 pp141-145). Although the CA was not established to take an integrated approach, many staff did their best to ensure programme work was complementary. In other words, people tried to address some of the challenges relating to sustainable rural development, and, by extension, to rural governance; in short, *"... to tie together the often separate, or parallel, concerns with rural environment, rural society and the rural economy."* (Parker 2011 p21).

However, in 2003 the government asked Christopher (Lord) Haskins, past-chairman of Northern Foods and with a farming background, *"... to look at the arrangements for delivering the government's rural policies in England ..."* (Defra 2003 p7). Haskins' review was conducted on behalf of Defra, in the light of its, *"... new leadership role in*

⁴ The writer, a member of the change team, was closely involved in both the evaluation and transfer/redundancy work that preceded the creation of the CRC.

rural affairs in government " (p171) ⁵. Haskins' personal preference was for, "... *rural delivery in England [to become] much more decentralised than it is, with key decisions being taken at regional and local levels.*" (p8). He believed that policy making should be separated from "delivery" (ie implementation of policy), and that delivery should be devolved to regional and local bodies such as the RDAs, local authorities, and RCCs (p44).

However, the weakness in centralizing policy making and regionalizing delivery was acknowledged by Haskins himself, who noted - before disagreeing with the statement - that, "*A criticism of the principle of separation is that it may lead to an even wider misunderstanding between policy development and delivery, whereby policy teams pay little attention to the concerns of delivery.*" (Defra 2003 p16). The criticism is logical. It is possible, therefore, that the CA's closure, and with it the end of combined policy and delivery work, made it difficult, "... *to effectively engage local rural communities in policy and delivery [and] perhaps reflects the difficulties which Defra has in responding to the diversity of rural England.*" (Elton 2008 p7). Nevertheless, the RCPU embodies Haskin's separation approach, as did the CRC.

Margaret Beckett, Defra's then Secretary of State, accepted Haskins' recommendation for separation of policy and delivery, but decided to form, "... *a much smaller [arm's-length, with little regional presence] organisation, with a new, well focused role providing independent policy advice to Government from a national perspective on issues affecting people in rural communities, and analysing and reporting on best practice in the delivery of the Government's rural policies.*" (JNNC 2003 p11). The name, Commission **for** Rural Communities, which was chosen by staff (by competition), defines very clearly the intended beneficiaries. Similarly, its primary role, to understand, "... *what rural disadvantage is and what counter-measures are in different circumstances.*" (Burgess 2005 p3), is equally clear. As with the CA, however, the CRC was, as discussed next, to be short-lived.

The Commission for Rural Communities (2006-2013)

Unlike the CA, which designed and implemented aspects of policy, the CRC's focus was on research and the identification and dissemination of good practice relating to disadvantage. As it was formed at a time when the number of public sector employees was being reduced, both budget and headcount were always under pressure.

Whereas in 2005-2006 the CA employed 639 full and part-time members of staff (CA 2006 p44), in 2009 the CRC had the equivalent of 64 full-time staff, three fewer than in the previous year (CRC 2009 p45), and that a fall from 84 in 2007 (CRC 2007 p27). By 2011 nearly all its staff had been made redundant. Notwithstanding its size and short life⁶ the CRC produced a lot of research and related literature⁷. It conducted inquiries into hill farming, health, housing, and the roles of rural councillors, and published case studies about a range of rural issues, including, for example, young people, and migrant workers. It also continued to produce the annual State of the Countryside Reports initiated by the CA in 1999 (CA 1999).

⁵ Prior to the foot and mouth outbreak the CA had answered to the Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) which, jointly with MAFF had published a Rural White Paper in 2000 (DETR/MAFF 2000). Following the foot and mouth crisis MAFF was abolished.

⁶ Short lived rural non-departmental government organizations were the norm after 1997, with New Labour and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition governments between them managing to establish and close the CA, eight RDAs, the eight Government Offices of the Regions, and the CRC.

⁷ A full list of the CRC's - more than 600 - documents can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/p4hxhtu>.

Unsurprisingly, the CRC's documents are easier to find than those of its predecessors. Those of the CA and the RDC are much harder to track down, although many individual reports can be found by searching the Web. The British Library's main catalogue lists 58 CRC, 31 CA and 128 RDC documents.

The relative difficulty in tracking down documents from all three organizations is, however, a concern. The documents are repositories of knowledge paid for by the taxpayer. They are all that remain of the "memories" of organizations, which, for more than 100 years, consecutively cared for the people and places of rural England not represented by the land-based, land owning and using membership groups discussed next.

Sector Specific and Interest Groups

No doubt aspects of the CRC's role will be filled by the RCPU and the influential, but partial, NFU, CLA and CALL, some members and officers of which constitute the "local rural elites" referred to by Roger Pierce (2004) in his study of landowners. These organizations, together with, for example, the National Trust and the CPRE, have "insider" connections to politicians and policymakers. Therefore, they have the potential and opportunity to fill some of the gaps left by the closure of the CRC⁸, but their primary responsibility is, of course, to represent their members' interests.

