



Soap Operas, Cenotaphs and Sacred Cows: countrymindedness and rural policy debate in Australia

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In spite of the fact that Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world, our national identity is closely tied to the bush. This paper discusses the pervasiveness of the agrarian myth in Australian culture and the impact this has on rural policy debate. It discusses how countrymindedness manifests itself in twenty-first century Australian culture and what this particular aspect of the national self-image means for discussion about rural policy. The paper argues that there is a reticence to criticise farmers which can insulate farm programs from the levels of scrutiny which apply to other areas of government policy.

In June 2005, the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) announced a Campaign for Australian Agriculture which it believes "through awareness-raising activities and education...can reconnect metropolitan Australians with rural Australia" (NFF 2005). The main impetus for this campaign was the perceived impact of campaigns by groups such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and green groups which present an image of farmers as destroyers of the environment and, as portrayed by PETA, as guilty of animal cruelty. Prior to the announcement of the NFF campaign, the then-Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Warren Truss, spent a significant portion of a speech to the Rural Press Club in Victoria arguing that groups like PETA were damaging the farmer's image and were misleading urban people about agriculture. He expressed concern that urban people were out of touch with the realities of rural Australia and were susceptible to the inaccurate claims of extremist groups (Truss 2005b). In a not dissimilar vein, then-Deputy Prime Minister, John Anderson, delivered a speech in 1999 titled *One Nation or Two?* in which he talked about the urban-rural divide (Anderson 1999). The Truss speech and NFF campaign of 2005 both refer to the need to bridge this divide.

These campaigns raise some interesting questions about farmers, their place in the Australian community and the role of the rural in the Australian national identity. Why are farmers concerned about the perceptions of non-farmers? Is there really an urban-rural divide? Are the urban media as ignorant and critical of farmers as Truss, Anderson and the NFF argue? And if so, is this ignorance to the detriment of farmers? This paper argues that while there may be an urban-rural divide in Australia, it is not necessarily a negative for farmers. It is part of the Australian story and has served the purposes of the National Party in preserving their *raison d'être* as the voice of country Australia. While the urban media are arguably limited in their capacity to report rural issues, the reporting that does occur tends to be more pro-farmer than anti-, reflecting a residual agrarianism in the Australian community that has a long history. Where this agrarianism is less benign is in its implications for the public policy debate on rural programs, resulting in a lack of critical analysis of

government policies towards the rural sector and the potential for the emergence of real inequities between farmers and non-farmers.

The paper is organised as follows. It begins with an exploration of agrarianism and its Australian manifestation, known as 'countrymindedness'. It examines the characteristics of this myth, its ties with national identity and its survival in twenty-first century Australian culture. The paper then examines recent media reporting of farm issues to test the assumptions underpinning the NFF campaign that farmers are not getting good press and that urban Australia is indifferent, or at worst antagonistic, to farmers. Finally the paper explores the implications for rural policy debate of the urban-rural divide and the limits that countrymindedness appears to place on the capacity for public analysis of government support for rural Australia.

Agrarianism

The seminal definition of agrarianism was developed by American rural sociologists Flinn and Johnson in the early 1970s. They outlined the tenets of agrarianism as follows:

- (i) *"farming is the basic occupation on which all other economic pursuits depend for raw materials and food"*;
- (ii) *"agricultural life is the natural life for man; therefore, being natural, it is good, while city life is artificial and evil"*;
- (iii) agriculture delivers *"complete economic independence of the farmer"*;
- (iv) *"the farmer should work hard to demonstrate his virtue, which is made possible only through an orderly society"*; and
- (v) *"family farms have become indissolubly connected with American democracy"*. (Flinn and Johnson 1974:189-94) Italics in original.

