

Short fuse of fury down on the farm

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Australia's normally conservative and self-effacing farmers are on the march, in a spirit of aggression and determination that has probably not been equalled for decades. JULIAN CRIBB, editor of National Farmer Magazine, argues the case behind the new wave of agrarian militancy.

THERE is anger in the bush.

Like most bushfires, its origins are in single tiny sparks. But the tinder is there, and seldom in Australia's long and eventful farming history has it been drier.

The past four months have witnessed more than 15,000 of Australia's naturally conservative and reticent primary producers turn out to demonstrations and protest meetings in three states. And there's more to come.

In draughty RSL halls and local meeting places across rural Australia the talk is of marching on Parliament, of tax strikes, chequebook strikes, the blockading of the capitals, of direct action against striking unionists.

The new wave of farm militancy is different from the demonstrations of the beef and dairy depressions in the '70s: it embraces a far wider span of rural industries — wheat, sugar, grapes, rice, sheep, dairying and parts of the cattle industry.

There is an edge of desperation too — which comes when any group of people realise the future looks extremely grim. Feeding the frustration is a feeling that Australia, its people and politicians, have dumped agriculture, that they no longer recognise its potential to grow, to generate jobs and national wealth.

The slide in farming's ability to compete on world markets will surely lead to one thing, the industry's leaders are warning: higher food prices for Australians, because the competitive edge will be sacrificed.

The pressure has been building for many years. In the past decade farmers have seen 25,000 quit the industry; their incomes slump to half the national average wage even on good years; rural unemployment and poverty soar to twice national levels and hundreds of small towns and communities dying on their feet.

Yet throughout this time farmers have made great strides to lift productivity: farm output has risen by more than a third, export income by more than \$6 billion.

According to CSIRO chiefs in the recent research funding debate, farming has swung over to new technology at a rate that makes other industries backward. Despite this, farmers' terms of trade, as measured by the Bureau of Agriculture Economics, are at their lowest level since the Depression of the '30s.

Last year, says the BAE, the average person working on an Australian family farm had a personal income of just \$11,500 — barely half the national average wage of \$21,000. In

1984/85, farm incomes are forecast to slump by 29 per cent in real terms. The much-vaunted capital gain which farmers are supposed to enjoy has averaged 0.6 per cent over the past eight years.

The feeling which all these harsh facts engender in the rural bosom is moving from one of worry and frustration to one of wrath.

As ricegrower Graham Blight, of Whitton, NSW, puts it: "We have a very productive, well-organised industry which produces a lot of good quality food and earns a lot of export revenue for Australia. Most of us are good at what we do, because you don't survive if you aren't."

"Yet we are in a position of absolute despair. The economic situation of many farmers is simply untenable. And many are starting to ask themselves exactly what they must do to stay in agriculture in Australia."

Some of Blight's fellow ricegrowers would like to blockade Canberra. In the wheat industry in NSW and Victoria there is talk of a tax strike — refusal to pay some of the recent State and Federal Government hikes in taxes and charges. In Western Australia, there is talk of a chequebook strike (a moratorium on farm payments which could hold over a billion dollars out of city industries).

The past four months have seen:

- Three thousand wheatgrowers attend crisis meetings in four towns in two States, NSW and Victoria. More are likely to be held in Victoria, Queensland and WA.
- Four thousand ricegrowers and townsfolk meet in Leeton, NSW, to protest at a

22 per cent hike in water charges.

• Four thousand graziers from various regions of NSW in demonstrations outside Parliament in Canberra and Sydney, against possible Army bases being located in their area.

• Five hundred dairymen involved in picketing and demonstrations over the milk marketing furore.

• Three hundred high country cattlemen mount an eye-catching demonstration through Melbourne streets to protest at the possible demise of their industry by conservation measures.

• One thousand Riverland and Sunraysia grapegrowers in protests about the collapse of their industry.