The National Farmers' Union

The NFU was formed in 1908, at much the same time as the DC and the CLA. According to its website, the union, formed to represent the interest of farmers during a time of agricultural depression, has grown, "... *to become one of the most effective and respected trade associations in Britain.*"⁹ It rose from small beginnings to a post-war position of influence, in which it, "... *was accorded a key mediating role: representing the interests of the farming community in the implementation of agreed policies.*" (Marsden, Murdoch, Lowe, Munton and Flynn 1993 p60).

Its membership, which peaked at 210,000 in 1953 (Cox, Lowe and Winter 1991 p30), stands at 55,000 today. This reduction is to be expected given the consolidation that has taken place in agriculture. The number of holdings has fallen steadily. For example, between 1987 and 2009, the number of medium sized holdings fell from about 33,000 to approximately 18,000 (Defra 2010 p1).

Irrespective of the steady decrease in the NFU's membership, its influence over policy has been largely maintained. Its office in London is close to the offices of Defra/Natural England (the one-time offices of MAFF, and the Local Government Association. In other words it is, and has long been, located close, physically and politically, to the heart of central and local government¹⁰. It remains, if less obviously than was once the case, an

⁸ Although there are other "insider" groups with land-related interests, such as house builders, forestry bodies and the Ramblers, their influence and roles in relation to disadvantage are either not central to this paper's purpose, or are insufficiently different to warrant specific attention.

⁹ <http://www.nfuonline.com/about-us/history/>

¹⁰ As an aside, in an illustration of the importance attached the "the land" relative to the wider rural population, a report by CoSIRA (1983 p2) and the Small Firms Service noted that, in the year 1981/82, the latter employed 225 people (cost £2.56m), CoSIRA employed 301 (cost £4.38m), while ADAS (<http://tinyurl.com/oxjvet5>), then a government advisory service for the agriculture sector, employed 5,100 people (cost £65m). At the time the small firms sector accounted for 25% of the labour force; the agriculture sector, 2.6%.

"insider group" involved in, and influencing, policy making (Grant 2005 p378, Woods 2005 p137). In addition, two of the four Defra ministers, Lord de Mauley, a landowner, and George Eustace, a farmer's son, have close farming connections¹¹. Owen Patterson, Defra's Secretary of State from 2012 until 2014, is also a farmer's son.

The NFU is part of the countryside Establishment. It has long-standing connections with government and the civil service, and its views are promulgated effectively via the farming industry's specialist press, such as Farmers' Weekly, and the BBC's Farming Today and Countryfile programmes. That is not to criticise the NFU – it does its job; as does a related organization, the Country Land and Business Association (CLA).

The Country Landowners and Business Association (CLA)

The CLA is also a member of the "insider" policy community referred to by Michael Woods (2005 p137), and a long-standing influencer of government policy; not least because of the close connections between land owners and the Conservative party (Pierce 2004 p291).

According to its website, *"The CLA is the membership organisation for owners of land, property and business in rural England and Wales. ... Anyone who owns rural land, no matter how much, will benefit from joining the CLA. The CLA is the only organisation dedicated to defending your interests as a landowner and is your only truly independent and authoritative source of advice."* (CLA 2014). In an interview in Country Life magazine (CL 2009) the then newly-appointed president, William Worsley, noted that 50% of the CLA's 35,000 members owned less than 125 acres. He did not mention that, between them, the members, *"... own about 50% of the rural land in England and Wales."* (CL 2010).

Worsley went on to say that the CLA is, *"... a broad church and, philosophically, you support what the CLA stands for, which is fighting for rural Britain."* He continued, *"The CLA's strength is the intellectual quality of its debate. It's got good policy, high-powered members and employs serious scientific brains."* He also – revealingly - noted that, *"After 12 years of Labour, we're still at the top table (in rural politics), with the NFU, and we must remain measured and sensible."*

Ewen Cameron¹², a farmer, landowner and past-President of the CLA, *"... personally lobbied [Prime Minister] Mr Blair against wide-ranging "right to roam" legislation, which would force farmers to allow ramblers on to their land."* (Parker 1999). Consequently, his subsequent appointment as the first chairman of the CA, the organization responsible for the "right to roam" legislative programme, initially drew some criticism (BBC 1999). Nevertheless, under his chairmanship, legislation was passed, much to the delight of, for example, The Ramblers' Association (Ramblers 2015). In any event, the appointment of a farmer/landowner and Establishment figure to head rural government organizations not primarily, if at all, concerned with agriculture, is essentially the norm.

For example, the first Chairman of the Development Commission was Lord Richard Cavendish (Rogers 1999 p15), a member of an aristocratic landowning family from the north-west of England. Cavendish was chairman from 1910 until 1946 (p137). Incidentally, three other of the seven Commissioners had professional connections with land-based industries, thus, intentionally or otherwise, ensuring a majority for these interests¹³. Of Cavendish's six successors (p137), four, Lord Shaftesbury, The Countess of

¹¹ <http://tinyurl.com/klvcdo7>

¹² Now Lord Cameron of Dillington in Somerset.

¹³ In addition to Cavendish, there were six other Commissioners: the social reformer Sydney Webb; Alfred Hall, Director of the Rothamsted Experimental Station; William Haldene, a solicitor and Crown Agent for Scotland; Michael Ennis, a member of the

Albermarle, Mr – now Lord – Vinson, and Lord Shuttleworth (the 5th Baron¹⁴) had, or have, landed/farming interests.

