
**‘Return to a Golden Era’:
Australian farmers' desire to return to a past
era of protection, subsidy and recognition**

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The Australian National Party has proven to be extremely resilient, but there are a number of factors threatening its long-term survival. Many of the Party's supporters demonstrate a desire to return to an earlier era of protection, subsidy, and recognition. They still adhere to the 'countryminded' values of the past, which party elites have largely abandoned. The Nationals' acceptance of many of the deregulatory policies favoured by their coalition partner, the Liberal Party, has led to hostility from some erstwhile supporters. Combined with demographic changes that have eroded its rural constituency, this has reduced the party's vote considerably.

Keywords: *Australian National Party, Australian farmers, Australian Country Party, Countrymindedness, Pauline Hanson, Subsidy, Deregulation, Depopulation*

This paper explores the political significance of many Australian farmers' desire to return to a past era of protection, subsidy and recognition, to a time when government support for agriculture and

the acknowledgment of farmers' worth were inextricably linked. Both support and recognition began to be withdrawn in the early 1970s, a process that gathered pace in the 1980s when the influence of neo-liberalism, known in Australia as economic rationalism, changed both public policy and the way in which urban elites thought about and described farmers. They were no longer widely portrayed as 'the salt of the earth' but as whingers, bludgers, and even rednecks. Kellner¹ suggests that groups whose identity is out of date and no longer socially validated often experience extreme alienation. This appears to be the case for many rural Australians, and is reflected in increased electoral volatility, weakening support for the major parties and a turning to minor parties and independents who promise a return to the comforts of the past. A combination of a mood both resentful and nostalgic combined with the progressive depopulation of Australia's inland farming regions, threatens the continued existence of the National Party, traditionally the voice of rural Australia.

A similar situation prevailed at the end of the nineteenth century when many Australian farmers felt as they do now: alienated, bitter about their status and financially insecure.² To achieve both financial security and community recognition, farmers turned to political action, initially through a series of sectional and regional organisations and then, when these failed to meet their expectations, through their own political party. From the 1920s to the 1970s the Australian Country Party (renamed the Country National Party in 1975 and the National Party in 1982) was instrumental in achieving many of the farmers' goals. A succession of state and federal governments of all political complexions was persuaded to provide a range of subsidies and support mechanisms to farmers who were generally described positively as 'the backbone of the nation' or the 'salt of the earth', descriptions which matched the way farmers thought about themselves. During this time, both their identity and government agricultural policy were shaped by the assumptions of 'countrymindedness': that there are superior values in the rural way of life that should be preserved and that city dwellers live on the wealth created by farmers. In order to understand the current

unhappiness of many Australian farmers, and their willingness to consider alternatives to the National Party, it is essential to recognise what they have lost in the way of status and economic security.

Countrymindedness and public policy

Countrymindedness is a term of uncertain origin describing a form of agrarian ideology as old as the division between city and country.³ At its heart is a belief in farming as an ennobling occupation on which all sectors of society depend. Farmers and their representatives down the centuries have shared Xenophon's sentiments that:

husbandry is the mother and nurse of all other arts. For, when husbandry flourishes, all other arts flourish, but whenever the land is laid waste, the other arts ...well nigh perish.⁴

In the same fashion, Australian farmers identified themselves as central to the nation's prosperity and well-being. B.D Graham quotes a political candidate in 1920 who describes the farmer as 'the root of the tree. If the roots were not sound the leaves would wither, and few flowers would be produced.'⁵ But in a dry country like Australia, which, with the exception of a few areas, is largely unsuited to European style farming,⁶ it was difficult to keep farming roots healthy. Hardship often led to bitterness and the perception that life in the city was comparatively easy. To make matters worse, there was a widespread belief that 'the great selfish consumer masses'⁷ of urban Australia were living on the efforts of rural producers whose neglect would see the cities suffer. A rural newspaper columnist argued in 1914 that farmers,

...interests are really everyone's interests. You can destroy your cities, but so long as the country flourishes these cities will rise up finer than ever, but if the country production is dead... grass will grow in every street in the cities and ruin must reign.⁸

This is remarkably similar to a section in William Jennings Bryan's famous Cross of Gold speech.⁹ Agrarian ideology had wide appeal.