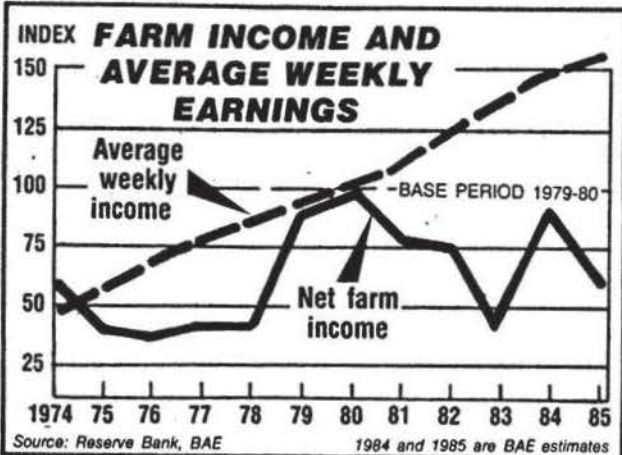
• Rising militancy and demonstrations among the nation's sugarcane growers and their wives, based on the worst cash crisis the industry has faced in decades.

The leaders of these industries articulate their feelings in a manner similar to Blight.

To understand why farmers are so upset with governments it is necessary to delve into the economic vital statistics of rural industry for a moment.

The bottom line of the whole debate is simply this: since 1980 farm costs have risen by 36 per cent, prices for farm produce by just 10 per cent across the board.

In other words, while every other Australian has enjoyed the benefits of wage indexation, farmers have been going backwards at a rate of 260 per cent in four years in incomes, living standards — and, above all, future capacity to invest in



their farms. In the grains sector, for instance, prices are today just 5 per cent higher than they were in 1980 — costs up by seven times as much.

Among the most outrageous increases in farm costs have been Government taxes and charges — federal, state and local — which have risen by 54 per cent over four years, according to the BAE; more than double the national inflation rate. Farm machinery is up 40 per cent, electricity up 58 per cent, cars and contracts up 40 per cent.

Returns for most types of farm produce, especially sugar, barley, vegetables, grapes, sheep and lambs are all lower in real and nominal terms than four years ago when they were only average.

Another thing which upsets farmers is the popular image that their sector is heavily subsidised. The latest annual re-

port of the Industries Assistance Commission put that myth to rest: totting up all forms of farm assistance it showed the average farm had aid totalling \$4500 a year over the past five years.

But the average farm also is shelling out more than \$12,500 a year to help prop up Australia's protected manufacturing industries, says National Farmers Federation economist David Michael.

If there's a handout war, farmers are losing it three to one.

The NFF has recently launched a nationwide petition to all people involved in rural industry in Australia — and there are some 1.7 million whose livelihoods depend on it — beseeching governments at all levels to back off with their cost and tax hikes, or watch

large parts of agriculture go under.

The root of the farm sector's frustration is that it believes itself to be sitting on an enormous untapped potential to improve living standards. It is quite possible, says the NFF, to more than double Australian agricultural output by the year 2000, but only if some of the artificial cost burdens and restraints are removed.

The concern of farm leaders is that if agriculture's ability to compete is destroyed, Australia will be left with a sickly cripple for governments to support at taxpayer expense, and food prices will skyrocket as they have in other nations around the world with protectionist farm policies.

Agriculture still earns 40 per cent of Australia's export income, substantially more than either mining or manufacturing. Several recent opinion polls reveal that the great majority of Australians think mining is the nation's biggest export industry.

What concerns the farm leaders is that this attitude appears to be wide-spread among the decision-makers of the nation, resulting in agricultural policy receiving an undeserved back-seat in the evolution and planning of national economic policy.

Summing up the new get-tough mood at a recent wheat crisis meeting was Rutherglen, Victoria, grape and graingrower Peter Chambers: "It is time we stopped being ladies and gentlemen — and started being what we are: men and women of the bush, fighting for our very survival — farmers, united and able to fight for the future of our children and of this nation."

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