

CHAPTER SIX

"OH, THE FARMER AND THE COWMAN CAN BE FRIENDS"*

INTRODUCTION In Australia, it was the farmers and the graziers who had to be friends if primary producers were ever to speak with one voice. While grazier organisations were established last century to combat the shearers' demand for a "closed shop", the farmers united to demand that large sheep runs be broken up for closer settlement. The antagonism directed at graziers continued long after the land issue dropped off the agenda at farmers' conferences. It was maintained by the gulf between the two groups over how to market farm produce—whether by monopoly marketing boards under grower control or by the free market system. When you added to this the divisions in property size, education, wealth and lifestyles it became clear that attaining friendship would take a monumental effort and a lot of compromise. In the end the graziers made the compromise by deserting the free auction system for a reserve price for wool.

THE FEELERS GO OUT

As noted in an earlier chapter, the Graziers' Association had tentatively approached the FSA on amalgamation in 1960 but, with the FSA trying to conclude lengthy unity negotiations with the Wheat and Woolgrowers' Association, it was not an opportune time to begin talks. In fact, FSA officials feared that reports of unity discussions with the graziers, however tentative, would put negotiations with the WWA at risk. The FSA wanted the Graziers' Association to refrain from publicly mentioning any contact on the issue. However, it was raised by the FSA General Secretary, Allan Johnston, who, in a letter to the *Bathurst National Advocate*, made it clear that the FSA had rebuffed the Graziers' Association. He wrote:

The Graziers' delegates raised the question of a possible merger with the F.S.A. and were informed

* Song title from the United States stage show and film, *Oklahoma*.

emphatically by my General President (Mr.E. Hoy) that it would be a breach of faith if he and his colleagues entered into any discussion on the subject. Mr Hoy further stated at the meeting that he would not even discuss possibilities of an amalgamation, and merger between the two bodies would have to originate with the rank and file members of the United Farmers and Woolgrowers' Association of NSW, which will be the name of the organisation which may result from a merger between the F.S.A. and the Wheat and Woolgrowers.¹

The WWA split from the FSA because many wheatgrowers saw it as indecisive on the question of compulsory wheat pooling, and resented its affiliation with the NSW Country Party which would go no further than support voluntary pools. The WWA had always eschewed political links, but the Labor Party's support for compulsory pooling had improved its popularity among the small farmers, especially in the Riverina where, in the 1928 and 1929 referendums on wheat pooling, the highest votes for compulsion were recorded. The WWA had its power base in the Riverina. Graham writes that neither ballot recorded the necessary two-thirds majority and, while the FSA campaigned for a "yes" vote, the Country Party" remained aloof and ignored demands for legislation to make a simple majority sufficient to have a pool established".²

By the early 1960s both the FSA and the Graziers' Association had long broken official links with the Country Party, but the graziers remained an unashamedly politically biased organisation. This, along with its adherence to the free auction system for wool, made unity anathema to the membership of the WWA. However, after the FSA and WWA united in 1962 to become UFWA, there were

¹April 4, 1961. The clippings from NSW country newspapers quoted in this chapter are held at the ANU Archives, N92/1543.

²D.B. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*. p.243. Graham discusses wheatgrower discontent in the late 1920s in some detail. pp.236-266.

isolated calls for UFWA and the Graziers' Association to unite. They came from a number of branches of both organisations and cross-membership could have been a factor. Cross membership was never assumed to be significant in terms of actual numbers but a person with joint membership was likely to favour amalgamation because of a lack of bias towards either graziers or farmers. It is possible that the spirit of unity was alive in some centres in pre-UFWA days but kept subdued until the long negotiations between UFWA and the WWA were successful. The Graziers' Association records show several branches passing motions in 1961 favouring amalgamation with the FSA. One was Dunedoo, on January 21, and another was Dubbo, on January 26. However, on January 20, Gilgandra passed a motion opposing amalgamation unless it was recommended by the Association's General Council.³

