



Our farmers are prepared—are you?

THERE'S a good deal of hypocrisy about food. People who are well off and well fed indulge themselves by objecting to genetic modification, even though it could help to feed the hungry. Those who have always been able to get fresh food are snooty about supermarkets that have given the urban population unprecedented access to quality vegetables and fruit. Politicians welcome low food prices and forget farm incomes. Farmers complain about imported produce and drive foreign cars. American senators preach free trade and demand more protection for agriculture than anywhere else on Earth. European farm spokesmen talk of the need for efficiency and then subsidise small, part-time, unproductive producers.

These are only some of the contradictions that were confronted at the World Agricultural Forum held in Brussels at the end of last month. *COUNTRY LIFE* followed the proceedings closely because the future of the British countryside is so intimately tied in with the prosperity of British agriculture. Agriculture is now a global business—its success dependent on global decisions and global trends—and this is the platform where farmers from Iowa to Indonesia and West Cumberland to South Australia seek to chart their future. All the tensions were there, but, in spite of the partialities and national prejudices, stark reality ensured a consensus.

The delegates recognised that we are in for a long period of rising food prices, uncertainty of supply and political interference. Climate change is a given. Even dyed-in-the-wool Republicans know the scientists aren't fooling. Extreme weather and unexpected meteorological events are now part of the scene and will increasingly affect harvests. Governments will feel forced to act to protect their own food supplies. So the increasing uncertainties of food production

will be further complicated by protectionist measures taken by ministers conscious that they will not be forgiven for famine.

It all means farming will take centre stage in a world with eight billion mouths to feed by 2030, more sophisticated dietary demands from a swelling middle class and losing farmland to urbanisation and desertification. You might have expected this audience to be upbeat at their prospects in a world of food shortage.

In fact, the atmosphere was far from exuberant. Farmers have grown used to poor returns and an ever-smaller proportion of supermarket prices. Everywhere, farming is unfashion-

able, so the young leave the countryside for the city. Environmental and welfare demands increase costs, but few are prepared to pay for the restrictions they impose. Other parts of the food chain have far greater clout and can

“If we want food and natural diversity, we are going to have to pay the bill.”

insist on better returns to cover bigger energy bills and higher labour costs. The great retail chains and commodity traders squeeze the producer in a way he cannot counter.

All this was presented in a matter-of-fact way. It wasn't farmers whingeing, but businessmen looking at the world as it is—the sober present reality against which they set the looming certainties of shortage. It drove clear conclusions. Scientific research must again become central to agriculture and the irrational fears of genetic modification set aside. Farmers must become bigger and better organised and more able to insist on proper returns. Food will have to take the larger proportion of incomes that it once did. Care for soil quality and conservation of water will be paramount.

These were professional people preparing to take on the biggest challenge of our times. If we want their food, but still want to protect our natural diversity and care for the countryside, we are going to have to pay the bill.