In Australia, frustrated farmers turned first to co-operative movements and rural pressure groups and then to the fledgling Australian Country Party to obtain what they felt was their due. The party, established federally in 1920, had mixed success, but over time its achievements were considerable and far out of proportion to its numerical representation and support. Much of the Country Party's agenda was transformed into 'settled national programmes'.¹⁰ The Country Party always argued that social, psychological, cultural and equity considerations should be taken into account when framing rural policy. Economic efficiency was to be considered, but it was not a priority. When Country Party supporters argued that 'any sensible cost in maintaining people in the country is not an unfair charge against the cities. It is an investment in our national welfare',¹¹ they were not calculating in dollar terms alone.

There was a widespread belief in the need for balance between the city and the country. There was also a deeply entrenched fear that empty Australian spaces invited invasion by the 'teeming millions of coloured people within a week of our thousand miles of undefended coastline'.¹² According to Earle Page, leader of the Country Party (1921-1941) 'it would be the most natural thing that neighbouring nations, especially those short of minerals and food for their growing millions, should cast envious eyes towards us.'¹³ Decades later Pauline Hanson was to tap into similar fears of 'being swamped by Asians'.¹⁴ Governments in which the Country Party was a coalition partner regularly took factors such as defence, 'social purpose, national growth concepts and the desire to develop regions'¹⁵ into account when making rural and regional policy. The party believed that all primary producers were 'entitled to a return which represented recovery of costs, a fair return for labour and a reasonable profit',¹⁶ even if they were farming on land unsuited to European style crops and livestock. Farmers became accustomed to having their interests considered whatever the commercial viability of their enterprise.

Along with material support came a rise in status, as the premises of countrymindedness came to be widely accepted. Even the Australian Labor party was persuaded that agrarian reform was 'a fundamental principle of the Gospel of Labor.'¹⁷ Labor's reluctance to attack rural interests was noted. One frustrated economist suggested by way of partial explanation that 'intellectuals are seemingly bemused by the legend of the pioneer, the man on the land.'¹⁸ Another noted that Labor's commitment to irrigation and land settlement schemes appeared to be based on 'vague and emotional commitments rather than careful appraisal of the economic merits of particular proposals.'¹⁹

The Country Party welcomed support from Labor but argued that no other party could adequately represent country interests.²⁰ Yet in its first big battle on behalf of its constituents - the removal of the tariff on manufactured goods - the party was unsuccessful, although it managed in a roundabout fashion to find a solution that compensated farmers for the costs imposed by the tariff. Not only did farmers feel resentful that the tariff forced their costs up, but also that the manufacturers that it protected sold primarily on the domestic market, unlike farmers who faced the rigours of foreign competition. Rural producers had the additional concern that countries whose exports were adversely affected by the imposition of Australian protective tariffs would retaliate by refusing to buy Australian primary produce. Finally, there was an anti-urban dimension to the farmers' anger because the tariff protected city-based manufacturers and organised labour. Even when in 1922, the Country Party entered into coalition with the Nationalists to form government, it was unable to remove the tariff.

Under the leadership of Earle Page, the party tried a different tack, urging farmers 'to break into the vicious circle themselves'²¹ and to seek compensatory assistance for primary industries. On the grounds that 'in Australia, if agriculture prospers, all business is prosperous,'²² Page and his successors made their case for substantial government expenditure on primary production. So pervasive was

the belief in Country Party circles in the primacy of rural industries that Sir Michel Bruxner, leader of the New South Wales Country party (1922 -1958) could argue that a bridge over the Clarence River in the north of the state was productive, whereas the Sydney Harbour Bridge was not.²³

Typically the Country Party acted as a facilitator or agent for rural producer groups, giving them a direct and privileged voice in policy making that was not shared by other key interests such as consumers.²⁴ Either directly or indirectly, the Country Party achieved increased farm income security via farm subsidies, compulsory marketing schemes, protection from imports, rural credit facilities, drought relief, and concessions for costs incurred on a range of activities such as the eradication of pests, the clearing of timbered land and the draining of swamps. Money was spent on agricultural research, roads, irrigation schemes (for which Country Party politicians had a cargo-cult regard), and the provision of subsidised telephones, postal services, radio, television and electricity. Country Party politicians used the federal horizontal equalisation principle to argue that all Australians were entitled to the same facilities wherever they lived. Few disagreed, although Victorian Liberal F.W. Eggleston recognized the connection between government support for agriculture and countrymindedness when he noted with some disapproval that Country parties had been able 'to secure a good many tax concessions to primary producers on the grounds that ...[they]...are "the salt of the earth".²⁵

