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AGRARIAN MYTH AND THE END OF THE COUNTRY PARTY

So long as agrarian myth was widely believed, the Country Party could use it to great effect. This golden age for rural myth and the Country Party lasted from the party's beginning to the late 1960s. There had always been a few critics who raised doubts about some of the fundamental assumptions of agrarian myth, but during this period the virtues and superior productivity of rural life were generally acknowledged. There was also widespread acceptance of the proposition that the country was authentically Australian in a way that the city was not. For these reasons, government assistance to rural industry was supported by all political parties, although specific policy choices differed. The Country Party, however, remained the *only* party committed solely to country interests, uncontaminated by allegiance to either city capital or city labour.

The narrowness of its support base was to prove troublesome for the party. The gradual, but progressive depopulation of rural areas since the turn of the century meant that the Country Party's hold on power was being eroded. This trend was exacerbated by the fact that rural seats were becoming increasingly urbanised as the larger country towns grew at a faster rate than purely rural districts¹ and the economic fortunes of rural towns became less dependent on agriculture.² By 1980 very few seats in the federal parliament relied purely on farming.³ The party attempted to combat this diminution of its natural constituency by broadening its

¹ D. Aitkin, 'The Australian Country Party', in *Australian Politics: A Third Reader*, ed. H. Mayer & H. Nelson, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1973, p. 421.

² 'Country Cuts and Thrusts, *Sydney Morning Herald Magazine: Good Weekend*, 7 October, 1989, p. 29.

³ P. Coaldrake, 'The Nationals: Where to from here?', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 64, November, 1987, p. 17.

appeal and becoming a national, rather than a country party. Apart from Queensland, where some peculiar regional factors helped,⁴ this was a strategy doomed to failure.

The coming to power of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972 signalled the end of an era. Not only was the Country Party out of office, but arguments based on rural myth were rejected and a more economically rational approach to rural policy making was taken. In 1975, the Country Party acknowledged the changed environment with a change of name to the National Country Party. In 1982 it dropped the 'Country' to become the National Party of Australia.

With loss of office, the Country Party no longer necessarily seemed the most appropriate representative of rural interests to many country people. Increasingly, rural pressure groups assumed this function. One of the most vocal of these, the National Farmers Federation, rejected arguments based on rural myth and substituted an economically rational approach.⁵ By 1990, even some members of the National Party, including the leader, had acknowledged a commitment to 'dry' economics and the reduction and eventual elimination of farm subsidies and 'all round protection'.⁶ Rural myth, once so invulnerable to arguments based on economic rationality had lost its hold on the major players in Australian politics and subsidisation of rural industry was widely rejected.

This is rather ironic in the light of the subsidies provided to their farmers by Australia's competitors and their justification of such assistance by reference to agrarian myth. For example, according to OECD statistics, as a percentage of agricultural production government subsidies were 10% in Australia, well over 30% in the European Community, and over 70% in Japan.⁷ A *Newsweek* article explained the high rate of subsidy to European farmers as follows:

But many Europeans save a special spot in their hearts for farmers, who are often seen as custodians' of their societies' traditional

⁴ See M. Bridson Cribb, 'Queensland', in *Country To National: Australian rural politics and beyond*, ed. B. Costar & D. Woodward, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, pp. 68-81.

⁵ This was not, however without anomalies. See R. Gerritson, 'Why the "Uncertainty"? Labor's Failure to Manage the "Rural Crisis"', *Politics*, 22, 1, May, 1987, pp. 47-57.

⁶ 'Out of the wilderness, back to the bush', *The Weekend Australian*, 12-13 May 1990, p. 19.

⁷ 'Farmers' Blockade', *Newsweek*, 6 November, 1990, p. 79.

values. What's more, they say, if farmers are not encouraged to stay on the land, the cities will become dangerously clogged and the environment will suffer.⁸

The decrease in rural assistance has not signalled the death of agrarian myth in Australia. There is still a widespread belief in the special nature of farming. Farm bankruptcies receive media attention and community sympathy denied to failed city businesses. But in key policy making areas, rural myth is no longer widely believed as it once was, so that it has lost much of its ideological effectiveness.

