

# TCW *Defending Freedom*

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## Labour's crippling attack on family farms will cut our connection with the land

By **Helen Bagwell** November 23, 2024



Tuesday morning I left the house early. It was cold, wet and dark with a howling wind. Appropriate weather, I thought to myself, to accompany farmers on a day of protest.

As we boarded the train to London from Somerset (where my family, on both sides, has farmed for many generations, some as tenant farmers and some as owners) we could see plenty of farming folk – easily recognisable by their clothing and footwear. Walking from Waterloo station to Westminster they were everywhere, in every shade of brown and green, wellies and work boots, heading to Whitehall to make their presence felt and have their voices heard.

Yesterday's farming protest had two parts and one aim: a series of meetings between 1800 farmers and MPs, alongside a mass protest with tens and tens of thousands of farming people gathered in Whitehall, to show the government the strength of feeling and despair against their inheritance tax plans. The Labour government's plan to introduce an inheritance tax on farmers is set to destroy many family farming businesses.

It takes a lot to upset farmers enough to get them to protest, and even more to protest in London! As someone said to me, it should be seen as the canary in the coal mine; a warning signal to the rest of society. If farmers are worried about their future and how they can survive, then we should all be worried.

I have grown up in farming, I have worked in farming all of my adult life. All of my family are farming and have done so for generations. It has been tough for farmers for years, battling regulation, price cuts, rising costs and government interventions, in addition to the usual pressures of weather, disease, volatile markets and long working hours. Farmers are a tough lot though, expecting hard work and challenges, and often are prepared to do whatever it takes to keep going in order to pass the farm on to the next generation, even if that means earning next-to-nothing from the farm.

In the recent budget, the government chose to throw a hand-grenade into the mix, provoking an instant reaction of horror from every part of the farming community. Announcing inheritance tax on farms is akin to setting a death sentence. Most farming businesses which own land are asset-rich but cash-poor. They would have no funds to pay inheritance tax, leaving the only option to sell the land and thereby destroying the farming business. Tenant farmers don't own their land, but face the same outcome when their landlords are forced to sell the land. In both cases, the land is the critical issue – no land, no farm, no farm business, no farming family and no farming future.

We gathered in Whitehall, packed together like sardines, listening to speakers describing the reality of the situation now faced by farmers up and down the land. Most of the speakers were farmers, but there were a few extras including the new leader of the opposition, Kemi Badenoch. She vowed to reverse the government's decision if they get into power in the future, but farming can't wait that long. Jeremy Clarkson spoke, giving his testimony of how difficult and costly farming is. He asked the protesters to put their hand up if they were from a family farm (almost everyone was) and then asked people to put their hand down if the prospect of inheritance tax would not affect them. I couldn't see anyone lowering their hand. That is the reality that all of us in farming understand, but the government will not acknowledge.



Farming is hard work, almost soul-destroying at times, but (mostly) we love it. We know that hard work, blood, sweat and tears are part of the deal. We are trained from a young age to help out on the family farm, as an expected and valuable part of childhood – that is how we learn our trade and develop the skills, passion, resilience, grit and determination necessary to make a go of farming. My eleven year-old nephew, for example, already knows the cows as well as, if not better than, his Dad! Farmers work long hours and often accept little financial reward or holidays in order to pass the business on in a fit state for the next generation. But what is the point in all of this hard work and sacrifice if it will all be taken away and the next generation left without the land to farm?

This inheritance tax will be a crippling tax on family farms, which will destroy many, and once they are gone they are gone forever. They won't be bought by other farmers – the land will no doubt be hoovered up by investors, corporates, hedge funds, solar park developers and rich elites. I suspect that is all part of the plan. Don't be fooled into thinking that the chancellor has made an error of judgement. She knows what she is doing and this has an ideological motivation. It is a vindictive policy against small business and against farming people, and it will result in the concentration of power, resources, wealth and food production away from the people of this country.

The land is significant. It is spiritually significant. Ask any farmer and they would struggle to deny the feeling of spiritual connection to the land. God created humans to 'have dominion' over the land that he created and provided for humankind to flourish. Throughout the Bible we find connection of God's people to the land, and that connection is seen to be a blessing. I fear that the loss of farming families from the land in this country will be accompanied by the withdrawal of blessing from our nation. As if our society has not already done enough to dishonour God and warrant a withdrawal of his blessing!

We need to wake up and see how serious the threat is. Farming is not an optional extra. It is essential for our food, our countryside and our rural economy. Farming is a vocation, a way of life, a business and a long-term undertaking. Farming families are of critical importance to our nation and its future. As one of the speakers in London said, a farmer whose family has farmed for generations, she will fight as long as there is breath in her body for the future of her children. May God bless her and bless our farmers.

*This article first appeared on Helen's Owl Tree substack and is republished here by kind permission*

