

Why our stricken farmers are in revolt

AUSTRALIA'S economic failure is the rural sector's overriding problem, not ballooning world agricultural stockpiles, or depressed international markets.

The reasons for farmers' discontent are the nation's growing international debt, industrial relations problems, high taxes, the burgeoning bureaucracy, lofty social welfare payments and discrimination against private enterprise.

The rural sector believes it is time to end "the lucky country" attitude, that Australia's future has been jeopardised by spoilt, lazy and complacent workers and too many years of living beyond the country's means.

As the first sector seriously affected by Australia's plummet towards Third World status, the growing rural clamour for a fundamental change of management is the most reliable guide yet to the public's expectations for reform.

Tens of thousands of farmers travelled hundreds and even thousands of kilometres to farm rallies in recent weeks because the crisis affecting agriculture is the most severe in Australia's history.

Literally thousands are in a financial predicament which could force them from the land within five years. The worst calculation is that the number of farmers will halve to fewer than 100,000 by the end of the century.

Sugar, dairy, rice, wheat and dried vine fruit farmers are in a grim position. Each industry will lose a large percentage of producers in the next two years.

But even more worrying than individual industry predicaments is the overwhelming burden of national in-

The angry march for survival through capital city streets by thousands of farmers this winter is the most obvious sign so far of the deep-seated dissatisfaction about the nation's economic malaise. Rural writer NIGEL AUSTIN reports on the revolt of the bush . . .

efficiency pushing the entire rural sector towards subsistence farming.

The widespread belief that the Australian farmer is wealthy is false. Any money left over from the squatocracy era has been slowly taken from the land, divided among families and eroded until there is virtually nothing left.

Similarly, farming for the way of life it offers is a cruel fallacy: the grim struggle for survival has taken the enjoyment out of life in the country.

Anger in the bush has mounted to fever pitch this winter because profit margins are so thin that consumption taxes and capital taxes would make agriculture untenable.

A grim struggle for rural survival

Farmers can survive the devastation of floods, fires and droughts in the most difficult farming conditions on any continent, but they cannot survive the economic mismanagement and discrimination of governments.

The philosophical message from the rural marchers is plainly that Australia's business engine badly needs a radical overhaul. Unfortunately, the indignation shown by marching farmers has been viewed

superficially as the lobbying of an inefficient industry.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Australian farmer is as efficient as any in the world, and given the incentive could develop the country's agricultural potential at an astonishing rate.

But the escalating need for money to clear the nation's foreign debt, to feed the 25 per cent of the workforce employed by the public sector and the 20 per cent receiving welfare payments is bleeding the once rich rural sector dry.

That Australia has lost its way and is stumbling on a downhill path similar to that taken by Argentina is open to discussion. But it is indisputable that Australia's living standards have fallen from the highest in the world in 1900 to number 21 today.

The greatest period of decline has been in the past 25 years when agriculture's contribution to export earnings has fallen from more than 80 per cent to 40 per cent.

In that time, Australia's share of world markets has fallen from 2 to 1.5 per cent. Similarly, the nation has dropped from the world's 12th greatest trading country to 20th.

Just as the first step in Argentina's decline was to bleed dry its rural sector, the same appears to be happening unconsciously in Australia.

How quickly the nation's main export industry for its first 197 years has

been trodden underfoot, its unique rural heritage forgotten.

An unprecedented number of properties are for sale throughout Australia, but won't be sold because their hard-pressed owners cannot find buyers to pay a price commensurate with the financial and physical input by themselves and previous generations.

For the family members still struggling on in agriculture the position has become so serious that many are attempting to remove their funds before they are reduced to little more than peasant-type subsistence farming.

Sons and daughters of several generations of farmers can see no incentive to stay in farming when a glamorous life and more secure future awaits in the big cities.

Their departure is providing another dilemma for the rural sector because the average age of farmers is about 58 and growing slowly older.

Misconceptions about Australian agriculture, including the belief of many city people that the average farmer is heavily subsidised, has been a major drawback to progress in recent years.

The negative perception gaining the greatest level of support is that Australia's rural sector is inefficient and uncompetitive, resulting in urban dwellers paying more for food and fibre and through support subsidies.