Non-believers

In an article entitled 'The Great Rural Bludge', published in 1973, Ken Buckley claimed that 'the decline of the rural sector represents one of the best prospects for Australia's future.'⁹ A statement more contrary to the beliefs of agrarian myth and the Country Party would be difficult to find. Although extreme in its antipathy towards the rural sector, Buckley's article was symptomatic of increasing doubts about the wisdom of extensive subsidisation of agriculture. This went hand in hand with a prior rejection of agrarian myth. Once it was believed that rural people were no more productive, essential or worthy than city folk, much of the justification for government assistance disappeared. Some critics reached the same conclusion as Richard Hofstadter had in America; that the nation was supporting the farmers, rather than the reverse. This was the line Peter Samuel had taken in a *Bulletin* article in 1970 when he accused the Country Party of 'fleecing the country' through its use of rural subsidies 'at the taxpayers' expense.'¹⁰

When the Whitlam Labor government came to power, it set about dismantling many of the benefits acquired for their rural constituents by Country Party Ministers. Its approach was far more economically rational and dismissive of rural myth than the Coalition's had been. At the Federal Conference of the Party in 1971, Bill Hayden was quoted as saying 'We just cannot keep pouring out subsidies willynilly, like a madman in charge of a counterfeit press'.¹¹ This was an

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ K. Buckley, 'The Great Rural Bludge' in H. Mayer & H. Nelson (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 432.

¹⁰ P. Samuel, 'Fleecing the Country', *The Bulletin*, 31 October, 1970, p. 28.

¹¹ Quoted in K. Campbell, 'Rural Industries', in *Public Policy In Australia*, ed. R. Forward, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1974, p. 164. Dr. Rex Patterson, later Minister for Northern Development

intimation of things to come. The dairy industry subsidy, some taxation advantages and reduced interest rates for farmers were removed in 1973 along with cheaper rates for telephone and rural mail services. In 1974, in a controversial decision, the Labor Party removed the superphosphate bounty on the grounds that it assisted prosperous farmers more than the needy.¹²

The Whitlam Government also rejected the McEwan approach of all round protection and cut tariffs by 25%. Protection, which the Country Party had been formed to oppose, but had eventually enthusiastically embraced, was falling from favour. A generation of bureaucrats trained to take a more critical approach to the costs of protection was moving into the public service.¹³ They not only looked critically at protection of manufactured goods, but at rural industry as well.

The Labor Government further alienated rural people when, in creating the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC), it extended its powers to examine agricultural assistance measures which had previously been exempt from Tariff Board scrutiny. Bill Hayden, speaking in parliament on the occasion of the introduction of the IAC Bill made it clear that the Labor Party no longer accepted myth-based arguments. Referring to the previous government's approach to rural industry, he stated:

The crude doctrines of agricultural primacy would be invoked to justify any kind of hand out to rural industry without examination. So there developed the notion that secondary industry assistance could not be granted without at least the semblance of inquiry and justification, but rural industry had claims which for some mystical reason were unexaminable. Of course there was no mystical reason; there were very hard cash-value reasons, reasons initially connected with the long-term corruption practised by the Country Party, now no longer enjoying the Treasury benches or having access to the public funds pork barrel. . . The Country Party has always been concerned with pilfering from the public purse on a massive scale.¹⁴

It was clear that the environment had changed. What had for many years been widely regarded as justifiable support for rural industry was now seen by many

and briefly Agriculture Minister in the Whitlam Government opposed this position.

¹² The Industries Assistance Commission recommended its continuation.

¹³ P. Kelly, 'Black Jack: Is he Godfather of the Banana Republic?', *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 26-27 July, 1986, p. 2.

¹⁴ Australia, House of Representatives, *Debates* 1973, vol. 84, pp. 2370-71.

