

Keynote address, Regional Australia Summit, Parliament House, October 1999

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Keynote address, Asa Wahlquist

Life in Australia is changing. None of us can avoid it, whether we live in the inner city, remote Australia, in the suburbs or a regional town.

The challenge is to make that change equitable, to grasp the opportunities it offers.

Change is coming from a number of sources, from globalisation, from government, from business, and changed social expectations. Our ability to respond to these pressures varies. Sometimes all we can control is our attitude. And that is not to be dismissed.

Against globalisation, things like world prices for wheat, wool and coal, our choices are limited mainly to producing as efficiently as possible, and to smart marketing. By and large in agriculture we've done that pretty well. In the longer term, when the US and European Community finally cease subsidising, Australian farmers will be set up to reap the benefits of their efficiency and innovation.

We can, within some parameters, change government, and its policies. And here we are seeing some interesting changes in rural Australia. Over the last decade, country Australians have made it clear their vote cannot be taken for granted. I'm not just talking about the passing phase of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, but about the rise of well-respected rural independents, who have been significant players in the NSW, Tasmanian, Queensland, South Australian and now Victorian state parliaments. I think it is fair to say that never again will a state premier assert, as Jeff Kennett did before his last election, that he had concentrated on Melbourne, because that was the heart of the state, rather than the 'toe nails', the regions outside it.

Some commentators are surprised at the anger from the bush. Let me list a number of reasons.

Rural and regional Australians are, by every significant measure, disadvantaged. Country people die younger, and receive less medical attention. They have lower levels of education and higher unemployment. They have more accidents, suffer worse health, and rural youth has a shockingly high suicide rate. (map 71)*

This map comes from Country Matters, a social atlas of rural and regional Australia, prepared by the Bureau of Resource Sciences.

Country people are also likely to be poorer. (map 56). Of the 40 poorest federal electorates, 36 are rural or provincial, while only two of the 40 wealthiest electorates, Kalgoorlie and Bowral, are in the country.

In 1996, at the time of the last census, a substantially greater proportion of non-metropolitan residents relied on government benefits and pensions, more country people lived in families receiving government benefits and in low income families.

Human Rights Commissioner, Chris Sidoti, last year conducted Bush Talks, visiting a large number of rural and remote areas. He found people there generally came off second best. He said that distance, isolation, lower incomes and minority status all exacerbate the experience of discrimination, harassment and lack of services and participation.

In the decade ending in 1996, at least 30,000 jobs were cut in country NSW: jobs that put over one billion dollars into the regional economy. Over 19,500 of those jobs had been cut by State Governments, coalition and Labor. The major areas were in the railways and in electricity generation, but there had been cuts across the board, in virtually every department.

Between 1996 and 1998 I estimate over 28,500 country jobs were lost nationally, in areas like banking, abattoirs, Telstra, mining and manufacturing. Both these figures, the NSW and national figures, are underestimates. It simply was not possible to estimate how many jobs had been lost in small business: the local car dealerships; the bakeries; the hardware shops and the delivery services; the job loss spiral that occurs when even a few jobs are cut in a small community.

The question is, what can we realistically expect government to do?

Country people are telling me there are two things government can, indeed must, do. The first is to provide access to data quality telephony, at costs that reflect the current technology, not the historic model which severely disadvantages country people.

It is imperative, not just for equity reasons, that in this information age country people have access to the major currency of our time.

High quality telephony is important because, as services are withdrawn from country areas, people can turn to the internet for provision of educational, banking, counselling and even some medical services. Through the internet country people can be part of a large community; this could mean farmers accessing market or weather information, or young people who are feeling isolated connecting with like-minded teenagers on the net.

It would give country businesses the ability to access the global market, and it would also enable city-based businesses to move to the country, bringing high income earners to country towns.

The second thing government must do is to provide, or facilitate the provision of, transport services.

According to the 1996 census, six and half million Australians, 30 per cent of us, live in non metropolitan Australia, where there are basically three population movements. (map 2)

First, there is the decline in the dryland wheat belt, and the contraction of smaller towns: in the 21 years to 1997, 205 rural communities lost population, with 70 of them losing a devastating 20 per cent.

Then there are the sponge cities, like Dubbo in NSW, Horsham in Victoria and Narrogin in Western Australia, which are growing often at the expense of outlying towns as services become concentrated in those regional centres.

The third movement is what Bernard Salt from KPMG calls the clamour for the coast.

Bernard points out that Australians have always moved around this continent in response to economic imperatives. Indigenous Australians moved about according to the seasonal and climatic pulses and the availability of food. Settler Australians followed the rivers and railways. They rushed to the goldfields, then went back to the cities.

Australia was settled at the time of the industrial revolution: as a result we are the second most urbanised country in the world. I wonder if we are the most mobile? In the five years between 1991 and 1996, one in every five Australians moved. I wonder how many Australians live in the same community as all four grandparents did, or if there is anyone who lives in the community that was home to most of their great grandparents?.

Bernard Salt says that in the last two decades, 1.3 million people have moved to the area bounded by Coffs Harbour, Toowoomba and Hervey Bay. 1.3 million: that's equivalent to the entire state of South Australia.