The Country Party also argued successfully that the democratic principle of one vote, one value should be rejected in favour of rural over-representation. The arguments they made were threefold: that a small rural population spread over vast area made parliamentary representation difficult; that rural Australians produces a disproportionate amount of the nation's wealth and; that numerically equal electorates would lead to the domination of the country by the city, to the detriment of the nation as a whole.²⁶ Country Party leader John McEwen (1958-1971) said in justification that Australia needed:

the voice of the man from the rural area, from the outback area, the man who is speaking for the export industries, which if they aren't sufficiently catered for will fail and drive the whole of Australia down with them.²⁷

A rural newspaper correspondent was even blunter:

I do not see any unfairness in Western Queensland electorates having say, 8000 electors, while city seats have 22000. In my book anyone living west of a line through Mt Garnet and Roma deserves votes just for living there.

Further, of the 800 individuals of a western electorate, the greater proportion would be involved in the production of something eatable, wearable, or exportable. Out of 22,000 city voters, the greater would t [sic] produce anything that could be eaten, worn or exported. They spend unproductive lives sitting behind desks adding up endless columns of figures, or standing behind counters handing over goods (more than likely, imported) to other unproductive hands. And all expecting every cent of the basic wage which, ultimately, has to come from actual production.

Surely, a western man who produces 500 fat bullocks a year (droughts, fires, floods, ticks and distance permitting) should be entitled to more representation than a man who never produced anything in his life?²⁸

As rural areas depopulated, however, demands for electoral weightage became harder to justify. With the election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972, the electoral laws were changed to reduce the permissible variation in electoral size from 20 per cent to 10 per cent and in 1984 the Hawke Labor government introduced one vote/one value boundaries for federal elections.

Not only was the Country Party out of office in 1972, but arguments based on country-mindedness carried less weight. Negative impressions of farmers appeared more frequently in print. With the

prioritisation of economic arguments, the golden era of protection and support for Australia's farmers was nearing an end. The next thirty years would see the achievements of the Country Party in securing both economic security and status for rural Australians progressively eroded.

Winds of change

Even before the election of the Whitlam government, some Australian economists, influenced by doubts about Keynesianism and concerns about Australia's future, had begun to raise questions about the economic viability of trade barriers and the likelihood of finding remunerative markets for subsidised produce. Where once farming had been described as uniquely productive, its contribution began to be questioned. When economists, unburdened by considerations of countrymindedness, weighed up the benefits and costs of rural assistance they abandoned social, cultural and equity considerations and concentrated on the financial balance sheet. Their findings refuted many farmers' deeply held beliefs about the primacy of agriculture. One agricultural economist calculated that it took \$174 million in dairy industry subsidies to earn \$100 million in export income.²⁹ Another economic commentator accused the Country Party of 'fleecing the country' through rural industry subsidies.³⁰ At a more general level, the value of industry protection, one of the pillars of the Australian settlement, began to be questioned.³¹

From 1963, the *Financial Review* began pursuing an aggressively anti-protectionist line, singling out Country Party leader John McEwen for particular attention. Under the leadership of 'arch-protectionist' McEwen, the Country Party, once a vigorous opponent of the tariff, had become its strongest advocate.³² As Minister for Agriculture and Commerce (1949-56), Trade (1956-63) and Trade and Industry (1963-1971) McEwen left an indelible imprint on the nation's economic structures.³³ He supported 'balanced development', which involved incentives and protection for both primary and secondary industries.³⁴ His motives appear to have been a combination of broadening the Country Party's support base by

appealing to mining and manufacturing interests and a strong belief that protection was necessary to foster industrial development and sustain full employment. By 1967, virtually any industry that asked for tariff protection received it.³⁵

This comfortable state of affairs ended when, as part of a strategy to control inflation and arrest Australia's economic decline, the Whitlam government launched an 'assault upon Protection' through the reduction of tariff rates by 25 per cent and the creation of the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC) in 1973 to replace the Tariff Board.³⁶ The Commission was given extended powers to examine agricultural assistance measures that had previously been exempt from Tariff Board scrutiny. Speaking on the occasion of the introduction of the IAC Bill, Bill Haydon, Minister for Social Security (1972-75) and later Treasurer (1975), made it clear that the Labor Party rejected 'crude doctrines of agricultural primacy.'³⁷ In 1974, to the outrage of farmers, Labor decided to allow the subsidy for superphosphate fertilisers to lapse, having already begun restructuring the dairy industry in 1973.