Australians as unjustifiable pork barrelling, a fact recognised with some bitterness in the words of a popular country song:

City folks these days despise the cocky,
they say with subsidies and all we've had it easy,
but there's no drought or starving stock,
on a sewerred suburban block. . .¹⁵

With the Country Party out of office, farmers could no longer lobby the government and expect sympathetic treatment. As a consequence, many farmers recognised the need to work through producer organisations rather than the Country Party. Confronted by this altered political scenario, the party acknowledged that both its electoral base and policy concerns were too narrow for it to sustain its influential position. In order to maintain power the party decided that it needed to broaden its appeal and capture urban votes.

A Change of Name and Direction

In trying to achieve this goal, a number of strategies were explored. One of these was an alliance with the Democratic Labor Party, which prompted Gough Whitlam to comment 'I have heard rumours about an impending union, but considering the parents it is likely to be barren.'¹⁶ In the end, the negotiations proved unsuccessful and there was no union. Another possibility was to attempt to capture rural seats held by the Liberals. This strategy, however, posed clear dangers to the survival of the coalition and there were no guarantees that the Country Party could take seats from its coalition partners. The third strategy, and the one which was ultimately adopted, following its success in Queensland, was to attempt to become a party of the right with both urban and rural appeal,¹⁷ a national rather than a country party.

The change of name (first to National Country, then to National) and direction meant that the more traditionally conservative aspects of the party's ideology, such as support for the Crown, Church and family were given greater emphasis. The party established good relations with the mining industry and built more

¹⁵ E. Bogle, 'Now I'm easy', in *Eric Bogle Song Book*, Larrikin Music, Sydney, p. 15.

¹⁶ D. Wells, *The Wit of Whitlam*, Outback, Collingwood, 1976, p. 48.

¹⁷ For an elaboration on these strategies, see D. Fraser 'Dealing with the National Party', in *Liberals face the future*, ed. G. Brandis, T. Harley & D. Markwell, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1984, pp. 155-6.

bridges to the manufacturing industry.¹⁸ The types of candidates selected by the party also changed. In 1975 it was clear that 'in choosing its candidates the party as a whole is now clearly less interested in honoring the claims of primary producers with long years of voluntary service to the party than it is in finding well-known, popular members of the local community who have been actively involved in commercial and service organisations.'¹⁹

This move in a new direction was not without costs. It was apparent that if the Country Party in its new guise as the National Party were to win conservative urban votes, the Liberals would be the losers. There was thus a fresh element of tension introduced to Liberal-National relations. This was most pronounced in Queensland where the Nationals were the dominant non-Labor Party and where it led ultimately to the collapse of the coalition.

The change of name and direction also alienated many of the party's traditional supporters. As one rural Queenslander put it, 'If you didn't vote CP you had rocks in your head. Then they got all mixed up trying to win votes in the city'.²⁰ The party, however, failed to appeal to conservative city voters. It was rather ironic that the party estranged some rural supporters by its courting of urban voters, yet retained its image as a rural party in the city. In the words of a *Bulletin* commentator 'it is the sort of party you join if you are a bushie and for which you do not vote unless you identify yourself primarily with the bush.'²¹

The 1990 federal elections produced the party's worst ever performance, when the Nationals lost four seats in the House of Representatives, including that of their leader, and two representatives in the Senate. With only 14 of the 148 House of Representative seats, their percentage representation was the lowest ever recorded since the Country Party had entered the federal parliament in 1922. This disastrous defeat provoked suggestions that the Nationals should

¹⁸ D. Aitkin, 'Why the National Party has collapsed', *The Bulletin*, 17 April, 1984, p. 40.

¹⁹ M. Bridson Cribb, 'The Country Party' in H. R. Penniman (ed.), *Australia At The Polls: The National Elections Of 1975*, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, Washington, 1977, p. 152.

²⁰ A. McGregor, 'The Deep North strikes Back', *Sydney Morning Herald Magazine*, 21 October, 1989, p. 17.

²¹ D. Barnett, 'More members, fewer votes', *The Bulletin*, 18 July, 1989, p. 37.

merge with the Liberals, a move which would signal the end of distinctive and separate rural parliamentary representation.