Now, this represents a significant change. Those 1.3 million people were not moving because of economic imperatives: they were moving because of amenity and life-style.

I think this presents great opportunities for rural Australia. But first we must ask the right questions, like how do we build vibrant rural and regional communities in a nation where we are still migrating, still colonising the country?

There is a huge movement of young people out of regional Australia. (map 5)

Country people often ask, how can we keep our young people in our town?

Now I think it is to be expected that young people want to move away and explore the world. I think the real question should be how do we attract young people, be they the sons and daughters of the town, or young people from elsewhere? And that is a rather different challenge. Certainly a University really helps. James Cook University in Townsville found over 65 per cent of their graduates enter the local workforce.

But small towns can make a difference too. Hyden, an area of just 600 people in Western Australia, asked young people what sort of accommodation they wanted.

The answer was not with Mum and Dad on the farm, nor in a rented house with the landlord hassling them to mow the lawn, but in low maintenance, single person units.

And so they built them, occupied them and have a waiting list.

Now this is not rocket science, but it is hard work. It is about inviting young people to be a valued part of the community, asking what they want and attempting to provide it. It sounds simple, but it is a very different mindset from writing letters in the local paper complaining about the behaviour of the town's youth.

Country areas will only be really strong when they are inclusive. Indigenous people are, generally speaking, more

inclined to remain in their country communities. (map 26). Some see native title offering indigenous people an opportunity to be included, to have a real stake in their communities; instead the hysteria and totally unnecessary fear generated over native title has been terribly divisive. This is one area in which corporate Australia could show real leadership: they have the skills and the resources and are not hindered by local fears. I know there is considerable progress being made on local agreements behind the scenes. Many local councils, too, have been active in forming local agreements.

Rural Australia will only be strong when it is reconciled and inclusive.

Moree in northern NSW is a town that has had a poor reputation for race relations, but a concerted effort by local people and businesses is turning that around.

Tony Windsor, a NSW independent, last year rejected Pauline Hanson's invitation to join One Nation. He objected to the way, when things hit a rough patch, she pulled out the race card. He said country people cannot afford that sort of division, that they either unity or continue to be marginalised.

Hanson went on to lose her seat, while Tony has the largest first preference vote in the country.

I feel that one of the sources of great pain in rural Australia is the sense of cultural exclusion.

This happens on a practical level, with the refusal of workers to cross the very aptly named Great Dividing Range. Earlier this year I visited Narrabri in northern NSW. It is a very pretty town of 7,000 with an air of modest prosperity. It has a diversified agricultural base, several research institutes, a good hospital and twice daily flights to Sydney.

Last year, the local paper, the Narrabri Courier conducted a survey and found there was a shortage of 118 skilled people, ranging from truck drivers to hydraulic engineers. The Courier itself, after advertising Australia-wide for a printer, finally recruited one from South Africa.

What is happening here? Why are 1.3 million people willing to migrate to the coast where there is higher unemployment, and not to a town as attractive as Narrabri?

I think former Narrabri resident, Dave Anthony put his finger on it. He is deeply frustrated by what he calls the lacklustre, even patronising view of rural Australia from the city, that there has been a failure to talk about the prosperity in the bush, to focus on the country's vibrant communities.

The Australian has attempted to overcome that, with a series on Boom Towns. In general terms, the successful communities were utilising their natural resources, and value-adding. They usually had a couple of key entrepreneurial individuals, a good local council and a real determination to talk the town up.

I believe we are seeing a major cultural change in much of rural Australia.

It began with deregulation of the major commodities, the end of government support, and guaranteed minimum prices. Then drought became a business risk farmers must plan for, not an occasion to put their hand out.

Earlier this year then-Deputy Prime Minister, Tim Fischer told farmers to stop whingeing, things were pretty good on the land. He admitted it was a courageous thing for a National Party politician to say, but it was long overdue.

In March at the Outlook conference a production-weighted analysis gave a much more realistic view. For example, the top 25 per cent of graingrowers, over most of this decade, have had a rate of return of 9.9 per cent. If you go to Western Australia you get figures around 15 per cent.

Mid-year Ian McLachlan told woolgrowers there were no magic puddings: they could choose to get up with the profitable top 20 per cent of woolgrowers, or get out. Imagine saying that in 1991 when the floor price ended.

One of the most important changes country people need to embrace is, to paraphrase Peter Kenyon, to stop waiting for the cavalry to arrive from Canberra or the capital city.

You can be Townsville lobbying for the \$530 million Korea Zinc plant, or Hyden farmers building a hotel to save them the indignity of being booked for drinking a beer under the salmon gums: they did it themselves.

While there are towns that are booming, there are other areas where we really need to question whether agriculture in its current form has a future. Areas like the Western Division of NSW, and south west Queensland, where governments set up closer settlement schemes that were doomed because they did not understand the nature of the land and climate of Australia.

You could liken Australia's agricultural history to a 200 year experiment: one that has resulted in the clearing of 20 billion

trees, resulting in massive land degradation and salinity.