Apart from the final Jeffersonian reference to American democracy, these characteristics are very similar to those described by Don Aitkin in the Australian context as countrymindedness (Aitkin 1985). The term countrymindedness appears to have emerged in Australia in the 1920s and is associated with the National Party and its differentiation from the Liberal and Labor Parties. It is also closely linked with a series of legends that are central to national identity. The legends of the Bush, the Pioneer, Ned Kelly and the ANZAC are all based in rural Australia (Frost 1992:69). When Australia presents itself to the world, it often uses the bush as part of the imagery – for example Australian athletes entering the Olympic Stadium in Seoul in (albeit yellow) Drizabones and Akubras.

Agrarianism has a long history in Western thought. The idea that rural life is wholesome, fulfilling and morally uplifting dates back to Aristotle and earlier. The transition from hunter-gatherer to agriculture-based societies was seen as the beginning of civilisation. It allowed for the development of permanent settlements, larger aggregations of population, specialisation of functions within the community, greater food production and other advantages which facilitated the evolution of modern societies (Montmarquet 1989:3-6). Montmarquet (1989:6) argues that "the agricultural revolution" is the event which still shapes our world today." In addition to its perceived role in triggering civilisation, agriculture has a special place in Western culture because of its links with nature. It is an activity that works with natural processes and this tends to confer on those engaged in agriculture favourable

social and moral status. It is also seen to encourage particular desirable character traits such as thrift, a tendency to hard work, self-reliance and individualism. John Stuart Mill argued that small scale agricultural production was “propitious to the moral virtues of prudence, temperance and self-control” of the peasantry (Mill 1893:358) and that “no existing state ... is on the whole so favourable both to their moral and their physical welfare” (Mill 1893:374). The French physiocrats argued that agriculture was both the only true wealth-generating activity and also the basis of the most stable and socially desirable societies (Montmarquet 1989:45–53).

Rural sociologists have long noted this attitude in Western culture to farming as a special undertaking (see for example Beus and Dunlap 1994; Buttel and Flinn 1975; Craig and Phillips 1983; Flinn and Johnson 1974). The European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) provides one example of policy driven by these sentiments. Ockenden and Franklin argue that:

the CAP provides evidence that agriculture carries a cultural and social significance far in excess of its economic importance. The policy is neither an afterthought nor an expensive irrelevance, but the manifestation of the unique place of agriculture in the psyche of industrial societies. Rural pressure groups and farmers’ lobbies have exploited this tendency, but they did not create it. (Ockenden and Franklin 1995:1).

Similarly, Duchène *et al* (1985:1). write of “the peculiar romanticism that still surrounds agriculture” in Europe. This attachment to the rural can be seen in the low levels of consumer resistance to the Common Agricultural Policy. As Moyer and Josling argue, “Europeans do not agree that it is more sensible to buy some of their foodstuffs from abroad than to subsidize farmers to produce them in EC countries” (Moyer and Josling 1990:50). During the current Doha Development Round the most effective tactic the peak European Consumer body, *Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs*, was able to develop to engage consumers in opposition to the CAP was the impact of the policy on developing countries (pers comm. BEUC Official 2003).

Much of the Australian version of agrarianism appears to have emerged not from the realities of rural life but from the imagination of city-based writers (Davison 1992), just as the family farm was the creation of urban lawmakers rather than the pattern of agriculture which was emerging in the colonies. The image of the Bush that results is often romanticised, containing stereotyped characters and certainly not reflecting the diversity of rural Australia. As Waterhouse has illustrated, these myths have also been reinterpreted over time to fit more comfortably with the agrarian yeoman ideal. The egalitarianism and collectivism that had characterised the early Bush, with its reliance on itinerant, single male workers and its traditions of offering hospitality to sundowners and swagmen, was replaced by the pioneer family as the centrepiece of the story (Waterhouse 2005:163–93). Gammage also points to the changing representation of rural Australia, arguing that the First World War:

shattered that left-wing idealism which had uplifted the bush tradition. Even in 1914, bush radicalism could best define what a real Australian was. ... The war gave Australian conservatives an opportunity to overturn the stereotype, and within a year they had done so. (Gammage 1992:62).