Such suggestions were not new. The idea of merger has a long history,²² but has received recent support from two former National Party leaders, Doug Anthony and Ian Sinclair. The Nixon Committee which was established to enquire into the future of the National Party also viewed the possibility of a Liberal-Country Party merger positively. The National Party, has, however, rejected this option. The Party's Federal President argued that a merger would not help the non-Labor parties win more seats, may provoke the formation of a 'genuine' country party and would disadvantage rural Australians. He suggested a return to the old Country Party emphasis on regional representation:

Certainly the majority of voters do now live in communities, be they small townships or large regional cities, rather than isolated settlements or scattered properties. Adjustment in political emphasis must be made for factors such as this. But it does not alter the fact that Australians living outside the capital cities do have different priorities and attitudes on a whole range of political issues.

There is therefore a compelling reason for a political organisation that concentrates primarily on representing those priorities and aspirations. That political organisation has always been the National Party. There is no reason why it should not continue to be the National Party.²³

The party's parliamentary leader Tim Fischer agreed that the party's first priority should be provincial Australia. He cited as National Party targets a number of seats based on provincial towns such as Kennedy, Leichhardt, Herbert, Capricornia, and two traditional Country/National Party seats lost in 1990, Page and Richmond.²⁴ The idea of a retreat from the cities received enthusiastic endorsement by the parliamentary leader of the National Party in Western Australia, Hendy Cowan, who stated that 'I welcome the concept of getting back to the bush. That's where we belong. . . we should concentrate on what should be our real base - the provincial urban voter.'²⁵ As a symbol of its changed direction,

²² For a thorough examination of the idea, see B. Costar, *The Merger Idea and Australia's Non-Labor Parties, 1920-1990*, University College of Southern Queensland Colloquium on the Future of the Non-Labor Parties, Brisbane, 28 July, 1990.

²³ S. McDonald, *An Assessment Of Amalgamation*, University College of Southern Queensland Colloquium on the Future of the Non-Labor Parties, Brisbane, 28 July, 1990, p. 15.

²⁴ G. Sheridan, 'Out of the wilderness, back to the bush' *The Weekend Australian*, 12-13 May, 1990, p. 19.

²⁵ A. Ramsay, 'Nats Beat A Path Back To The Country', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 December,

the party, which for over a decade had tried to distance itself from its role as faithful watchdog of country interests, chose 'Putting the Country first'.

In some ways the wheel appears to have turned full circle with the National Party returning to its country roots and an emphasis on city-country differences. The environment, however, has irrevocably changed. As the Nixon Report found, demographic and economic trends have altered the face of rural Australia, and there is no longer an independently owned rural media which the National Party can use to explain its views. The changing composition of rural electorates promises to make the party's task of winning provincial urban votes even more difficult than in the past. The 1987 federal elections showed a swing to Labor in country seats which had grown by 5% or more. This swing occurred partly as a result of the population growth, but also because of 'the ALP's ability to read demographic changes with accuracy and perspicacity.'²⁶

Rural Pressure Groups

As the National Party declined in influence, and especially since it has ceased to share government, many rural people turned to pressure groups of varying degrees of militancy in an attempt to secure their interests. There are numerous rural producer organisations. Most of them are linked to particular commodities, but there are a smaller number of organisations committed to representing a wide range of farm interests. One of the most influential and newsworthy of these, the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) deliberately turned its back on arguments based on rural myth.

The NFF was formed in 1979, in part because of dissatisfaction with the interventionist style of the National Country Party and its continued support for high tariffs for manufacturing industry. It distanced itself from the National Party and cultivated links with the Liberals, Democrats and Labor, although it has opposed the latter on numerous policy issues especially in the field of industrial relations. The NFF supported 'dry' economic policies and its grazier leader, Ian McLachlan, according to a *Queensland Country Life* editorial,

raised the ire of some farmers by preaching the commonsense doctrine of self help - as opposed to the convenience of blaming

1989, p. 27.