Instead of seeing the Whitlam government's moves against protection as the beginning of a long-term trend, many farmers saw them as the aberrations of an urban party, to be reversed with a change of government. This proved not to be the case, although for farmers, the election of the Fraser coalition government (1975-1983) appeared to offer the comfort of a return to the stability and predictability of the past. This was because Fraser, despite his free market rhetoric, favoured government intervention. The Prime Minister was closer to his National Party cabinet colleagues than many in his own party and shared with them a belief in 'protection, tolerated arbitration, and championed a managed exchange rate and strong government intervention in markets.'³⁸ Fraser, whose prime ministership marked the end of the long period of post-war prosperity, was the last Australian Prime Minister, Labor or Liberal, to retain these beliefs.

Within Fraser's own party there was a ferment that prepared the ground for the economic and public sector reforms of the Hawke-Keating Labor governments which would see the old 'regulated, protected, introspective' Australia disappear.³⁹ Policy and opinion makers were drawn to the economic theories of Friedman and Hayek and the governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Economic journalists, many of them ex-Treasury employees, endorsed laissez-faire policies and the transfer of government authority to the market.⁴⁰ Influential neo-liberal think tanks promoted economic rationalism. Even a farmers' organisation, the National Farmers Federation, formed in 1979, argued in favour of deregulation and the removal of 'inefficient' farmers. Increasingly the demands of globalisation for flexible and adaptable modes of production convinced influential Australians of all political persuasions of the need to replace the machinery of the state with the mechanisms of the market place.⁴¹ Just as policies based on country-mindedness had once had bi-partisan support, so by 1983, the year the Hawke Labor government won office, there was broad political consensus on the wisdom of dismantling the old nation building state.⁴²

Deregulation of the Australian economy was swift, ensuring the transformation of fundamental political institutions and reshaping political culture.⁴³ Labor governments over the next ten years responded to the apparently inexorable pressures of global capitalism by making economic efficiency the primary goal of all government service provision. Equity considerations were largely abandoned with the result that rural services significantly deteriorated, underscoring farmers' declining political influence. By 1996 a series of studies indicated that levels of economic and social disadvantage were greater in rural and regional Australia than in the capital cities as a result of exposure to 'the sharper edge of global competition, combined with the rationalization of both public and private sector services.'⁴⁴ It was not lost on Australian farmers either that their competitors in the United States and Europe continued to be subsidised.

So long as such policies were made by the urban-based Labor parties, farmers and country townfolk could console themselves with the prospect of more sympathetic treatment from a Coalition government in which the National party was a junior, but traditionally influential, partner. Farmers expect more concessions when 'their party' is sharing power⁴⁵ but the actions of the Howard coalition government since its election in 1996 demonstrate how much the influence of the National Party has declined, and how out of touch its leaders are with grassroots small farmer members. This was driven home by the Nationals' endorsement of national uniform gun legislation, introduced in the wake of the Port Arthur massacre and widely supported in the cities but almost universally opposed by farmers. To rub salt in the wounds of many supporters, the parliamentary National Party made it clear that it had abandoned countrymindedness in favour of the free market policies that are the price of coalition with the Liberals. As a result, the Party's leaders endorse elements of micro-economic reform that impact directly on services in rural Australia such as the full privatisation of Telstra, and National Competition Policy, which has encouraged state governments 'to improve the efficiency of the national economy by means of general deregulation' and which has seen large reductions in regional employment in telecommunications, rail and electricity authorities.⁴⁶ The party's own research found that the issues that angered its usual supporters were 'gun laws, trade policy, economic rationalism, the so-called level playing field.'⁴⁷

Despite this, National Party leaders are reluctant to blame the economic policies they have embraced for the deteriorating conditions faced by many farmers and country residents. John Anderson, the current National Party leader, in a 1999 address to the National Press Club in Canberra, conceded that Australia was in danger of becoming two nations, one urban and rich and the other regional and poor, but blamed technological change for the trend rather than economic rationalism, globalisation or national competition policy.⁴⁸ Undoubtedly advances in technology have allowed fewer farmers to produce more food and fibre and improvements in transport have permitted consumers to bypass small

towns in favour of larger centres. Since the mid-1950s farm numbers in Australia have declined by 2000 farms a year.⁴⁹ Many former farmers have joined the unemployed, ill-equipped by experience and training for positions in new 'post-industrial' areas such as tourism or the knowledge industry. The capacity for physical labour and the endurance essential to farming are no longer valued skills in the new economy.⁵⁰