Agrarianism in Australia is reinforced by its links to the ANZAC legend. The Official Historian of the First World War was “at pains to stress the importance to the A.I.F. of the recruits from

the country" (Robson 1973:744), possibly providing the source for the inaccurate but widespread belief that members of the Australian Imperial Force were drawn disproportionately from rural areas. The link between the war and the Bush was strengthened by the establishment of the War Service Settlement Schemes which provided farm land to returned soldiers. These 'soldier settlement' schemes tapped into the yeoman ideal and built on the myths about the characteristics of the diggers, suggesting that returned soldiers may find difficulties in settling into an indoor occupation (Waterhouse 2005:199). The linking of the ANZAC story with the agrarian myth can be seen in the many cenotaphs, memorial halls, swimming baths and avenues of remembrance throughout rural Australia. The Remembrance Driveway website reports that "Today Australia has more war memorials than any other nation" (Remembrance Driveway Committee). For example, the small town of Braidwood in southern New South Wales (population c. 1000) has two monuments — one dominating the main road through town — a memorial baths, two honour rolls and a sanctuary lamp. This mixing of the agrarian myth which has been part of Western culture for centuries with the ANZAC legend results in a potent national image which bears little resemblance to the urban lifestyles of the vast majority of modern Australians.

The urban-rural divide that is of such concern to the NFF is actually one of the features of country-mindedness. The country-city dichotomy found in agrarianism has the city coming off worse on each count as can be seen in Flinn and Johnson's description above of the city as "artificial and evil". As they note, "a strong belief in the virtues of rural life demand that the sins of city life be exposed by farm people" (Flinn and Johnson 1974:190). The city in Aitkin's formulation is "competitive and nasty, as well as parasitical" and while the "core elements of national character come from the struggles of country people", "city people are much the same the world over" (Aitkin 1985:35). Davison refers to this "symbolic counterpoint" between city and bush as providing "a vital clue to the sources of the 'Australian Legend'" (Davison 1992:109). Current concern about the divide appears to be that the bush is the object of criticism rather than the model of virtue.

The rural myth is also perpetuated in popular culture but this is generally not an accurate depiction of rural Australia. Television Soap operas such as *McLeod's Daughters* play to agrarian myths about rural life but do not portray an accurate picture of life on the land. As a starting point, the average farmer is male and in his fifties, not young, beautiful and female. *Flying Doctors*, *Blue Heelers* and, before them, *A Country Practice* also draw on images of hard working, quirky but well-meaning characters. They often include the jaded city slicker whose cynicism is turned around by country life. Whether these programs have an impact on the level of urban sympathy for farmers is worthy of further research.

Finkelstein and Bourke explore the impact of the rural myth on television advertising and ask "*Why ... does the image of the Australian bush continue to dominate the popular imagination?*" (Finkelstein and Bourke 2001 – italics in original). They suggest that the answer is in the way culture is produced and, in their study of rural imagery in advertising, explore the effectiveness of the 'Bush' as a symbol of Australian identity. They describe a rural image which:

is the site of authenticity, veracity and love, albeit heterosexual and young. It is a repository of unpretentious vitality and honest endeavour. These symbolic messages encompass the values and aspirations that are thought of as shared, even universal, among Australians. (Finkelstein and Bourke 2001:51).

Australian-accented country music, such as the work of Graham Connors, also relies on romantic imagery of the bush, including using the city–country dichotomy effectively in songs such as *Let the canefields burn*. The television quiz show *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* had a special “farmers’ edition” in mid 2005. After the last farmer departed with \$32,000, the Channel Nine website reported that “Over the past weeks, a total of \$205,000 has been won by the farmers, easing some of their strain as they continue to battle the poor conditions.”