²⁶ J. Cribb, 'Bush-whacked by Labor', *The Weekend Australian*, 1-2 August 1987, p. 22.

governments for most of the problems of the land. But to balance this viewpoint, Mr. McLachlan has consistently prodded Governments to get off the backs of successful farmers and let them operate efficiently without the choking constraints of excessive taxation and bureaucratic controls.²⁷

The NFF also devoted considerable energy to curbing what it saw as the excessive power of unions. It joined the Australian Confederation of Industry, a major employers' association, but withdrew when that organisation failed to share its opposition to centralised wage fixing. Despite the fact that its attacks on union power were couched in the language of the New Right, the NFF was tapping into a vein of traditional farmer resentment. Farmers have long felt that compared with workers in other industries, they are poorly rewarded for their efforts. This has meant that the virulent anti-unionism of the NFF, although based on the economic arguments of the New Right, fits comfortably with agrarian myth. It functions in a similar fashion to unite disparate rural groups. Farmers who do not share the NFF's free market views have been able to unite with it in feelings of resentment and hostility towards the unions, and by extension towards the Labor Government. As Rolf Gerritson pointed out

the shared anti-union, anti-Labor stance of the farm organisations is useful for maintaining both the unity and the identity of the farmers as a separate, cohesive grouping in society and the farmers' status as "representing" rural Australia. It also provides a mechanism that overrides the intercommodity rivalries which previously bedeviled farmer group politics.²⁸

But the NFF has not been entirely consistent in its approach to the free market. It combined a New Right deregulatory philosophy with demands for tax concessions for farmers,²⁹ a combination which left it open to the same sorts of criticisms about contradictory policies which the old Country Party had received. It also alienated many small farmers who felt that it was a federation for the 'big man' rather than for the battling small farmer. For example, the NFF's taxation policy permitted the use of farms as tax shelters, a device of use to 'Pitt Street' farmers and those with numerous business interests. This policy had in the past pushed up the price of land, making it too expensive for the small farmer.³⁰

²⁷ Editorial, *Queensland Country Life*, 26 May, 1988, p. 8.

²⁸ R. Gerritson, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 52.

³⁰ *ibid.*

According to the president of the Union Of Australian Farmers (UAF), formed in 1987 to help the family farmer:

the National Farmers Federation and the NSW Farmers Association are concentrating on the big macro-economic issues - government spending, the size of government, foreign debt, inflation, interest rates etc. which may be extremely important but will take some time to achieve. Meanwhile thousands of farmers are being pushed off their properties and the NFF seems content to sit back and watch, he says.

He accuses NFF president, Ian McLachlan, of supporting a rationalisation of rural industry which would see 20,000 NSW farmers disappear as part of some "far-flung, macro-economic vision" being pursued by the Federation.³¹

Like the old Country Party, rural organisations such as the UAF believe that there are reasons other than the purely economic for keeping farmers on the land and they look to government to help keep them there. They argue that the NFF approach, which rejects the family farm as 'merely an emotional term that could not be properly defined',³² will lead to the concentration of rural wealth in a few hands. In order to prevent this, the UAF argues that 'it is essential to stem the exodus of sound family farmers through the short-term provision of increased adjustment assistance by the government.'³³

Many small farmers continue to look to government for help. The pages of the rural press call for government assistance on a whole range of issues. Typical requests are for a nutgrass subsidy (in the *Queensland Farmer and Grazier*)³⁴ and more government funded research to combat mice plagues (the *Oakey Champion*).³⁵ Farmers feel that this assistance is due to them because they are not responsible for their own predicament. The UAF asked if 'good, efficient farmers, in trouble through no fault of their own, [should] be kicked out of agriculture?'³⁶ For many farmers, the fault lies with an unpredictable climate,

³¹ V. Graham, 'Fighting for the family farm', *The Land*, 23 July, 1987, p. 10.