The backgrounds of CLA presidents and chairs of the D/RDC, and CA, are similar: they tend to have strong land-based Establishment connections. For example, the five most recent presidents¹⁵ all have close personal, professional, and, in some cases, aristocratic and political connections to agricultural and related businesses and interests.

The intentions, therefore, of the CLA and the NFU, in terms of their political aims, are clear. Equally clear, given the sectoral protectionist lobbying roles of these two organizations, is the fact that their aims will not necessarily chime with, support, or be relevant to the concerns of some of those represented by the CRC.

There is one other organization that broadly occupies the same policy and interest territories: the Countryside Alliance.

The Countryside Alliance (CAI)

The Alliance was formed in 1997, "*... partly as a response to the newly elected Labour Government's pledge to ban hunting with dogs but also borne [sic] of a need to represent an increasingly marginalised rural minority.*" (CAI 2014). The reference to a "marginalised rural minority" is interesting¹⁶. The term is not defined. It could apply to those who hunt with dogs or, alternatively, to the rural disadvantaged, the CRC's primary concern.

The CAI's website highlights its defining countryside demonstrations of 1997, 1998 and 2002. These, "*... emphasized a number of issues, including agricultural recession, housing development and the closure of rural services, but the defence of hunting remained the core motivation for both the organizers and the majority of participants References to hunting predominated on the banners and placards carried by marchers ...*" (Woods 2005 p217). Also mentioned is the Alliance's work on rural business and services, and its campaign for improving rural mobile telephone and broadband. This last leads the CAI's 2015 election manifesto (CAI 2014a).

The manifesto also calls for improved food labelling (p3), stresses the importance of wildlife management, "*... best achieved by a combination of methods undertaken by farmers, gamekeepers, landowners, naturalists and huntsmen ...*", the repeal of the Hunting Act, and opposition to further restrictions on firearms (p7). Although few of the latter topics are likely to concern the CRC's "rural disadvantaged", the needs of rural communities and the importance of rural services are not neglected. There are supportive references to the problems of service sparsity and related travel difficulties, the relatively high cost of heating and road fuel, the threat posed to the now privatized Royal Mail's universal service obligation, and the need for affordable housing, together with – interestingly - related incentives for landowners to make land available for housing (CAI 2014 pp4-5).

Congested Districts Board of Ireland; Henry Davies, County Land Agent for Carmarthenshire; Saint-Hill Eardley-Wilmot, a past Inspector-General of Forests to the government of India; and Sir Francis Hopwood, Permanent Under-Secretary for the Colonies (Rogers 1999 p11).

¹⁴ In a good example of institutional and Establishment symmetry, the 2nd Lord Shuttleworth chaired the Royal Commission on canals and inland navigations referred to earlier in this paper (Rogers 1999 p117).

¹⁵ David Fursdon, 2005-07; Sir Henry Aubrey-Fletcher, 2007-09; William Worsley, 2009-11; Harry Cotterell, 2011-13; Henry Robinson, 2013-date.

¹⁶ The CAI is an amalgamation of three organizations: the Countryside Business Group, the British Field Sports Society, and the Countryside Movement.

The CAll does not ignore the needs of rural people beyond its core land and sport-based interests; indeed it calls for equality in access to services and facilities to those in urban areas. It is more broadly based in its interests than the NFU and CLA. This is reflected in its governance structure. The Chairman is Kate Hoey, a Labour MP with a London constituency; her deputy is Conservative Peer, Lord Mancroft. Nevertheless, the expertise and connections of many of the officers and members lie more in traditional country pursuits and the Establishment than in the study and understanding of rural disadvantage.

The Establishment's Quiet Influence

The CAll is, therefore, like the NFU and CLA, a lobbying organization with good political and Establishment connections. They are not disinterested. They do not exist to do the work done by the CRC, or, previously, the CA and the D/RDC. Whereas the work of the quangos concentrated on the topics and circumstances affecting the majority of the people, especially, in the case of the CRC, those with the least influence and the greatest needs, NFU, CLA and CAll members have their own interests at heart. Indeed, some members may be, "... *farmers and landowners ... as militant as coalminers.*" (although more successful) where fighting for their interests is concerned (Rose *et al.* 1979 p18).

They are also often the holders of honorary posts, such as Lord Lieutenant and High Sheriff, and elected members of local authorities (Pierce 2004 p 291). It is important, therefore, to draw the reader's attention to the existence of these posts and the post holders; especially the honorary appointments. As appointees and local representatives of the Crown¹⁷ they are Establishment figures, largely "invisible in plain sight", with proximity to power, and the potential to exert "quiet" influence.

For example, the writer's county of Dorset had, in 2014, a farmer and ex-Leader of the county, and a district, council as Lord Lieutenant, a landowner as Vice-Lord Lieutenant, and, of the 39 Deputy Lieutenants, nine have farming/landed connections. In addition, eight of the 39 previously held the office of High Sheriff; several have public, including military, service, one is a Master of Foxhounds, four are governors of one local private school, and a high percentage, relative to the general population, were privately educated. To draw the reader's attention to this is not to doubt the individuals' commitment, or to denigrate their work, but to make the point that these honorary positions are mainly held – in rural areas – by members of the landed, business, and service elites.