As farmers and their families leave the land, jobs in service industries in small towns have disappeared along with the reduction in demand. Small country towns all over Australia have 'died' because schools, police and railway stations, banks and other services have been withdrawn as both public and private sectors activities have been recentralised in large regional cities.⁵¹ John Anderson indicated that 1300 bank branches had closed across Australia (not all of them in country towns), with devastating effects on local economies. He failed to mention the impact of the contraction of public services, or to take into account the snowballing effect of such departures on investment in local businesses, leading to further service deterioration.⁵² Where there has been growth in rural areas in recent years, it has largely been confined to commuter belts, coastal and other scenic regions: 'By contrast, depopulation was the defining feature of Australia's inland agricultural regions.'⁵³ The declining populations mean that social networks and traditional community organisations such as local sporting teams often become unsustainable, with negative impacts on mental and physical health. Levels of depression and alcoholism are higher in the bush and rural youth suicide is as much as 13 times the national average.⁵⁴

As well as declining farmer numbers, agricultural production is less significant than it was in the days when every school child learnt that 'Australia rides on the sheep's back'. Rural exports have declined as a percentage of total exports from as much as 77 per cent in the early 1950s to 40 per cent in 1970. By 1997-98 the rural goods share of exports had fallen to under 20 per cent.⁵⁵ With farmers generating less wealth, successive governments have felt that the direction of

funds to improve the standard of living in country areas could not be justified.⁵⁶ This is especially the case when economic factors remain the primary, or only, consideration in the formulation of government policy. The National Party explicitly rejects the European justification for farm subsidies that agriculture is not only concerned with producing food and fibre but also plays a critical role in preserving the fabric of rural communities.⁵⁷ According to National Party Agriculture Minister Warren Truss, who chastised farmers for 'talking about doom and gloom',⁵⁸ such policies see farming's conversion to a 'Disneyland theme park role'.⁵⁹ Policy makers no longer accept the nostalgic Physiocratic premises of the old Country Party that agriculture is uniquely productive and fundamental to the nation's well-being. Instead, subsidies are dismissed by John Anderson as 'handouts to farmers'.⁶⁰ Instead of the direct assistance farmers once received, National Party policy, and government funding, are directed to the development of 'self-reliant regions' with the 'Federal government supporting new ideas, self-reliance and achievement' and fostering private sector investment.⁶¹ Without many farmers realising it 'the structural and broader economic conditions, which enabled agricultural interests to have a significant impact on policy development in Australia, no longer exist.'⁶²

Other changes have added to the uncertainty and challenges of rural life and have threatened traditional forms of identity.⁶³ The role of women has changed, migration has transformed Australia's Anglo-Celtic face and new concerns about the environment and the rights and living conditions of Aboriginal Australians have brought old assumptions and traditions into question. For many affluent, cosmopolitan Australians, such changes have been welcome. For them, the transformations of the global era offer freedoms, connections and possibilities unavailable in the era of Page, Fadden and McEwen. Struggling farmers on the other hand feel insecure and anxious in a rapidly changing world. They form an economically, politically and socially isolated underclass,⁶⁴ apparently abandoned by the party that had once claimed to watch over rural interests and that had so clearly articulated their shared beliefs. Research consistently shows that farmers still adhere to the tenets of

countrymindedness.⁶⁵ Its abandonment by policy makers has threatened not only livelihood but identity.