³² J. Cribb, 'The death of the family farm', *The Weekend Australian*, 9-10 January, 1988, p. 15.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ 'Grower calls for nutgrass subsidy', *Queensland Farmer and Grazier*, April, 1989, p. 7.

³⁵ 'Grainmen call for more research to combat mice plague', *Oakey Champion*, 11 May, 1989, p. 1.

³⁶ J. Cribb, 'The death of the family farm'.

government, unions and city based finance houses, the familiar villains of rural myth.

A sifting through newspaper stories over the past three years produces articles listing all these factors. A western Queensland sheep and cattle man blames four years of drought for his desperate situation;³⁷ a *Land* columnist claims that 'all we can hear about from Labor governments are announcements of vast city expenditures on centralised activity, plans to solve congestion problems and bleats about the homeless, destitute, drug addicts, child delinquents, and criminals who colonise squalid suburbs living off ill-gotten gains and Government handouts';³⁸ The *Land* editorialises against wage rises for unionists in the face of falling wheat prices;³⁹ two correspondents representing the UAF argue that as a result of financial pressures 'the winners will, of course, be the city businessmen, the stockbrokers, the corporations, the foreign investors, and the losers will be the family farmers, the solid, hard working men and women caught in the squeeze of circumstances and robbed of their livelihood and homes.'⁴⁰

It is clear from these statements that agrarian myth, especially those versions which emphasise the difficulty associated with making a living from the soil, is still believed in many rural circles. Indeed, a survey commissioned by the NFF in 1986 which polled 1200 people in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane indicated that many city dwellers share the sentiments of country people. The survey found high levels of urban sympathy and understanding of rural problems. It also found that

the major perception is one of hardship and vulnerability, rather than pointing to any blame on the part of farmers and the rural sector generally. However, there is still a strong view that the rural sector is inefficient and this is costing money to the man in the street.

Oddly enough, this perception of inefficiency did not alter the opinion that farmers should be supported by government. The survey reported that 'there

³⁷ H. Brown, 'The rains came, but not for a man praying for a drizzle', *The Weekend Australian*, 30 April-1 May, 1988, p. 9.

³⁸ 'Sommerlad says', *The Land*, 3 September, 1987.

³⁹ Editorial, *The Land*, 19 February, 1987, p.8.

⁴⁰ Correspondence, *The Land*, 15 October, 1987, p. 4.

appears a growing feeling that farmers should receive more government subsidies and support' although there was a substantial group opposing this notion.⁴¹

The positive response of city dwellers to farm problems may have been encouraged by a number of farmer demonstrations and protests which had received extensive media coverage throughout Australia. Such protests increased in momentum in 1987 as a number of farm families were forced from their farms as a result of bank repossessions. These departures were reported widely in all media and were greeted by a flood of urban sympathy which prompted one bank executive to comment; 'After motherhood and the ANZACS, the Australian farmer is next in the sympathy stakes.'⁴²

Comments such as this indicate that agrarian myth is still accepted as valid in the Australian community. Its acceptance, however, is not as widespread as it once was. Even some farmers have put the view that farmers in economic trouble have only their own bad management to blame.⁴³ The once almost universal recognition of the need for direct rural subsidy has disappeared in a climate in which free market economics dominates the thinking of the bureaucracy and the top echelons of the political parties.

Agrarian myth is still an important factor in uniting farmers against a perceived common enemy, particularly in difficult economic times. For many farmers, myth still makes sense of their predicament and absolves them of blame. As it has in the past, it gives meaning to their lives by describing the battle to win a living from the soil in the face of opposition from the environment and/or city based enemies. This interpretation of events also makes sense to many city dwelling Australians as well, a fact which is unsurprising given the importance of agrarian myth in our cultural history. Beliefs which have been reiterated through the ages, and then reinterpreted to fit local conditions are not easily shaken off.

Such beliefs, however, are less ideologically useful than they once were to

⁴¹ 'Cities rally towards rural economic plight', *Weekend Australian*, 15 May, 1986, p. 7.

⁴² K. McClymont, 'Banks defend foreclosures on angry farming families', *Times On Sunday*, 8 March, 1987, p. 5.