Indeed, some of the "County" landed and farming families whose members hold these appointments have occupied these positions so often over the centuries that they are a (semi)-permanent presence. Well connected, their influence radiates out from county to Westminster. Their interests, concerns and priorities will, as Rose *et al.* noted (1979 p11), most likely reflect, "... *their values, their beliefs and their ideologies, and thus indirectly further their interests to the detriment of less powerful and less prosperous groups.*" In short, and not surprisingly, they speak mainly for their own.

Today, the programmes introduced in the Rural White Paper of 2000 (DETR/MAFF 2000) are largely history. Local government and voluntary sector budgets have been cut, and funding for community-related research is hard to find. With the CRC abolished, and policy development now a civil service function, the landed, farming and county "insider" organizations, institutions and individuals, together with the preservationist groups,

¹⁷ Lord Lieutenants and High Sheriffs are technically crown appointments, and so are deemed to be non-political. The former are appointed by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister (<http://tinyurl.com/cpk9gkb>); the latter are essentially judicial nominations (<http://tinyurl.com/newgcp>). Both posts are unpaid.

may, without the CRC's countervailing voice, be assumed by some to speak for – all of – rural England. These changes are significant; they smack of High Toryism, a reassertion of traditional landed influence. Although outside the scope of this paper, the sociological implications of these changes in terms of power relationships and the exercise of influence are ripe for investigation, and would complement the work of, for example, Rose *et al.* (1979), Pierce (2004) and Sturzakar and Shucksmith (2011).

"Insiders", *de facto*, connect the RCPU both to the wider rural world and the organizations' members, if only indirectly. Other organizations, such as local authorities and the NHS, in which the CRC was interested (CRC 2008a), also have views, policies and experience pertaining to rural disadvantage at a time when, as recent research suggests both downward social mobility (Bukodi, Goldthorpe, Waller and Kuha 2014 p21), and hunger appear to be increasing (APPG 2014). When these bodies are added to the consultation mix it can be seen that the challenge facing the RCPU is considerable. Consequently, it is understandable that the unit emphasises rural proofing as an, "... *area of our policy that is increasingly important across government.*" (Defra 2014 p4). Also, as it is politically constrained, its freedom is limited, as discussed, briefly, below.

The RCPU

Although concerns have been expressed about the RCPU's ability to consult only the "usual suspects" (EFRA 2013 p86), it should be noted that these suspects are numerous, and are themselves often representative organizations with networks of their own.

This complicated tapestry includes the Rural Communities Action Network (RCAN), Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE), the organization which runs RCAN, and which, together with RCAN, represents the views of county-based RCCs. In addition, the Rural Services Network, the Rural Coalition, Rural and Farming Networks (RFN), Local Enterprise Partnerships, and the European Union LEADER programmes' Local Action Groups, are also listed. As all of these are representative membership bodies it can be argued that the views of most interested organizations are consulted, if indirectly. For example, the Plunkett Foundation, which stated that the RCPU liaises directly with too few organizations (EFRA 2013 p86) is a member of the Rural Coalition, as are, and along with others, the NFU, CLA, ACRE, and local government organizations.

The concern that arises from this is that the RCPU is not in a position, as the CRC was, to address specifically, and as a priority, the needs of the rural disadvantaged, conduct related research, and to advocate. According to Defra (2012), the RCPU focusses, "... *on Ministers' stated rural priorities – housing, broadband, services, transport and fuel ... [and] ... programmes designed to drive rural economic growth including delivery of the socio-economic elements of the [Rural Development Programme for England¹⁸], and the package of measures announced in the Rural Economic Growth Review.¹⁹*" These topics and programmes are relevant in terms of disadvantage, but the relevance is implicit, rather than, as was the case with the CRC, explicit, and of primary importance.

That ministers – politicians – and not independent individuals appointed for their knowledge and experience, are now responsible for policy is a significant change in approach. When coupled with the – consequent? – paucity of research and policy relating to disadvantage, the post-CRC gap is obvious. It is discussed in the next section.

¹⁸ Information about the LEADER RDPE can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/lekccqt>.

¹⁹ Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/lw9une5>

Consequences of the CRC's Closure – Some Views

Eighteen people were asked for their opinions about the CRC's closure. Included were officials, politicians, community/economic development practitioners, academics, ex-Board members/Commissioners, a local government officer, the manager of a rural business support organization, the director of a regional rural network, and a parish clerk (who, in turn, consulted five fellow clerks). All of those approached had had some involvement with the RDC, CA, CRC, or RCPU.

The following questions were used to prompt responses:

- 1) What did the CRC do that is not now being done?
- 2) What is government, including the RCPU, unable to do (eg by way of research, to make public), that the CRC was able to do? (eg investigate foodbanks, undertake poverty-related work)?

Of the thirteen contributors (eighteen if the additional five parish clerks are included): two are ex-Commissioners (one is also an academic); six are current, or ex, officials in one or more of the organizations (two are also academics); one is a business support manager; two are academics with experience in community development, the voluntary sector, and local government; one is a parish clerk; and one a local government officer.

The following declined, had nothing to contribute, or did not reply: one Conservative and one Labour politician (both of whom have held ministerial positions); an academic/ex-Commissioner; a community development specialist and academic; the director of the regional rural network.