A metropolitan newspaper editor last week told a delegation of stunned farmers that the rural sector was an asset-rich, heavily subsidised industry which didn't deserve community support.

Until Australia regains the vision and understanding of its abundant natural resources to take maximum advantage of them the nation will continue on its present path.

Nobody listened when Banjo Paterson warned late last century that Australia ought to spend more money developing its resource-rich agricultural sector instead of non-earning city facilities.

It is a warning which could equally be applied today and viewed by political parties, educational institutions, metropolitan media groups and the rural sector itself as the path to Australia's continued prosperity.

After years of complacency, the rural sector has reached the depths of despair and finds itself in a situation where many landowners are locked in a serious battle for survival.

The National Party has recognised the need for change by denouncing the end of its McEwenism policies. It has taken a long time, but until all political parties develop a far greater understanding of the bush and its possibilities progress will be impeded.

Perhaps the worst blame of all for the nation's lack of understanding of its most important industry lies with agriculture itself.

Considerable blame must also lie with the metropolitan press from which broad community perceptions develop. Most have for decades failed to provide a mature comprehension of this vital sector.

Writing about the bush and the nation's subsequent understanding of this industry has been on a steady decline since the days of famous bush bards like Paterson and Henry Lawson.

Only a major demonstration, like the recent farmer rallies which even Blind Freddy wouldn't miss, gain the superficial attention of most of the metropolitan press.

It has been a major reason for the irrational, but widespread misunderstanding of the country which has been translated into government policies and politicians' votes.

Because there is so little philosophical understanding of the rural sector, politicians have been able to say virtually anything (whether they believe it or not) and get away with it.

Senior public figures have escaped, virtually unscathed and probably believed by large sections of the community with ludicrous comments in re-

cent weeks. The worst example was the Treasurer, Mr Keating's, claim that tax avoidance by farmers and accountants might have cost the Government more than \$1 billion in 1984-85.

The Arbitration Commission's deputy president, Mr Justice Staples, was just as bad with comments that Australia's primary industries were heavily subsidised.

He was wrong because the real rate of assistance to agriculture has fallen from 15 per cent in 1970-71 to 3 per cent in 1980-81, according to the Industries Assistance Commission.

It is clear from the past two years of federal government that the Australian Labor Party has little time for the rural community. In the past week the Minister for Primary Industries, Mr Kerin, has finally broken rank and voiced his dissatisfaction with his own party.

There is no doubt that the competitiveness of the rural sector is being reduced by government economic policies, just as each Australian farmer is subsidising the rest of the Australian community to the tune of \$7000 a year.

If Australia is to unlock its rural potential, then government policies impinging on agriculture must be eliminated. Included are mismanagement of labour market, policy, wasteful government expenditure, excessive taxes and a host of unnecessary regulations.

The genesis of the rural sector's plight was in the years after World War II when agriculture was subsidised, endless world markets seemed assured and the industry became complacent about its future.

We should have listened to Banjo

But the tide of economic and international circumstances slowly swung away from agriculture and the Coalition parties lost power. Now under this Federal Government the rural sector for all its submissions, protests and willing co-operation has received not a single concession from Mr Hawke and his associates.

National Farmers' Federation president Mr Ian McLachlan says all political parties are out of step with the rural electorate, that none has a real appreciation of its position.

Mr McLachlan echoes the concern of the entire income-producing section of the nation when he says the federation was looking for performance from governments and not empty words.

It is the reason the electorate swung blindly behind the Hawke movement in March 1983 hoping for a saviour and the reason support is now swinging in bewilderment between parties.

There is no outstanding alternative. With help, the rural sector will again provide the nation's traditional backbone and put the nation back on the road to fulfilling its vast natural resources. But the remaining years of this decade will be a watershed period for agriculture as world food stocks grow worse.

The likelihood of a trade war between the United States and the EEC will severely burden sections of Australian agriculture in the next few years.

