

ADDRESS TO THE MOUNTAIN CATTLEMEN'S GET-TOGETHER

The battle lines are drawn. We are going to war. Like the stockhorse that snuffs the battle with delight, we had better be ready and have the will for the long hard fight ahead. There are no cheap and easy political victories. We, of all people, should know that.

For too long, we have endured the lies dressed up as fact about cattle grazing damaging our beloved high country.

For too long, we have stood mute before the calumny that we are yesterday's men — dinosaurs, out of date in the new order.

For too long, our heritage, forged by the sweat and blood of generations of generous men and women, has been belittled; dismissed as if it counted for nothing at all.

For too long, our efforts in showing the way to others, in rescuing them, providing them shelter, cutting tracks for them; for too long now this has all been thrown back in our face.

And for far too long, our own concern for the conservation and proper management of the high country has been falsely labelled as exploitation and ruthlessly ignored.

We have watched while a small group of radicals and crazies, emboldened by a succession of victories over the last twenty years, has grown ever more arrogant and demanding. Parading lies disguised as scientific fact, they have created the illusion of a massive following and have enslaved governments of both political persuasions to their view.

Theirs is the classic fascist tactic — the big lie technique. Theirs is the classic fascist goal — privilege for the few, exclusion for the majority.

For us, it is now the time to put up, or we will be forever shut up.

It is time to turn the tide!

We are the genuine conservationists. Ours is the real concern for the well-being of the high country. Our love of it demands nothing short of our total commitment to see its future secured and to have it managed for all Australians to share.

This government decision to evict ten mountain cattlemen families is portrayed as a minor issue, a small adjustment affecting only 5% of grazing area. Well, it is the straw that breaks the camel's back. We have been losing ground in a succession of blows since 1923, when we lost Mt. Buffalo to grazing.

In 1944, while the men were away at war, we lost above the timberline in the Snowy Mountains.

In 1956, Mts Feathertop and Loch and the point of Bogong were taken from us. Our Harrierville branch was wiped out in one blow.

In 1957, we lost the rest of the Snowy Mountains and the Man from Snowy River became an outlaw "up by Kosciusko' side".

In 1960, Mt Buller was taken from us.

1964, three more families were thrown off Mt Bogong.

In the early 1970's, we lost the Baw Baw Plateau.

And then the war of attrition started. Runs were no longer transferable between bona fide cattlemen, they could only be passed on to direct family descendents. We have lost some of our best grazing, simply because a family had no sons or daughters.

In 1982, we surrendered the Avon Wilderness.

In 1984, Mt. Howitt and Mt. Magdala were lost.

In 1988, in the cruelest blow of all, they cut out our heart. They took the Wonnangatta Station and they took it by stealth.

We used to graze 40,000 head of cattle in the Victorian High Country. Now we graze 18,000 head.

On the Bogong High Plains alone, we used to graze 15,000 cattle. Now it is down to 4,000 head.

Many of our best runs have gone. Some of our oldest families have been thrown out. We have already lost over half of our traditional grazing country.

And now they are going for the king hit - ten more of our families in one go. If we lose these ten families, we will soon lose the lot. These threatened grazing runs are the keystone of our arch.

No more cattle, no more cattlemen must go. Any attempt to evict them must and will be met by resistance, by any means at our disposal. Most important, we must stand together, so that no longer can we be divided and conquered.

If we are to turn the tide of these high country evictions, we have to carry our case to the people of Victoria, and the people of Australia. No government will change its mind simply because it is asked to. We will have to win the hearts and minds of the public and force government's hand - just as our opponents have done.

You have heard the outline of our campaign from David Treasure. This will demand unstinting effort and strong commitment from all of us over the months ahead.

We have had a bit of a lull during the past two years, but if ever we needed you, we need you now. Otherwise all our efforts, all our work will have been wasted. We will need you, not just at Bogong in three weeks, not just at Kosciusko shortly after, but many times over the next months. Stay in contact and please join the Association.

We are at a watershed. All of us here hold in our hands the future of mountain cattlemen. One hundred and fifty years of heritage and tradition lies in the balance. If we act strongly, we can preserve it for future generations. If we fail, all is lost and our forefathers will have struggled for nothing other than a dim and receding memory.

With us lies the responsibility for the future of the High Country.

If we prevail, we can ensure the development and maintenance of a lush and thriving environment, open to all. If we fail the influence of radicals on conservation and management practices will have no effective opposition. Within one generation, our own high country will become a decaying and senescent wasteland. Like the Snowy Mountains and mighty Kosciusko, it will degenerate into a mausoleum for native flora and fauna, a citadel of dead hopes and aspirations, an environment so hopelessly out of control that it has to be locked up and kept away from the scrutiny of ordinary Australian - who would otherwise be appalled at the damage and deterioration.

In standing against those who would destroy us and our beloved high country, we face a wider challenge. For too long, the crazies of fringe politics have had it their own way throughout Australia. Our struggle for practical and democratic conservation in the high country, if successful, could point the way for others to follow. It is not just our struggle that needs to be won. The Mallee, the Barmah, the huge Kosciusko Park area; all are going the wrong way.

Political battles can be won. But they are only won by the hardy and the committed. The result of this battle lies in the test of your individual commitment. Look around you. If you have the light of battle in your eyes, if you see strength and purpose in this great crowd of four thousand people, then you will know we can win.

And if not, if you shrink from this fight, then as you drive out of here take a good long look at the High Country, because you may never see it again.

It is all up to you!

GEOFF BURROWES

5th February, 1989.