In his 1985 piece on country-mindedness, Aitkin argued that it was “finished as an ideology” and that it “may have a future as part of the romantic past, but it has ceased to have power in the practical present” (Aitkin 1985:40). The continuation of the bush myth in popular culture and the agrarian rhetoric associated with the National Party indicates that the ideology still has some power in the early twenty-first century. The lack of debate over the considerable sums of money allocated to drought relief — over \$1 billion in the current drought (Truss 2005a) — and the relaxation of eligibility criteria for assistance at a time when welfare is becoming harder to access for other groups in the community, suggest that support to farmers is accepted as deserved.

Media reporting of farm issues

The tone of the NFF’s campaign for Australian Agriculture implies that the urban media have been reporting farm issues in a way which is unfair to farmers and which portrays farmers as environmental vandals and whingers and does not recognise the rural sector’s contribution to the economy. It is also clearly concerned that urban Australians will be misled by reporting of the campaigns of environmentalists and animal welfare groups.

In order to undertake a preliminary test of these propositions, a search using the Factiva database was undertaken in September 2005. The search parameters were as follows:

- **Date:** In the last 2 years
- **Source:** The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) News, the Australian Financial Review, BRW, the Canberra Times, the Courier Mail, the Daily Telegraph, the Herald-Sun, the Hobart Mercury, the Adelaide Advertiser, The Age, The Australian, the Australian Women’s Weekly, the Bulletin.
- **Subject:** Disasters/Accidents, Environmental News, Politics/International Relations, Weather
- **Industry:** Agriculture

The search resulted in 502 items. Of these, only five appeared to be critical of farmers — two reported on the view of the scientist Peter Cullen urging farmers to leave marginal land, one was on a CSIRO report on water use and two addressed the economics of drought relief. From a less systematic search of the letters pages of the major dailies, it seems that the occasional critical letter to the editor rarely goes unanswered by other readers ready to defend farming. A further search in Factiva on “farmers and PETA” resulted in over 300 items, with the reporting focused on the dispute between PETA and the wool industry over the practice of ‘mulesing’. There was little discussion of the nature of PETA’s claims. Nevertheless the NFF and the National Party seem very concerned that city people are being influenced by groups such as PETA to a degree that will be detrimental to farmers’ interests.

Even a cursory glance of the PETA website reveals that this group is quite extreme in its position, advocating not only veganism but also arguing against the keeping of pets due to the subservient position in which this places cats, dogs and other companion animals. It is curious that the NFF is so concerned that non-farmers are unable to recognise the extreme nature of these views and discount their criticisms of farmers accordingly.

The NFF's own research indicates that "Rural and country Australia is perceived to be the backbone of Australia" (Crosby|Textor 2005:6). However, when asked about the important policy issues that the Australian government should be addressing, the research found that "rural and country issues were not 'immediate' top of the mind concerns for metropolitan participants" (Crosby|Textor 2005:13). It is perhaps not surprising that security and terrorism, education, health, and the economy and employment were listed as the most important (Crosby|Textor 2005:12). Of some concern to farmers would be the fact that "rural and country issues were as often mentioned [as the drought] in the context of the environment, specifically environmental problems" (Crosby|Textor 2005:13). The research also reported recognition that:

political parties and other organisations such as the media are more prone to highlight the negatives rather than the positives of the rural experience in order to further their own ends, such as capturing the 'green' vote among urban dwellers and to boost viewer ratings with scare mongering stories. (Crosby|Textor 2005:14)

Again this suggests that people are sufficiently discriminating to question very unfavourable portrayals of farming.