In addition to the individuals approached, the NFU, CPRE, CAll, CLA, ACRE, and the Arthur Rank Centre were asked for their views. Although initial replies were received from the CAll and ACRE, in the end none of the organizations contributed. It is possible that this is because the CRC was of little or no importance to them. Another possibility is that the CRC's closure represented a threat (eg loss of support or funding, and no obvious alternatives) or an opportunity (eg potential to increase influence by filling the research/evidence/advocacy gap, an end to the CRC's possibly unhelpful findings and recommendations).

The views of the participants are presented and discussed below.

The majority of the participants alluded to a post-CRC "**independence gap**".

An ex-senior official, who had worked for the RDC, CA, and CRC, said that, "*Its strength was to think independently and advocate independently from an outside perspective.*" Although acknowledging that others could have done its work, its, "... *unique feature was its freedom ... from government and the civil service.*" An ex-CRC Commissioner noted that although the CRC was unable to continue with some of the more practical, action-research work done by the CA, such as the Land Management and Market Towns initiatives, its clearly defined role, and its day-to-day focus on social justice, rural deprivation and inclusion, was distinctive and valuable; as was its strong emphasis on influencing policy across government departments. This last point was reinforced by an academic and an ex-official, both of whom attached, contrary to Lord Haskins' view, importance to the – now lost – link between the development of policy and its implementation.

In terms of work **not** being done, a research specialist in housing and community development mentioned the annual State of the Countryside Reports, related data, and research reports. Another ex-Commissioner noted the value, in terms of independence, of the CRC's work on the rural economy and "digital divide". Given that it was, "...

proactive and not reactive ...", it was able, "... to persuade/influence Ministers to take issues seriously – ie the rural poor."

The officials with CRC and civil service experience also noted the CRC's freedom to consider topics which were not government priorities or necessarily popular with other rural stakeholders. The organization's focus on matters relating to poverty helped to ensure clarity of purpose. However, one official noted that, although the CRC gathered a lot of evidence and, *"... had a co-ordinated approach to influencing government across a wide range of issues ..."*, more could have been done to inform policy development. The other official remarked that the RCPU is, *"... able to do a lot of the types of research ... done in the past."*, but noted that there are fewer opportunities to conduct CRC-style thematic studies.

This suggests that there is a **"research gap"**.

In terms of the CRC's influence on government, two views illustrate the tensions that can occur when a state funded organization produces evidence or provides advice that runs counter to government priorities and policy direction. An ex-Commissioner stressed the CRC's independence, but noted the need, *"... to be sensible ..."*, and not to be, *"... aggressively, unpleasantly critical of the government that's paying your bills ... we could be pretty robust in what we said ... some government ministers ... found that easier to cope with than others We didn't hold back, but you've got to be constructive."* The difficulty in achieving the right balance between welcome and unwelcome advice is summed up by one official's view that, *"The problem was that often [the CRC's] voice was at discord with what government wanted to hear and wasn't always couched in the best tone."*

This contributor went on to note that, *"The CRC was good at identifying insightful evidence and data, but did not link this all to policy. ... staff worked hard to find evidence and highlight an issue but didn't work to follow this up with appropriate policy solutions. ... the CRC was just starting to adapt to this approach (evidence to support policy cycle way or [sic] working), just as it was disbanded."*

An ex-RCC worker, now a lecturer in social policy, hinting at an **"information gap"**, was initially concerned when the CA was closed, but, in the event, found that the CRC's reports and case studies, especially those relating to young people and housing, were accessible; they used less jargon, and gave examples of good practice.

The ex-senior official noted that the CRC was under continual pressure to reduce the number of staff, and to spend less money. This, which, *"... hobbled it from the beginning"*, reflects the interviewee's view that the CRC's creation was, *"... probably more a political decision than a rational policy decision."* Its effective replacement by the RCPU, however, has been a loss of research capacity (exacerbated by the wider effects of the age of austerity and government priorities) in that, *"... the Defra research programme is very narrowly focussed ... you can understand why it would be ... very focussed on their policy objectives ... we're not getting that more enquiring primary research that the CRC, I think, was very good at."*

Consequently, the interviewee added, *"The land-based organizations [eg NFU, CLA, CAll] have more clout than they had before."*, before noting, *"I don't think that moving the work into government is all bad. There are things that are lost, and possibly one or two things that have worked better. Having civil servants working inside the machine has got perhaps more traction with other Whitehall departments than the CRC [had]."* An official supported this view, saying that although the RCPU lacks the CRC's independence, its place in government means that it can respond quickly to demands, and, as an insider, is better placed to influence wider government policy. This

interviewee also made the point that the CRC's independence was relative, as its corporate plans had to be "signed-off" – ie approved - by government.

Where poverty is concerned, an academic stated, *"The key for me is that 1 in 5 rural households in/at margins of poverty has [sic] remained the statistic since the late 1970s ... an indictment on every successive government since that time."* The ex-senior official thought that, although the RCPU could investigate topics related to poverty, they are unlikely to do so. This is because the RCPU is, *"... more reactive to policy changes ... its work programme geared to policy changes that are happening, and trying to engage with that, rather than standing back and saying, 'What are the big issues out there?'. ... Also so much of a civil servant's time is spent on day-to-day ministerial matters, leaving only a relatively short amount of time in which to address other matters."* (a view supported by a civil service contributor).