⁴³ 'Forced sales anger farmers', *The Land*, 26 February, 1987, p.4.

country people. In the competition for advantage over other interests, arguments based on agrarian myth are no longer sufficiently convincing to produce a flow of government support. Public policy is no longer formulated by believers in rural myth. For example, the Department of Trade has expressed fears that Australia is failing to adapt with sufficient haste to the new order of agribusiness⁴⁴, for which the catchcry is 'get big or get out'.⁴⁵ This represents a major change from previous policies which supported the retention of the family farm. Just how big a change can be illustrated by the suggestion of an influential business strategist that

The family farm is an anachronism in an increasingly competitive and corporate world. . . We expect that further declines in some commodity prices and land values in the short- to medium-term will force a massive and long-overdue surrendering of land ownership in the agricultural sector and a consolidation of rural holdings into much larger units.⁴⁶

Agrarian myth is no longer as impregnable as it once was against the assaults of non-believers. The numbers who believe in it to the point of being prepared to support the redistribution of income to rural industries are diminishing. For this reason attempts to resurrect a 'country' party with an ideology based on aspects of agrarian myth cannot succeed.

The National Party, with its country origins and largely rural supporters is faced with a dilemma. Its foray into the cities as a conventional conservative party has failed, a fact which the party now recognises. The party leadership wishes to breathe fresh life into regional aspects of agrarian myth and concentrate on winning seats in provincial Australia. Such seats, have, however changed. The evidence suggests that the residents of country towns do not necessarily identify with farmers and their values nor do they feel the need for distinctive political representation.

This does not mean that the National Party will disappear overnight. For many farmers, it will continue to represent their interests. It is unlikely, however, that

⁴⁴ N. Austen, 'Agriculture enters demanding new phase', *The Bulletin*, 29 September, 1987, p. 46. Agribusiness involves the vertical integration of agriculture with either the supply of farm inputs or with the processing and distribution of farm products, or both.

⁴⁵ N. Austen, 'There's no business like agribusiness', *The Bulletin*, 13 September, 1988, p. 127.

⁴⁶ N. Austen, 'Farm boom, but small will no longer be beautiful', *The Bulletin*, 8 December, 1987, p.53.

the National Party will ever rival the old Country Party in power and influence. Not only did the Country Party have a stronger electoral base, but it could use agrarian myth to great effect in justifying claims made on behalf of its constituents. These arguments sounded convincing to its supporters and political rivals alike. This is a luxury the National Party must do without, for the doubters, even within the party, are too numerous and the believers too few.

CONCLUSION

Myth is a useful political tool. In order to be useful, however, it must be a 'living' myth which is widely believed to be true. In reaching an understanding of the political use of myth, it is important to reject the interpretation of myth as simply a false belief which can then be contrasted with a conflicting reality. Myth may or may not be objectively true. What is significant is that it is widely *believed* to be true.

One of myth's primary functions is to unite believers by telling a tale so convincingly that it makes sense of their lives. This tale does not have to be logical or consistent. In fact, myth is rarely either. One of its great political strengths is its invulnerability to attacks based on rational argument. Thus it can be, and often is, contradictory. Myths can be revolutionary, or they can be conservative. Both types are absorbed into political ideologies where their unifying function and emotional appeal strengthens the ideology's attraction.

Australian agrarian myth formed an important component of the ideology of the Australian Country Party. The myth itself can be traced as far back as ancient Greece and Rome. Its themes of rural virtue and productivity and a negative assessment of city life became an important and familiar component of both literary and popular European culture. It is therefore unsurprising to find that it was extremely influential in European colonies such as North America and Australia.

From the beginning, there have been two main strands in agrarian myth. One strand portrayed nature as abundant and life on the land as Arcadian. The other portrayed nature as perverse and life on the land as constant struggle. These two versions of myth, although contradictory, co-existed and were believed simultaneously. Examples of both can be found in Europe, America and Australia. In Australia, however, because the land is largely unsuited to small

farming, the version of myth which portrayed farming as a life of struggle came to dominate. This situation can be contrasted with America, where images of abundance prevailed. In both countries, however, the farmer was seen to face opposition from city interests. In Australia, such opposition was frequently added to opposition from the land and climate.