At a broader level, the NFF campaign does contain an element of truth – city people probably do not have an accurate understanding of the bush. The Australian media are largely urban-based with few rural reporters with any depth of experience (Wahlquist 2003:67). The 'shock jocks' are likely to be generally sympathetic to farmers, although they are not particularly knowledgeable (Wahlquist 2003:71-2). Talk back host Alan Jones received a warm reception at the NSW Farmers' Association Drought Crisis Summit in May 2005. His speech, included arguments that "most of Australia was unaware of the crisis in the bush and too much money was being spent by governments on other issues, whether it was Aborigines or overseas aid, rather than the water question" (Doherty 2005b). The outgoing President of the NSW Farmers' Association reportedly described the speech as "one of the most inspirational talks I've heard" (Doherty 2005b:5). In 2002 Jones's contribution to the drought policy debate was to call for the rivers to be turned inland.

Reporting on the drought is illustrative of the largely sympathetic approach taken by the urban press. The *Canberra Times* carried a front page story on 16 May 2005 over a large photo of a drought-affected farmer. The headline was "I loathe being in debt, but even food's on credit" and the story told of the impact of the drought on a second-generation local farming family. The article reported that "Regular pay packets, holidays, trips to see a film, sometimes even buying meat are all luxuries" (Doherty 2005a:2). Reports over the next few days in the same paper covered the Drought Crisis Summit organised by the NSW Farmers' Association. The reporting continued on a sympathetic note with emphasis on the hardship being endured by many farming families, and was laced with implied criticisms of "much of city Australia" for being "oblivious" to the drought's impact (Doherty 2005c:5).

Research shows that farmers *perceive* there to be an anti-farmer bias in the city and the impact of this cannot be discounted. In interviews with farmers during the 1990s drought, Stehlik reported that farmers experiencing genuine hardship felt misunderstood and abandoned by urban Australians (Stehlik 2003). This was in spite of the \$20 million raised by the Farm Hand appeal and the considerable expenditure by both Commonwealth and State governments for drought relief. This feeling of alienation is reflected in an almost belligerent attitude to urban people as illustrated in the following from a letter to the Editor of *The Land*. Mr Angus McNeil wrote that "Farmers, unlike many other Australians, do not like having to accept handouts". His main point was that support was justified due to low commodity prices, high interest rates and drought (McNeil 1994); however, his tone draws on a perception of a soft city life in which welfare is too easy to come by. In a similar tone, rural writer and former farmer Sarah O'Brien wrote a very angry piece in *The Age* in December 2002, including the following:

Forgive my rural ignorance, but isn't welfare the transposing of public money into private hands? The same urbanites, economic journalists and think-tank CEOs — who would take tax breaks, government rebates, subsidies and any other government monetary relief they could get their hands on — are quick to accuse farming people when they have the gall to do the same. (O'Brien 2002).

As an aside, this type of tone is unlikely to win any urban friends, let alone bridge the urban–rural divide. It also reflects the city–country dichotomy of countrymindedness.

Rural Policy Debate

The brief summary above suggests that the rural–urban divide is in fact an important part of the national identity and that there is not really an image problem for farmers in urban Australia, more a rural perception of misunderstanding. In addition, farmers are not reluctant to present their case forcefully when they feel they are being misrepresented. So perhaps agrarianism is a harmless part of Western heritage which has become part of national culture, the urban–rural divide is part of an ongoing national conversation and the NFF campaign need not be taken too seriously in public policy debate.

For the purposes of this article, the real test of the impact of agrarianism is on policy debate: whether pervasive agrarianism constrains analysis of rural policy. In many Western countries, evidence of farmers' political power is not hard to find, with farm lobbies having considerable influence over legislatures resulting in the development of complex support programs to prop up farm incomes and protect them from import competition. The rationales given for agricultural support are clearly based in agrarian ideas. In examining support for farming, Self and Storing suggested three relevant public interest issues:

First, there is the problem of balancing the economic welfare of farmers with that of the nation. Second there is the question of whether agriculture possesses any special cultural values of a kind which call for measures of aid or protection. Third is the question of what general types of farming system the State should seek to promote, and what steps it should take for improving the general functioning of agriculture. (Self and Storing 1962:220).