The same concern was also expressed by an ex-Commissioner, who said, *"What's missing is any real sense of independent scrutiny ... and a lack of public visibility relating to its work. [The RCPU is] ... very, very invisible ... you talk to people in the Local Government Association or any of the non-government organizations ... they're not thinking of the [RCPU]. It's not really at the forefront ... it's doing some good stuff ... on rural proofing, because they've got good people there, but it's, it's, it's, just beneath the radar. ... It lacks that critical edge, it lacks that independent voice, it lacks that resource."*

This is because, as a civil servant noted:

"The RCPU has to work to Government (Ministerial) priorities, because its resources are bound to departmental priorities. For example, Rural Services, poverty etc were not cited as one of [the Secretary of State's] priorities, so much of our work was reconditioned to reflect rural economy. ... The supremacy of the rural economy as the main political driver means that all the RCPU activity and engagement is around that. As (sic) the expense of many other issues that need to be addressed in rural areas including poverty."

The successful aspect of the RCPU is that it can engage at the top table with other government departments – to an extent. Over the last three years ... it has taken giant leaps forward.

The Achilles heel of the RCPU is twofold. It is part of government and ultimately it is not able to be a critical friend in the truest sense. The second weakness is that it is not fleet of foot and thus is unable to respond to issues quickly if they aren't a ministerial priority."

This is an effective summary of both the strengths and weaknesses of having a unit within government. It is part of the machine, its staff trusted by colleagues in other departments, its professional ethos unquestioned, but its freedom to act and to communicate outside of government and the civil service limited by remit and duty. Not surprisingly, the CRC's position was considered to be freer than the RCPU's. It was, according to a civil servant, *"... highly responsive and unrestricted by any political priorities, meaning that it could dig deep to uncover the facts and present the truth even if this embarrassed government – this was the very essence of what it was good at – but ultimately its downfall."*

Whether the potential to embarrass the government of the day was the reason for its downfall is open to question. Along with many other arm's-length bodies it was a casualty of the present government's "bonfire of the quangos" (Institute of Government 2012). This, the latest bonfire of many, concentrated on non-departmental public

bodies, such as the CRC, rather than, for example, on public corporations and health authorities (Flinders, Dommett and Tonkiss 2014 p20). As, according to government figures, some 280 quangos have been abolished or merged since 2010 (UK Government 2014), it is possible that the CRC was simply one of the many chosen for summary incineration.

Nevertheless, the opinions expressed above about the CRC's freedom relative to the RCPUs, and the concerns relating to rural disadvantage, deprivation and poverty noted by the House of Commons' environment, food and rural affairs committee (EFRA 2013 pp28-29) suggest that the closure of the CRC, and with it, the loss of a "critical friend's" research and advice, has implications for rural England. Similarly, the Government's belief that these topics are best dealt with via rural proofing (p27) and **external** monitoring and reporting²⁰ (p29), makes clear the RCPUs position **within, and of,** government.

The point above about the loss of research effort and capacity is reflected in the comments made by the manager of a rural business support organization, who, although noting the CRC's closeness to government, viewed the change with concern, stating:

"The demise of the CRC has left small communities (parishes, villages and towns) without a place to turn to for authoritative research, advice and guidance. It has also deprived them of the ability to put a forward point [sic] of view and contribute to a collective voice on issues of concern. Despite being clearly linked to government it was respected for its independence."

The reference to the value of the CRC's work to the town/village council level is interesting in that information gathered from parish clerks suggests that the value may be more perceived than actual. As part of this research a parish clerk consulted five other clerks who, between them, cover fifteen parish councils. Most of these clerks have been clerking for between ten and twenty years and yet two of them had not heard of the CRC, and had to search the Web for information. In a similar vein, a rural District Council officer with more than twenty years' experience in community – including town partnership - development work, felt, due mainly to the day-to-day pressures of work, detached from changes at the national level, and did not know, for example, that Action for Market Towns, an organization that had, since the late 1990s worked with, and for, town partnerships, had closed²¹.

When the clerks' views are considered in the light of the other participants' contributions in relation, for example, to the CRC's perceived independence relative to the RCPUs, and the clear organizational differences and responsibilities between the two bodies, a "vertical" communications gap is apparent. Of course, the sample size is small, but the lack of awareness is consistent with the findings of a 2014 survey of town clerks that found an overall lack of familiarity with the CA-led programmes contained in the rural white paper of 2000 (Morris 2014). This suggests that national level organizations cannot be complacent when it comes to communicating with the third – or, as some see it, the first – tier of local government, whose clerks are often part-time and, therefore, under time and work pressures (p67).

To an extent this can be seen from the clerks' collective, and somewhat dismissive, response to the second question (namely, what is government unable to do that the CRC was able to do): *"There was nothing that could be found that the CRC did [relating] to*

²⁰ This refers to Defra's annual report on investment in the ACRE network (ACRE 2013). This report mentions poverty only in the context of fuel poverty. Disadvantage is mentioned once, in connection with grants made to RCCs. Deprivation is not mentioned.

²¹ The writer was, until 2013, a Trustee and Director of AMT.

Parish and Town Councils that isn't being done now." However, no examples were given.