For farmers, changes to the way in which they are portrayed in this new economic climate are painful because it has become clear that their contribution is no longer recognised as it once was. This 'denial of recognition is not experienced abstractly, but emotionally in indignation, shame and anxiety.'⁶⁶ Those appealing for help, such as the unemployed in the outer suburbs or farmers wanting assistance are inevitably stigmatised as dole bludgers or whingers. National Party politicians like John Anderson recognise that 'the sense of alienation, of being left behind, of no longer being recognised and respected for the contribution being made, is deep and palpable in much of rural and regional Australia today.'⁶⁷

In the same speech, however, he described farm subsidies as 'handouts', seemingly unable to perceive the connection between the sense of alienation he describes and the denigration of the recipients implicit in the use of the term 'handouts'. Dependence on state support (handouts) is increasingly associated with personal failure and inadequacy.⁶⁸ Whereas once policy-makers and newspaper columnists idealised rural Australians, in the 1990s there were numerous negative portrayals. Instead of the Kings in Grass Castles described by novelist Mary Durack, they were 'kings of the welfare state' or 'bludgers in grass castles.'⁶⁹ One farmer expressed his frustration in terms that demonstrate the conflict between his own perceptions, shaped by countrymindedness, and those of farming's urban critics:

It's like...well, we create wealth, but others seem to accumulate it. We provide the necessities of life, but no-one appreciates it anymore.

We've become the nation's nasties. We're clobbered for wrecking the environment: written off as a bunch of whingers ...⁷⁰

An anecdote told by a Queensland Department of Primary Industries consultant captures well what such changes mean at a personal level. An old farmer told her: 'Once I used to feel proud walking down Queen Street [Brisbane's main shopping street]. Now I feel ashamed.'

Political impact

Once the National Party's rural constituency could confidently anticipate government compliance with their demands for action.⁷¹ Now, however, they can exercise little control over government policy and deeply resent their role as 'policy takers',⁷² a resentment sharpened by comparison with the way things used to be. The 'sense of grievance'⁷³ that marked the foundation of the Australian Country Party can be observed again, exacerbated by apparent urban indifference to the plight of country Australians. Like their nineteenth century counterparts they have found it difficult to obtain representation through the mainstream parties or to have their countryminded frame of reference accepted by the urban media. It is not surprising that in these circumstances many have turned away from the National Party and sought alternative means of representation and influence. Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party was the most spectacular, if short lived, manifestation of this desire to return to the past.

Populism's programme is often one of restoration.⁷⁴ Pauline Hanson recognised the desire in many Australians to return to a more secure past and the rise of her party exposed the extent of disillusionment with the three major parties and with the values espoused by opinion formers in the media and the academy.⁷⁵ In the case of One Nation its supporters were opposed to both economic and social liberalism. People drawn to her party felt economically or culturally threatened by the rapid rate of change they had experienced and resentful of the cosmopolitan elite who, it appeared, was both imposing the changes and benefitting from them. As Michael Leach has argued:

In one sense, the project of Hansonism was that of recovering a particular version of Australian identity and 'place' perceived to be under threat, and of securing the public 'recognition' of this identity.⁷⁶

For farmers, struggling to recapture the recognition that the almost universal acceptance of countrymindedness had once bestowed upon them, Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party seemed to offer a path back to that golden era. Electoral analysis makes it clear that seats designated by the Australian Electoral Commission as rural provided the greatest levels of support to One Nation. In the 1998 federal election the ONP was supported by 12 per cent of rural voters compared with 4 per cent of inner metropolitan voters.⁷⁷ In the 1998 Queensland state election the National Party was hit in its heartland seats where:

the Hanson message was particularly heeded by regional and rural Queenslanders who perceived their social and economic environments to be under threat, and who were predisposed to blame the major parties (especially the Nationals) for their predicament.⁷⁸

The One Nation Party vote was however volatile.⁷⁹ In the end, a combination of scandal and ineptitude on the part of One Nation and better tactics on the part of the major parties saw it diminish as a political force. Its fleeting success, however, revealed the existence of conflicting and almost irreconcilable desires within different parts of the Australian electorate and signalled a deterioration in the National Party's electoral fortunes that it has found difficult to arrest, especially when combined with the demographic changes that have been eroding its support base for decades. As rural populations decline, redistribution sees the number of rural seats reduced. Other traditional National Party seats, especially in scenic coastal districts have changed direction as retirees and city escapees with non-rural interests and party affiliations move there. Indeed over the past ten years there appears to have been a marked physical and cultural re-

orientation in Australia from the interior to the coast. More than 80 per cent of Australians now live within 50 kilometres of the coast.⁸⁰

Although farmers constitute only a small percentage of the electorate, they are extremely important to the National Party both as voters and local branch members. Their falling numbers and disillusionment with the party have influenced its decline, clearly demonstrated in its shrinking vote. Whereas once the party regularly achieved more than 10 per cent of the vote, its share of the vote throughout the nineties has dropped to single figures. In the 1998 federal election, the party obtained 5.4 per cent of the vote while One Nation obtained 8.4 per cent. Although the One Nation vote in 2001 dropped to 4.3 per cent the Nationals managed only a 0.2 per cent increase to 5.6 per cent. The vote for independents and others was 9.5 per cent. In an election which returned a triumphant Coalition government for a third term, the National Party lost two seats to independents, both advocates of a return to the protectionist policies of the past and one a disgruntled former National with leanings towards One Nation.