The influence of agrarianism can be seen in the answer to each of these questions. First, the idea that farming is a basic, fundamental undertaking on which prosperity is based leads to the conclusion that, as the economy grows and develops away from its agricultural roots, the spoils of development should be shared equitably with farmers, without whom progress would not have been possible. Former Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson summed up this sentiment in a speech in 1999:

Here we are on the cusp of a new millennium, at the end of a century in which the prosperity and international standing of our nation has been built in large part on the enterprise of country Australians. (Anderson 1999).

Although the obvious examples of government spending arising from these types of sentiments are from the European Union, Japan and the United States, Australia also has a history of complex agricultural support but these programs have been largely dismantled (Botterill 2005).

The answer to the second of Self and Storing's points has been addressed above and appears to be a resounding 'yes'. In addition to its cultural characteristics, agriculture is seen as a special category of economic activity because:

- (1) there is an inelastic demand for food and as economies develop, farm incomes do not keep up with general economic growth;
- (2) farming is subject to climatic uncertainty and occasionally other natural calamities beyond the control of the farmer;
- (3) farmers are generally price takers, and particularly those dependent on export markets, are subject to fluctuating prices;
- (4) farming is an essential activity and it is only fair that farmers share in national wealth; and,
- (5) the family home is often inseparable from the family business and therefore social considerations cannot be completely removed from agricultural policy. (Botterill 2004:201).

Consistent with the agrarian myth, the answer to the third question as to the form of agricultural production remains the family farm. The agrarian view of agriculture is tied to the family farm as the preferred form of agricultural production and political commitment to preservation of the family farm remains important in Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia and many other Western countries. Interestingly, in Australia small family farming was largely the creation of urban-based politicians. An initially capitalist form of agriculture was seen as undesirable by colonial law makers who set out to break the power of the squattocracy and create a yeoman agriculture, partly to achieve the social goal of raising the moral tone of the colonies (McMichael 1984:220). Waterhouse notes that this was particularly the case in Victoria where the impetus for 'unlocking the land' came from "a set of ideas that promoted small-scale agricultural production as morally virtuous and conducive to a stable democratic society" (Waterhouse 2005:24). Closer settlement schemes were partly designed to create family farms and generate the types of community values associated with this form of agricultural production.

The clearest manifestation of countrymindedness in contemporary political debate is the tactic of the National Party (and the occasional Liberal) of accusing their opponents of not understanding rural Australia. While the National Party and farm groups are active in commenting on policy areas not strictly related to farm production — such as industrial relations — they are quick to identify rural policy commentators who do not have direct ties to the bush (and who by implication therefore do not understand farming). In a recent debate in the Senate, a Labor member was called a “city slicker” by an opponent who advised that “rather than listening to whingers and whiners in the capital cities”, “rather than hanging out in the coffee shops, rather than hanging out on the coastal strip he actually gets out there [and] gets his boots a bit dirty” (Campbell 2004:29). Farmers themselves employ this tactic of differentiating themselves from the implicitly less-deserving urban dwellers as illustrated by Mr McNeill's letter to *The Land* cited above. The author has been on the receiving end of this type of response as a guest on live radio with a talk back caller questioning the value of academics to the community. Flinn and Johnson identify “suspicion about a man who makes his living by using his head and not his hands” as one of the characteristics of agrarianism (Flinn and Johnson 1974:194).

Agrarianism can also be seen in the level of public debate over expenditure for farmers and rural communities — particularly when contrasted with debates over other areas of government expenditure. In the lead up to the Commonwealth Budget in May 2005, there was public debate over limiting IVF treatments for women over 42 in order to save \$14 million per year. About the same time that this issue was generating discussion in the media, the Agriculture Minister put out a media release which included the information that the Commonwealth Government was spending \$4 million per *week* on drought relief (Truss 2005c). Although not strictly comparable, there was no suggestion that the \$14 million could be saved in the area of drought relief rather than by restricting IVF services. Apart from critical pieces in the *Financial Review* and, occasionally, *The Australian* (see for example Albrechtsen 2005; *The Australian* 2005), the media rarely critique rural policy decisions in similar depth to their treatment of other areas of government expenditure.

