

FOOD POLICY PANEL

Harold F. Breimyer, Chairman

The food-farm policy topic was tossed around like a medicine ball by a panel composed of a St. Louis housewife-consumer movement leader, Mrs. Alberta Slavin; a Nebraska farmer, Ralph Raikes; a U.S. Department of Agriculture economist, Kenneth Farrell; a retired agribusiness economist, A. C. Hoffman, and the chairman, an extension economist, Harold Breimyer.

What is the “gravity coefficient”—the degree of seriousness—of the U.S. and world food situation? The answers ranged from Mr. Raikes’ confidence that farm products would soon be not only ample but in surplus, to Mr. Breimyer’s warning that the peril in the present situation is not being appreciated. The majority view was that the current situation is not temporary and will persist.

Discussion revealed almost a hiatus between principles of farm policy and food policy. This seems to say that after years of reciting a litany about their linkage we are not prepared to formulate the two policies jointly.

Mrs. Slavin declared that although consumers are concerned about the price of food, they react even more strongly to any actual shortages, and although they do not think in terms of a food reserve policy, they in effect would support one. Mr. Raikes remained unconvinced. Farrell and Breimyer added that the present situation will bring inescapable pressure for such unpalatable actions as restriction of exports of farm products.

Also included in the discussion was the murky area of costs of marketing. Hoffman and Breimyer concurred in some skepticism that our vast research has proved as useful as hoped. Mrs. Slavin contended that consumer groups could show economists how to carry on meaningful marketing research. Hoffman expressed his concern about overconcentration in the U.S. economy and the ineffectiveness of antitrust policy.

Paradoxically, even though there was little clear consensus on what the content of food and farm policy education should be, the current policy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to down-play that arm of extension education was unanimously deplored.