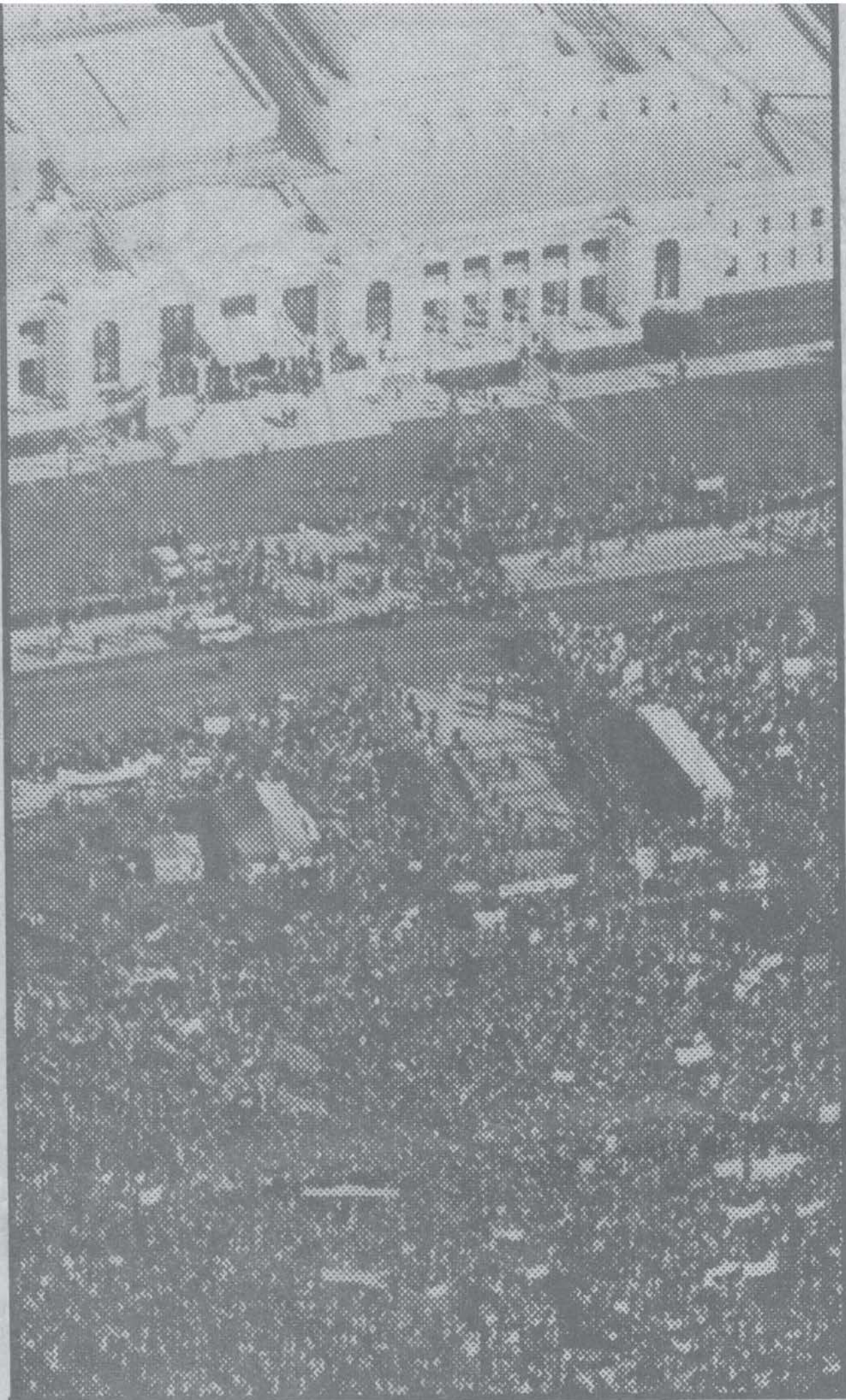
Australia's solution is not so much influencing overseas events, but dealing with domestic problems.

Ultimate responsibility rests with the Federal Government. Until it reduces the overall need for taxation there seems little immediate chance of salvage for the rural sector, the small business community or national prosperity.

While Australia's untapped agricultural potential is being neglected, the community in general faces the prospect of becoming the poor white trash of Asia.



'Farmers sow, Labor reaps' . . . a placard which puts in a nutshell the belief of farmers that they are the victims of expensive social policies



An aerial view of the rally by thousands of farmers on the lawn in front of Parliament House this week