Television analysis of farm support is similarly gentle. Chris Masters is arguably Australia's leading investigative journalist and has produced some hard hitting documentaries. On 1 August 2005 the ABC broadcast a story by Masters on farmers: “Gambling the Farm”. Although the program was subtitled “Australia's Great Divide: Chris Masters asks if the bush is getting too much help”, it was a largely uncritical treatment of farmers recovering from drought. It did not inform the urban viewer of the amount of drought relief that was being received, which is now over a billion dollars in Commonwealth funding alone. The program was full of agrarian imagery: farmers' alluding to cushy nine-to-five jobs, reliable incomes and regular holidays in the city; the problems of dying country towns; primary schools forced to close; and football teams that have to borrow players. This was not balanced with material on the success stories of non-metropolitan Australia such as booming regional centres which now service farms and their surrounding areas. As the Productivity Commission notes, “This ‘sponge city’ phenomenon, whereby people from small outlying communities are drawn to larger regional centres, has been facilitated by improved transport links, more reliable vehicles and the availability of a wider range of, and cheaper, goods and services in larger centres” (Productivity Commission 1999:xxv). It is country people, not city dwellers, who are drawn to these larger centres thereby driving smaller operations and smaller centres out of business.

In 2002, *The Australian* newspaper was an active promoter of the *FarmHand* appeal which sought charitable donations to assist farmers coping with drought. It should be noted that farmers in extreme drought qualify for an income support payment equivalent to the unemployment benefit so those in genuine need were already in receipt of income assistance from the government. *FarmHand* provided charity on top of this support and the government excluded any support received through this appeal from the income test for the welfare payment — so farmers could receive both income relief funded by the taxpayer and charitable donations made by people moved by the plight of drought-affected farmers. In promoting the appeal, the Australian editorial drew heavily on agrarian imagery, opening with reference to Dorothea McKellar and concluding with a plea to all Australians to “unite in practical plans to salvage and restore this burning continent” (*The Australian* 2002).

The lack of critical debate about rural policy can flow into actual policy settings. Elements of current drought policy serve as examples of the inequities that can arise when farm programs are not subject to widespread public debate. At a time when the Commonwealth government is tightening eligibility criteria for welfare support, farmers have seen an easing of the income test for drought relief, which is paid at the same level as the unemployment benefit, Newstart. This results in the position that a farmer, whose farm has already been exempted from the assets test, can earn an additional \$10,000, that is an additional \$383.46 per fortnight, before losing any income support. By contrast, an unemployed person taking on part-time work begins to lose benefits, as much as 70 cents in the dollar, once they earn \$142 per fortnight (ACOSS 2005:21). The rationale for this increase in the income test is that farmers who have taken off-farm work have done so as part of a drought management strategy and it would be unfair to “penalise” them for this by denying them income support.

It should be noted that there are real problems with farmers’ accessing welfare support when they are in need. The introduction of the assets test in the 1980s excluded many from mainstream welfare programs that they had previously used to address short term income problems such as during drought. From the 1970s onwards, rural policy in Australia shifted from an emphasis on income support to a focus on facilitating structural adjustment in the agricultural sector (Botterill 2005). Providing welfare support to farmers was seen in the context of this industry policy objective. This meant that programs to provide income support were framed in such a way as to avoid the provision of *de facto* subsidies to otherwise non-viable businesses — for example by linking income support to farm exit strategies. The legislation for these schemes was developed in the agriculture department rather than being incorporated in general social welfare legislation. This meant that the policy was not subject to public debate in the context of broader welfare policy or considered by the welfare policy community as it was seen as rural policy. The main lobby group consulted in its development was the NFF.

