

The Berries of Wrath: Prince Charles demands “hard graft” from furloughed workers

Robert Stevens
21 May 2020

It is a measure of the arrogance and stupidity of the Johnson government that it chose Prince Charles to front its “Pick For Britain” campaign.

So far removed are the Conservatives from the sentiments of the UK population that they never stopped to consider the impact of a bone-idle multi-millionaire landowner urging workers furloughed during the COVID-19 pandemic, students and the unemployed to sign up as seasonal fruit pickers and farm labourers.

On Tuesday, Prince Charles was rolled out to make a video appeal. Speaking against the backdrop of the vegetable garden on his inherited 53,000-acre Scottish estate, Birkhall, Charles felt obliged to educate his “subjects” on the hitherto unknown fact that “Food does not happen by magic; it all begins with our remarkable farmers and growers.”

He moved swiftly on to invoking “that great movement of the Second World War—the Land Army,” supposedly “being rediscovered in the newly created Pick For Britain campaign.”

He explained that “In the coming months, many thousands of people will be needed to bring in the crops. It will be *hard graft* but is hugely important if we are to avoid the growing crops going to waste.”

The only hard graft Charles is aware of is carried out by those employed on his vast Duchy of Cornwall private estate, established in the 14th century to provide an income for the heir apparent. The Duchy’s total area of 126,000 acres is spread over 23 counties. In 2016, it was valued at over £1 billion and last year Charles received £21.6 million in proceeds from the estate.

The workshy prince’s cajoling provoked the inevitable backlash. Social media comments included:

• “Prince Charles asking people to do “hard graft” with one hand in his pocket... #OutOfTouch #Covid_19

#PPEshortage”

• “As far as I’m aware, Prince Charles isn’t an authority on ‘hard graft’”

• “I never thought I’d see ‘Prince Charles’ and ‘hard graft’ in a sentence.”

• “71 year old man who lives in a palace, has a servant to squeeze his toothpaste & has never actually had a job... gives us a lecture on Hard Graft.”

• “What the f*** does this parasitical Prince know about hard graft, not done a day’s graft in his pampered life.”

• “Robespierre is SO overdue a rehabilitation!”

• “Pick for Britain? Seriously? This is the 21st century It’s not the 1940s Somebody’s seen Dig for Victory & thought it would be a hoot to come up with a cringe worthy smokescreen to disguise government policy on migrant workers It doesn’t.”

The latter comment points to the fact that Britain’s harvest could rot in the fields. For the best part of three decades, it has been gathered mainly by tens of thousands of eastern European migrants, who work for one or two seasons at a time—usually from May—before returning home. The low pay on offer is still substantially higher

than in their impoverished native countries.

Due to the anti-immigration policies associated with Brexit, now compounded by the pandemic, much of this workforce is no longer available. The Tories have long desired to replace cheap migrant labour with a native workforce so reduced to penury that they too will do backbreaking work for a pittance. In 2016, then Environment Secretary Andrea Leadsom declared, “We could get British people doing those jobs... the concept of a career in food production is going to be much more appealing going forward.”

The pandemic was duly seized on to make this dream a reality. The declared aim of the Pick For Britain website, launched by Environment Secretary George Eustice who owns a fruit farm, is to “bring workers and employers together and ensures the UK can continue to deliver the best quality British fruit & veg for everyone to enjoy... Come help pick for Britain to feed the nation!” “We believe those who are furloughed may be getting to the point that they want to lend a hand, play their part,” said Eustice.

The campaign has met with only limited success. According to a *Guardian* report Tom Bradshaw, Vice President of the National Farmers’ Union, said the level of interest in Pick for Britain had been “overwhelming,” with over 100,000 hits from unique users. And he estimated that from April, thanks to the crisis, 25–30 percent of pickers on farms were already British when the figure is usually below 1 percent.

But with 20,000 to 40,000 more workers to find, experience shows that many of these online queries will not be pursued. Almost half of all applications, 50,000, were registered with the Alliance of Ethical Labour Providers—one of the main contract suppliers to farms. But of these, just 6,000 opted to complete the video interview for a role and 1,000 rejected the terms and conditions offered outright. Just 112 people agreed a contract.

Industry leaders fear that even if enough workers agree to take a job, and this is a “big if,” many will quit after a few days, or as soon as possible. Jack Ward, CEO of the British Growers Association, told the *Guardian*, “We’re OK or OK-ish,” but “there’s a nervousness about the rest of the season. As we progressively come out of lockdown, some people working on farms will return to their original roles.”

Little wonder. The Pick for Britain FAQ states that pay “varies depending on the specific job role, but hourly pay is underpinned by the national living wage or the national minimum wage [£6.45 for an 18–20 year old and £8.20

for a 21–24 year old] and many jobs have a productivity bonus too.” The majority will receive from “£9.00 to £11.00 per hour.” Only those experienced in the job can “earn up to up to £14 per hour” as the productivity required is only “achievable for some staff.”

For this pittance, workers are expected to work long hours with farms operating from “first thing in the morning until mid-late afternoon... Packing is often done in shifts and can carry on until later in the day”—which farmers have explained means until midnight.

Due to the early start times—often 5:30 a.m.—and the remote rural locations, workers usually stay in farm-supplied accommodation. Pick For Britain boasts that farms generally operate “permanent caravan-style accommodation sleeping three or four people per unit. The charge for the accommodation is set at a “maximum of £57.40 per week”—for someone likely earning less than £300.

In the middle of a pandemic, these living conditions are clearly dangerous. To the question, “How does social distancing work when living in a caravan?” the FAQ responds, “If one member of the group becomes ill with COVID-19 then the others in the group will have to self-isolate as well, just as any other household would do.”

This near-universal rejection of the scheme came despite a barrage of government propaganda comparing labouring in the field today with the Women’s Land Army. The analogy is a significant indication of the future direction of the class war offensive Johnson is readying. The “land girls” were initially taken on as a voluntary workforce during the war and then recruited as conscription labour as part of a vast army of 80,000 workers. Carrying out physically demanding work for long hours, they were often forced to live in barracks.

There are events that in hindsight indicate how ripe a society was for revolution. Marie Antoinette’s response to being told that the peasants had no bread, “Let them eat cake,” springs to mind. A freeloading Prince pontificating on behalf of a dysfunctional government on the necessity for the lower orders to engage in “hard graft” is another such event.



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