

The Jim Hightower Position

The election this spring for the Democratic nomination for agriculture commissioner finds incumbent Reagan Brown opposed by former Observer editor Jim Hightower. We asked the candidates to write presentations for their candidacies for the Observer so that our readers may give each of them a full and equal hearing, and we are pleased this issue to publish their statements. — Ed.

By Jim Hightower

Austin

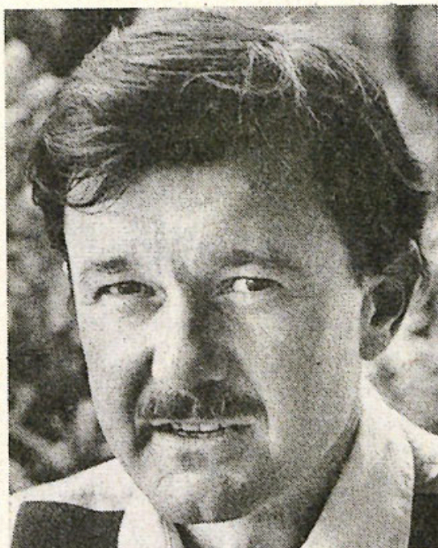
I'm running for agriculture commissioner because people are hurting and this office could be doing something to help them.

For the last three years in a row, family farmers in Texas have been going flat broke, with more than 2,000 of them, on average, going out of business every year. These are good, efficient, productive farmers, who have just produced some of the biggest yields and highest quality crops in Texas history. Yet, they are getting less for their crops than it costs to grow them. For the first time in our history, farmers in 1981 paid more in interest than they received in net income. And 1982 promises to be the worst year yet. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates a minimum decline in farm income of 12%, although the bleakest estimates are that income may plummet by 35%.

But when consumers go to the grocery store, they don't notice food prices falling any. While net farm income fell by 36% during the last three years, food prices in the supermarket went up by 28%. The spread between what a farmer gets and what the consumer pays grows wider and wider — a dollar loaf of bread now returns less than 10 cents to the wheat farmer, a \$2.80 jar of roasted peanuts pays only 26 cents to our peanut growers, a \$4 steak at the meat counter is worth only 55 cents to Texas ranchers, and a \$20 pair of blue jeans returns only 75 cents to the cotton grower.

Meanwhile, the workers in the food industry aren't making enough to keep pace with inflation. Over the last four years, labor's share of the food dollar fell from 46 cents to 31 cents.

The only participants in the food economy that consistently make large financial gains, year-in and year-out, are the huge processing conglomerates and the national retail chains that separate



farmers from consumers. There is a surprising lack of competition among food middlemen — while there are some 32,000 food-processing firms in America, for example, only 50 of them now make more than 90% of the profits in the entire industry. The Federal Trade Commission estimates that the lack of competition in this middle sector costs Texas consumers more than \$1 million in "monopoly overcharges" every year.

It comes down to this: The Big Boys are making a killing off of all of us, tossing us pigs' feet and pork rind. I believe that it's time farmers, workers and consumers got some of the sweet ham for a change. And as Huey Long once said, "If you want some ham, by God, go into the smoke house and get it."

So that's what I'm doing — going into the smoke house of Texas politics, putting together a coalition of farmers with consumers, labor with small business, urban people with rural people, so that we can win back our Agriculture Department and put it to work on the real problems that are hurting the majority of Texans.

Just because this department has done nothing for the last five years doesn't mean it's incapable of helping us. In fact, it's the third largest agency in our state government, and one of the most powerful. It has some 47 laws to work with, affecting everything from price-fixing to marketing to energy policy to economic development in our rural areas. It has a staff of more than 500, 28 field offices scattered throughout the state, an annual budget of nearly \$17 million, and all the tools of executive office. It is also a major platform for shaping the national political debate about food and farm policy — not only should the agriculture

commissioner be a major advocate for the broad constituency of "gougees" in Texas, but he should also be a major voice in the making of national policy. After all, Texas is the second largest food-producing state in the country and that gives us a pretty big stick to wield in Washington.

The incumbent commissioner has been content to hold the title to his office, refusing to use the tools and powers of that office to help anyone. There's a lot more to being agriculture commissioner than sticking a straw in your mouth and humming, "Thank God I'm a country boy," but that's about all the people of this state have had for the past few years. It's time to get this office back in competent hands so we can begin to help people.

An old time populist said something nearly 100 years ago that I think makes sense for us in Texas today. Her name was Mary E. Lease and she took to the political stump in Kansas in the 1880s when farmers were being gouged by railroad corporations for their freight rates. She said something to them that should apply to all of us today: "It's time to raise less corn and more hell." That's what I plan to do. □

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