Professor Mike Archer, the director of the Australian Museum, in planning another experiment, where a group of farmers in NSW's western division will shift to using natural resources. He hopes it will result not only in more sustainable land use and increased biodiversity, but also more profitable 'farming' and a stronger community,

The Bookmark Biosphere Reserve Scheme, in South Australia's Riverland, integrates profitable farming with conservation. It includes family farmers, corporate investors, scientists and a lot of hard-working volunteers, all striving for more environmentally sustainable land management and a robust community.

Areas that need readjustment are not just a problem for the local farmers. They deserve community support in coming up with better ways to manage both the environmental and human resources.

Now I'm not going to be so bold as to forecast the death of the whingeing cocky, but there are communities where he has been abandoned. In the boom towns, there has been a palpable change, the "we'll be rooned" stories in the newspapers have been replaced by articles about local successes.

So how do we get this image across?

This is critically important. Remember, this is a nation in which virtually entire states of people are prepared to move to a better life.

I think there is a lot of grief in rural Australia, because country people feel they are excluded; that multicultural Australia does not include them.

Most city people have little contact with the country: due to the tide of country people moving to the city, and the fact the overwhelming majority of migrant settle in the city. Most city people have little notion of what rural Australia is like, beyond Macca's Australia All Over, or that whingeing cocky. Neither does it justice.

Think back to the imagery of the fifties: women were housewives, migrants were like those portrayed in Nino Culutto's *They're a Weird Mob*, Aborigines were invisible and farmers were men who talked slowly and wore battered hats. Now think of the current images. Women work in a wide range of professions. It is the same with immigrant Australians. Aborigines are everything from artists to activists who visit the Queen. But farmers are still men talking slowly wearing big hats.

We can, within some parameters, change government, and its policies. And here we are seeing some interesting changes in rural Australia. Over the last decade, country Australians have made it clear their vote cannot be taken for granted. I'm not just talking about the passing phase of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, but about the rise of well-respected rural independents, who have been significant players in the NSW, Tasmanian, Queensland, South Australian and now Victorian state parliaments.

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Think back to the imagery of the fifties: women were housewives, migrants were like those portrayed in Nino Cullutto's *They're a Weird Mob*, Aborigines were invisible and farmers were men who talked slowly and wore battered hats. Now think of the current images. Women work in a wide range of professions. It is the same with immigrant Australians. Aborigines are everything from artists to activists who visit the Queen. But farmers are still men talking slowly wearing big hats.

Now this image is a long way from the truth.

For a start, one third of farmers are women. One third belong to Landcare, view themselves not as rugged individualists but as members of a community, and do more for the environment than many city people who call themselves conservationists. Farmers have a greater uptake of the internet than their city counterparts. They are more likely to be aware of globalisation than city folks. Farming is also a highly technical profession, and I suggest a lot of the fear city people are expressing about genetically modified foods springs from an ignorance about modern farming systems and food production.

Rural Australia is still a vital part of the Australian imagination. Our best poet Les Murray is an ardent advocate for country Australia. A good number of recent novels have all been set in the bush. But they tend to an old-fashioned view of rural Australia. And as for the film industry, it just sees the bush as a source of fabulous scenery and weird characters.

It has been left to the food industry, to Stefano de Pieri, in his ABC TV series "A Gondola on the Murray", to portray the country as home to interesting, vibrant individuals, and new experiences.

Through Stefano's programs alone nearly one million Australians saw that country Australia does not consist of the stereotypes; rather it is a stimulating place, peopled with interesting characters.

My own personal suggestion to effect cultural change is to relocate Sea Change's Laura Gibson.

I'd move her to a town like Mudgee, where I can assure her the Lawson Park Hotel has a selection of red wine much more to her liking. She might even find herself drinking it next to the winemaker. Max could move there and abandon his pretensions to a novel on foreign correspondents and write the real Australian novel.

Laura could befriend members of the local arts community, or the foodies. Perhaps there would be an idiosyncratic book-reading cook who'd challenge Max's place in her affections.

Sea Change tapped that part of the Australian psyche that longs for space, for more time, for down to earth people. That's all out there in rural Australia too, but city people will not know what country Australia has to offer us, unless we tell them.

There is no doubt there is a great divide today between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australia: it is reflected in the statistics, in the anecdotes, and in how people from both the city and country feel. Bringing us together is a political challenge, it is a challenge to business, and it is a cultural challenge.

The alternative, to continue on the current path and to effectively abandon much of rural Australia, would greatly diminish us as a nation.

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It has been left to the food industry, to Stefano de Pieri, in his ABC TV series "A Gondola on the Murray", and to a lesser extent Stephanie Alexander's "A Shared Table", to portray the country as home to interesting, vibrant individuals, and new experiences.

It was through food that most anglo-Australians had their first multicultural experiences, going to a Chinese, Italian or Vietnamese restaurant. So I suppose it is not so surprising that it could be through food that city Australians meet their country counterparts. After all, what do Australian farmers do? Grow really good food. And what are country people renowned for? Their hospitality.

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