Two of the most significant writers on Australian agrarian myth have failed to acknowledge the essentially plural nature of myth. This has had important consequences for their work. Russel Ward, in *The Australian Legend*, separated bush myth from agrarian myth, thus presenting a deep division between bush workers and small farmers, despite his own acknowledgement that they were often one and the same people. Once it is recognised, however that there are many versions of any myth, then it is possible to see both bush workers and farmers as characters in an overarching Australian agrarian myth. Both can be seen as contributing to the creation of Australian national characteristics, a role Ward confined to bush workers. By broadening the range of possible mythical protagonists it also becomes possible to acknowledge the place of women in the creation of 'typical' Australian characteristics. Although women did not belong to Ward's 'nomad tribe', they did belong on the farms and selections of the Australian frontier and are thus familiar characters in Australian rural mythology.

Coral Lansbury, in her book *Arcady in Australia* assumed that myth is false belief. She acknowledged two visions of Australian rural life. One vision is Arcadian. The other portrays bush life as never ending struggle. The latter she took to be a true account, to be contrasted with the false Arcadian vision. Yet the ready acceptance of conflicting views is a characteristic of myth. Banjo Paterson's joyous vision of the bush has seemed as true to generations of Australians as Lawson's more dismal account.

This variety of agrarian myth has added enormously to its political value. Depending on the context, different protagonists and different varieties of myth can be used and readily understood. Because myth is not an artificial creation, but evolves as community property, it is accessible and acceptable to all. This was the great strength of agrarian myth to the Country Party. Because myth's assumptions were accepted and understood by all, when the Country Party asked

for government assistance for rural industry, the grounds for its request were widely understood.

Myth therefore became an important component of the Country Party's ideology and was used to ask for government support for a range of policies designed to maintain as many Australians as possible on the land. In this broad goal the party was consistent, although the policies chosen to implement it varied. Because the Country Party never appeared to have a strong commitment to particular policies, it was sometimes accused of being a pragmatic, non-ideological party. Indeed, this was how some party members saw themselves.

Yet, at the heart of Country Party ideology was agrarian myth with its belief in the superiority of country life and its necessity for the nation's good. This guided the party's policy choices such as opposition to the tariff and its eventual acceptance in return for the protection of rural industries, support for rural sector subsidies, closer settlement and electoral weightage. All were designed to keep people in the country and enhance the quality of their lives.

Although the Country Party portrayed itself as *the* party of rural people, many of the policies it favoured received broad community approval well into the 1960s. There had always been some criticism of rural sector support on the grounds of its economic cost to the nation but such criticism made little impact. Belief in agrarian myth was almost universal. By the late 1960s, however, the economic rationalists were in strategic positions and were being listened to. This was a trend which has continued until the present day when 'dry' economics has won support even within the ranks of the Country Party's successor, the National Party.

The National Party resisted arguments based on economic rationalism for longer than most. In arguing against decisions based solely on economic terms, it, like the Country Party before it, argued that there were values other than the purely economic which were worth considering. The Country Party suggested that values such as equity and community ought to be considered in the making of public policy and on these grounds resisted the arguments of 'dry' economics. Surprisingly, the party has received little recognition for this, even among those who are opposed to economic rationalism themselves, perhaps because of the party's image as self-seeking and pragmatic.

As the last chapter indicated, the National Party's electoral base has contracted, just as belief in agrarian myth is no longer as widespread as it once was. Agrarian myth is not yet dead as the ancient Greek myths are. All Australians are familiar with it. Mythical images of rural life are still used to sell beer and margarine and provide 'national' costume for Australia's Olympic teams. It no longer, however, convinces those in powerful positions in the government and bureaucracy that extensive government support for rural industry can be justified in the national interest.

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