The rural business support manager answered this question slightly differently, stating that, *"From a national point of view there is nothing that government can't do to compensate for the loss [of the CRC]."*, before adding:

"The problem is that they [the government] have no will to do it. They have dramatically cut back on the type of research that reveals the real needs of rural communities and strangled the independent voice that at times was able to contribute to and or seriously challenge government thinking, policy and practice. ... DEFRA works with 35 agencies and public bodies, but not one of them focusses on rural deprivation and none of them are tasked to provide an holistic overview of the state of the countryside and its people. ... "

Finally, in addition to the work of the CRC and the RCPU, the role of the Rural Advocate (RA) was mentioned. This position, initially located within the CA, and subsequently the CRC, gave the holder access to the highest levels of government, including the Prime Minister (CRC 2008b), and the responsibility to, *"... inform government about the reality of the diverse and changing needs of rural communities, businesses and individuals."* (Wiredgov 2008). The role was abolished, along with the CRC, despite pleas from, amongst others, *"Lord Cameron of Dillington, who was appointed to the advocate role by Tony Blair in 2000, [and who] 'begged' ministers to rethink their plans, warning of the 'still unrecognised issues of rural deprivation, which continue to come very low on every Government's priorities'."* (Independent 2011). This, coupled with the decision not to update the Rural Statement (Defra 2012a) after many decades of regular reporting from government (albeit arm's-length) bodies is indicative of the extent to which the closure of the CRC and the formation of the RCPU has changed, fundamentally, the previously largely consensual approach to the community aspects of rural development in England.

To judge from the above, gaps do appear to have opened in relation to policy, research, and institutional freedoms, however limited. After more than 100 years, this is change indeed.

Conclusion

This paper set out to consider the implications of the closure of the CRC, and its replacement (in effect) by the RCPU, for rural England's disadvantaged people and places. The main concerns identified are the:

1. loss of independence associated with the replacement of an arm's-length organization by a civil service unit;
2. lack of a coherent research programme relating to disadvantage;
3. potential for policy influence to be skewed in favour of membership and lobbying groups.

It is almost thirty years since the Hereford Diocese of the Church of England published the results of its discussion about rural disadvantage (Lewis and Talbot-Ponsonby 1987), which concluded (p200) that:

*"If people are really able to see that poverty **does** exist, even in posh rural areas, they are more likely to do something about it locally as well as demanding changes in national policies and provisions. It would be only too simple just to demand that the politicians do something while*

*we continue to live out a comfortable existence. We **and** the politicians need to feel uncomfortable.*" (emphases as in original).

Today, in the age of the so-called "Big Society", the church is making much the same plea in relation to a much more obvious indicator of poverty, hunger (APPG 2014 p43). To judge from the growth in the number of foodbanks²² and associated volunteer helpers - 30,000 in 2013/14 - involved in the foodbank movement (Trussell Trust 2014), it seems that although people have heeded the 1987 call, the same cannot be said of all politicians, or of government. As one contributor to this paper noted, the level of poverty in rural England remains a concern, and perennial problems relating to access to jobs, housing and transport continue.

In the late 1970s a report by the Standing Conference of RCCs (Clark and Smith 1978 p49) noted, "... *the loss of services on individual communities can ... be enormous. In aggregate terms too the many threatened closures to schools, garages, post offices and shops etc. represents a massive change to the scale and form of rural life in England.*" Similar points have been made since by a variety of organizations about the many facets of disadvantage and the effects on different constituencies (Smith 1992, Hale 1996, CA 2002, Age UK 2013), with perhaps the CRC's research into older people being the most recent detailed study (CRC 2006).

The perennial nature of poverty and its close semantic relations, disadvantage, social exclusion and deprivation, suggests that they are intractable problems. They may be so, but to turn the body politic's back on attempting to understand and solve them is no answer. Indeed, it is a possible dereliction of duty to the common good. At the very least the change from independent advice to Minister-led policy is a short sighted approach, because, clearly, these problems will not go away. The fundamental change in approach in relation to rural poverty discussed in this paper calls to mind Walter Bagehot's comment that, "*Poverty is an anomaly to the rich people. It is very difficult to make out why people who want dinner do not ring the bell.*"

The debate, however, is not primarily about the pros and cons of arm's-length versus civil service bodies. It is about what needs to be done for disadvantaged people and places, and how best to develop and implement policy responses. Surely, not to do this is not an option?

In the late 1980s, in similarly straitened times to today's, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations helped create Rural Voice (RV), an umbrella body for rural interest groups such as farming organizations, the RCCs, the National Federation of Women's Institutes, CPRE, and the National Association of Local Councils (Rogers 1999 p102). A politically active lobby group (p103), RV's equivalent today is the Rural Coalition (ACRE 2012 p1) established by the CRC in 2008 (RC 2010).

The RC's thirteen members²³ have recently produced a report which, "... *sets out [its] headline priorities for the next government.*" (RC 2014 p2). These - seemingly inevitably - centre on matters relating to the economy, housing, and physical and social health. Interestingly, there is only a passing reference to rural services, and the words,

²² An example of usage: between November 2013 and November 2014 a foodbank in a small country town in the south of England distributed 16.5 tonnes of food. In all, in the twelve month period December 2013 to November 2014, 92 couples, 114 families, 270 single people, and 86 single parents were helped. In 2013/14 the reasons given for use were (in rank order): low income, benefit delays, benefit changes, and debt (Mac 2014).