When the Commonwealth government introduced a Drought Relief Payment in 1994, now called the Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment (ECRP), it set the level of the payment and the income and assets tests at the same level as the unemployment benefit. As a concession to the asset-rich, income-poor status of many farmers, the farm asset was exempted from the assets test with the test only applying to off-farm assets — such as holiday homes or investment properties (for further discussion of Commonwealth responses to farm poverty, see Botterill 2003). The changes announced to the eligibility for the ECRP in mid 2005 include a doubling in the off-farm asset level as well as the increased income test. The rationale for the increased asset allowance was that the business structures of many

farms may involve more than one family member or partner (Truss 2005a). These amendments to eligibility all relate to the blurring of business and family that is associated with the family farm. They are also consistent with the idea that farmers are, to use Angus McNeill's words "unlike many other Australians" in that they are independent and do not want handouts — they are forced into this position by circumstances beyond their control. This interpretation of need allows farmers to be treated differently from other groups who, in the neoliberal construction, develop an unhealthy dependence on welfare (Mendes 2005:137). Mendes argues that there may be a "fundamental ideological shift from income support as a means of poverty alleviation, to income support as payment aimed solely at facilitating participation in the labour market" (Mendes 2005:148). The treatment of farmers suggests a third option: income support as reward for drought preparation. Because of the tendency to treat farm poverty as a policy issue within the agriculture portfolio and not as a welfare issue, these types of inequities go largely unnoticed by the general public.

This point is not made to suggest that farmers are undeserving of support or that they are always more favourably treated by government; the point is that they are *differently* treated and this difference generally is unremarked and undebated outside the agricultural policy community.

Conclusion

The city–bush dichotomy is an important part of the Australian identity. It has inspired poets and writers and the makers of television commercials. Australians see the bush as part of the national image and draw on it when it suits them while living largely urban lives. It is undeniable that many urban people lack the links to the bush that existed in earlier generations. Popular culture does nothing to address this ignorance, promoting unrealistic and romanticised images of rural Australia. From this perspective, countrymindedness is harmless. It has its origins in an agrarianism that has existed for centuries and which sees something special in agriculture as the fundamental human activity. Politically, countrymindedness has provided the National Party with a separate identity for over 80 years and the party has provided a voice for rural Australians who might otherwise feel disenfranchised by an urban-dominated political process.

This paper has argued, however, that agrarianism has another, largely unacknowledged impact on Australian society — as a silent censor of public debate on rural policy. On equity grounds, considerable government expenditure in any area of policy should be open to scrutiny and debate. However, rural policy does not attract the level of analysis that is accorded to areas such as industrial relations or tax policy, even though large sums of money can be involved. Critics are often attacked personally for their non-rural backgrounds and their comfortable lives.

There have been occasional bursts of polemic aimed at the farming community. Buckley's 1972 assessment of farm support is worth quoting:

In GODZONE, these [farmers and graziers] are the people who are most convinced that they are the chosen and that if God fails them temporarily by sending drought or glutted markets, then the rest of the population owes them not merely a living but maintenance of their capital assets. (Buckley 1972:71).

This is, however, an unusually critical piece. Generally, criticism of farm policy is muted. This may be because, for example, it seems tactless to criticise drought support during severe drought — and no one is interested when it is raining. It may be because urban people are ignorant of rural issues and are therefore uninterested.

This paper has argued that an urban–rural divide does exist in Australia. It has its origins in an old dichotomy in Western culture between farming and non-farming pursuits; it has become part of Australian culture; and it has resulted in different policy approaches. This has not necessarily been to the detriment of farmers. The urban media are not as critical as the NFF campaign implies, but they may be as ignorant. Perhaps the NFF campaign is much more subtle in its objectives. Rather than genuinely seeking to address the divide, it may be aiming to reinforce the romanticised, agrarian, image of farming that evokes public sympathy. Just as the urban–rural divide has been important to the survival of the National Party, it may also be important to farmers in insulating farm programs from critical scrutiny.

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