

The Changing Geography of Rural Australia*

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This paper examines some of the key trends affecting the geography of rural Australia. The paper suggests that the changes evident in rural areas are the result of complex interactions between natural and human systems. Particular attention is paid to the links between wider processes of economic restructuring, social conditions and environmental issues in shaping contemporary geographies of rural areas.

The paper begins by arguing that, for many parts of rural Australia, the 1970s marked a decisive shift in both economic and social conditions. During the two decades following World War Two rural areas generally prospered as high global commodity prices, particularly for wheat and wool, led to a prosperous agricultural sector, vibrant economic conditions in the small towns that supported farming, and a growing population. Since the early 1970s, however, the picture for rural regions has been quite different. A number of factors, such as the 1973 and 1979 Oil shocks, global economic uncertainty, growing international production of agricultural commodities, and subsidised farm production in the United States and the European Union, have undermined the prosperity of rural areas.

* Aquest text és un resum de la conferència prevista per al 27 de maig de 2004 que s'hagué de suspendre (vegeu p. 145).

Furthermore, significant shifts in Australian government policy exposed rural areas to these volatile international economic conditions. For much of the 20th Century Australian governments were committed to the development and maintenance of export orientated agriculture and stable rural communities. While the agricultural industry, and the rural society that it supported, were periodically affected by economic downturns, wars, and technological changes, their full socioeconomic impacts were often tempered by interventionist agricultural, social and regional development policies. By contrast, the period since the 1970s has been one in which governments have attempted to reduce levels of market intervention. Direct financial assistance to farmers has virtually ceased, tariffs and other forms of income protect have been removed, and there is reduced commitment to socio-spatial equity through the cross subsidisation of services and infrastructure.

The changing political-economy of rural Australia is evident in the social conditions facing many residents. Real net farm incomes have fallen and triggered a series of farm amalgamations and expansions as larger operators displace less profitable producers. Much of the available evidence suggests that the displaced farm families rarely remain in their rural communities, and tend to migrate to coastal or metropolitan regions. The economic reliance on agriculture throughout large parts of rural Australia has meant that the changes affecting agriculture do not end at the farm level. In small towns that service agriculture, a reduction in the farm population has resulted in falling levels of patronage for businesses and services, contributing to a contraction of local economies, widespread job losses and increased outmigration. Recent evidence suggests that around half of all inland towns in Western Australia are experiencing population decline. While wider economic processes may have been the trigger for these falls in population, parallel changes in government policy compounded this impact, particularly in many of the smaller centres.

However, it is important to stress that not all rural areas are in decline. Indeed, a number of coastal and more scenic regions have experienced considerable population and economic growth over recent decades as former urban (and, in some cases, rural) residents seek alternative living environments. Such growth often has important political and planning implications, particularly in those areas where the quality of aesthetic landscapes and the availability of agricultural land come under threat.

Underlying the social, economic and political changes occurring in rural areas are major transformations occurring in natural environments. Soil and water salinisation, erosion, soil acidification, the destruction of natural habitats, and the loss of biodiversity are major problems in rural Australia. One of the central arguments of this paper is that unless these natural resources are managed in a sustainable manner, then it will be impossible to ensure the social and economic sustainability of rural Australia.