The National Party's reduced representation has impacted negatively on its capacity to influence policy. For example, in the first Bruce-Page government the Country Party provided 5 of an 11-member ministry. During the McEwen era it retained the same number of ministers in a cabinet that had expanded to 14. The National Party's current cabinet representation is 3 of a total of 16, with the party losing one portfolio to the Liberals after its poor performance in the 2001 election. It is difficult to conceive of circumstances in which the National Party could regain the influential position it once held.

Its contemporary weakness is illustrated by responses in 2002 to one of the worst droughts experienced in Australia for 100 years. Whereas once the Party would have been at the forefront in demands for assistance, it has maintained a low profile, leaving the limelight to a newly formed private organization, the Farmhand Foundation. According to its founders, this body had the dual aims of providing

immediate relief to people suffering the effects of drought and of eventually making Australian agriculture 'drought proof'. A version of the Bradfield scheme, a proposal devised in the 1930s to divert some of Australia's rivers to the interior and a favourite project of the old Country Party has been mooted again. Because all of the Farmhand principals have links to Telstra, the suspicion has arisen that their interest lies in persuading rural voters to accept the full privatisation of Telstra in return for money spent on irrigation and water infrastructure.⁸¹ Whatever the truth of such allegations, it is clear that the National Party's role in shaping public policies of significance to its constituents has been greatly reduced. The party has been effectively sidelined on two issues of importance to its rural constituents: the further sale of Telstra and strategies for dealing with the impact of drought.

The Farmhand project shows that interest in the conditions of rural Australia has not totally vanished. Nor has government funding completely disappeared. The impact of One Nation alerted the Howard government of the volatility of the rural vote and money from the first sale of Telstra shares was committed to establishing Rural Transaction Centres in rural communities with populations below 3000. These centres replaced financial, communication and government services that had previously been withdrawn from small communities. There were further boosts to regional areas, especially those in marginal electorates, when Federation Fund grants were dispersed in 2001 for projects such as the restoration of historic buildings, the establishment of heritage trails and the construction of playgrounds and picnic areas. The restructuring of the troubled dairy and sugar industries has also been costly.

Pork-barrelling gestures and policies designed to eliminate 'inefficient' farmers do not however constitute a return to the settled national programmes of the past where government financial support for rural producers was taken for granted. Nor does a media campaign linked with business interests suggest that the ideas of countrymindedness will once again underpin government policy. Instead, farmers' current position as 'policy takers' is reinforced,

dependent to a great extent on the exigencies of electoral politics and media interest. There has been no recanting from economic rationalist policies by the Howard government and no suggestion that factors such as social purpose or achieving a balance between city and country might be considered in framing rural policy.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that in order to understand the alienation of many rural Australians, and the volatility of the rural vote it is necessary to comprehend what farmers have lost over the past thirty years in the way of status and financial assistance from governments. From the 1920s to the 1970s, the widely accepted beliefs of countrymindedness provided both social validation for farmers and the justification for government intervention in their favour. Countrymindedness was central to the ideology of the farmers' own party, the Country Party, which was adept at achieving support and recognition for farmers and their goals. Neo-liberal politicians, on the other hand, argue against such intervention and classify those who ask for it as whingers or bludgers in receipt of handouts. Economic rationalism in conjunction with technological developments has reduced the number of farmers and hastened the decline of country towns. Parallel with the revolution in economic policy have come other changes, such as the changing role of women, multiculturalism, and the recognition of Aboriginal land rights, which have threatened traditional forms of identity. The farmers' own party, the National Party has jettisoned countrymindedness and replaced it with liberal economic policies. Faced with such change, Australian farmers have turned to parties and independents who reflect their own desire to find a way back to the comforts of the past. In these circumstances, the long-term future for the National Party appears bleak.

NOTES

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