²³ ACRE, Arthur Rank Centre, CLA, CPRE, National Association of Local Councils, NFU, National Housing Federation, Plunkett Foundation, People and Places, Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, Royal Town Planning Institute, Rural Services Network, Town and Country Planning Association.

disadvantage, poverty, and deprivation do not appear. This is surprising given that a recent government-sponsored literature review lists both the – well known - reasons why the cost of providing, for example, public transport services in rural areas is relatively high (Ranasinghe 2014 p13), and the main factors affecting rural disadvantage (p17). Indeed, even the government's rural statistical survey (Defra 2014a) notes, "*Proportionally more households in rural areas are in fuel poverty than the national average.*" (p102), and that, "*...many thousands of individuals living in rural areas are in households below average income.*" (p85).

The failure of the RC's report to mention, let alone emphasize these major rural concerns could be a reflection of the priorities of the majority of its membership. It may, however, indicate nervousness in connection with these topics - an implicit recognition that the CRC's closure signalled the end of an era in which rural policy encouraged research and practice designed to address, and overcome, rural disadvantage. Irrespective of the reasons, the omissions are disappointing, not least because the RC's predecessor, Rural Voice, according to ACRE (2012), helped persuade a Conservative government to publish the first ever rural white paper (DoE/MAFF 1995 p3).

The white paper not only drew attention to disadvantage (DoE/MAFF 1995 Ch.3), but also undoubtedly influenced the priorities of the second white paper (DETR/MAFF 2000) published by a Labour government. This paper also recognized the need to address aspects of disadvantage by, for example, providing "*... support for deprived rural areas ... better rural services which combat poverty and social exclusion ... [and] ... support to develop ... market towns ... as service centres.*" (p12).

The practical and academic work arising from the two white papers is receding now in terms of history and institutional memory (Morris 2014). It seems that government is uninterested in rural development as understood by the D/RDC, CA and CRC. For example, there were doubts about Defra's willingness to continue, after approximately 90 years, to support ACRE financially (ACRE 2015 p2)²⁴. This seeming reluctance by government provokes the question: who will ensure today's wider "rural voice" will be heard by politicians and policy makers? The responsibility cannot lie solely with the Rural Coalition. Neither can it – and nor should it - lie with lobby groups or Establishment membership organizations.

There are, as this paper has described, rural organizations aplenty, but they all have their own priorities and vested interests, and few, if any, have the duty, remit or resources to make rural disadvantage their *raison d'être*, as was the case with the CRC. In the four years since the "Big Society" self-help approach was announced there is little to suggest that voluntary effort alone can do the work once done by the CRC, its predecessors and researchers. In fact the limits of volunteerism were critiqued by McLaughlin in the 1980s, who also, presciently, noted, "*... the attraction of self-help policies to a central government administration ... committed to a programme of public expenditure cuts virtually guarantees their continuation and even their increasing importance.*" (McLaughlin 1987 p364). Although Alan Rogers questioned aspects of McLaughlin's reasoning (Rogers 1987 p359), he understood the need for public sector involvement in tackling rural disadvantage. He wrote:

" ... it must be recognised that the voluntary approach to rural community development is but one means to an end and one which inevitably has its limitations. It is predominantly consensual rather than conflictual in its approach and has a long standing tendency to accept existing structures within rural society rather than oppose

²⁴ The government's decision to continue to support ACRE came shortly after an online petition in support of ACRE gathered more than 13,000 signatures, at an eventual rate of more than 1,000 a day (<http://tinyurl.com/phkluar>).

them. It must be seen, therefore, to be matched by a balancing statutory foundation for rural social policy which is able to recognise deep-seated structural weaknesses in the economy and society of rural areas and to set the framework of rural policy (within which the voluntary sector must operate) accordingly.” (Rogers 1987 p360).

Ultimately only the state can ensure fairness.

The decision to close the CRC appears to have been primarily driven by the government’s desire to reduce the number of quangos, rather than by an objective analysis of need and benefits. It is a decision that flies in the face of more than 100 years’ experience and broad political consensus. Also, it lacks logic. There is evidence that poverty remains dynamic, and is, for some people, persistent and entrenched (Hills 2015 pp124-132), suggesting a need for continued policy responses and associated research²⁵. Perhaps we should not be surprised by the decision, however, for, as Benjamin Disraeli noted, *“England is governed not by logic, but by parliament.”*

It may be, therefore, that the government will come to regret closing the CRC (Hetherington 2013). For, with each year that passes, the information, recorded experiences, research findings, and exemplars of good practice produced by the CRC and its predecessors, become more dated and difficult to find. When, inevitably, it becomes necessary to revisit these topics, to fill the gaps identified and discussed above, the body of work of these organizations will have much to offer tomorrow’s policymakers and practitioners ... if they can find it.

²⁵ Other organizations, eg, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (www.jrf.org.uk), the Institute for Public Policy Research (<http://www.ippr.org/>) and the Centre for Social Justice (<http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/>) are also interested in poverty/disadvantage, and related matters, but their interests are not specifically rural, and they do not occupy the CRC’s “governmental/policy/advisory” niche.

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