Once the FSA-WWA amalgamation was achieved in 1962 a major hurdle had been cleared from the path of farmer-grazier unity and while grass roots pressure for unity, as deemed essential by Johnston in his letter to the *Bathurst National Advocate*, was not evident, there were stirrings. In June, 1966, the Narromine branch of UFWA voted that a committee be set up "to inquire into the difficulties and possibilities of an amalgamation with the N.S.W. Graziers' Association".⁴ The *Dubbo Liberal* reported that the Dubbo region, which included Narromine, was "fairly equally divided" on amalgamation and went on to quote Mr Q. Shepherd, of the Narromine branch of the Graziers' Association, saying that "present primary producers were a disorganised crowd and we will have to amalgamate".⁵ The same newspaper article reported the chairman of the UFWA Dubbo District Council, H.A. McCarthy, saying that amalgamation was a matter of urgency. McCarthy had dual membership and was formerly chairman of the Bathurst Branch of the Graziers' Association. "I belong to both", he said, "and I feel that with so many vital issues at stake we should lose no time in getting together."

³ANU Archives, N92/221.

⁴*United Farmer*, the official UFWA journal, June 17, 1963.

⁵June 14, 1963.

The *Inverell Times* reported on March 3, 1967, that a meeting of wheatgrowers in Moree was generally in favour of UFWA merging with the Graziers' Association. Most of the 30 at the meeting, primarily concerned with the provision of more wheat storage facilities, were UFWA members. In 1966, the Chairman of the Mudgee branch of the Graziers' Association, C. Suttor, told the annual meeting of the branch that it seemed ridiculous that the two organisations were divided, but pointed out that the controversy over wool marketing had widened the gap.⁶ There was hardly a groundswell of support for amalgamation just a flickering in certain branches. Graziers' Association president, Bruce Wright, gave the pro-unity groups little encouragement in declaring, before his own Armidale branch, that unity, to him, did not mean amalgamation but making joint approaches to Government on matters of mutual interest. Wright said that joint approaches to the Federal Government would keep costs down but:

in other matters there was healthy competition between the two organisations each of which was kept on its toes and was doing things which otherwise would have been left undone.⁷

In the previous month, at Dubbo, Wright said that unity appeared virtually impossible and that it would only produce a dictatorship. He said the past history of other organisations showed the flaw in trying to attain unity of thought and action.⁸ When UFWA president, Max Ridd, addressed the Uralla Branch of the Graziers' Association in May, 1966, he went no further than Wright on the unity question, saying that all primary producers should sit around a table and discuss their common problems. His host, Uralla Branch president, P.J. Gall, agreed with Ridd, saying that anything that brings about a closer liaison "must be a good thing".⁹

⁶Reported in *Muster*, June 1, 1966.

⁷*Muster*, June 1, 1966.

⁸*Nyngan Observer*, May 12, 1966

⁹*Uralla Times*, May 12, 1966.

The attitude of Wright and Ridd was generally reflected in the cautious approach of the membership of both organisations to unity, but it was an issue that would not go away. The pro-unity motions passed at branch meetings were sometimes sent on to annual conferences which forced a debate on the issue. In 1963, just a year after the amalgamation of the FSA and the WWA, the UFWA annual conference discussed at length a resolution from the Dubbo and Mendooran district councils that every effort be made by UFWA to have all primary industry organisations amalgamate, particularly UFWA and the Graziers' Association. The resolution was amended to request that a committee be formed to investigate all aspects of amalgamation with the Graziers and report back to the 1964 conference. However, another amendment, moved by former UFWA president, E.G. Hoy, declared that "we have talks with other organisations other than the Graziers".¹⁰ The Hoy amendment became the motion when the original motion and the first amendment were defeated. It was passed unanimously. Hoy did not mince words, telling conference delegates "don't lie down to the graziers, let's not tie ourselves down". The UFWA leadership appeared in tune with Hoy's advice and by 1968 it had followed the lead given by South Australia and Victoria and amalgamated with the NSW division of the APPU and also with the state branch of the Apple and Pear Growers Association.

Grant Harman, in a paper especially prepared for the meeting of the Graziers' Association's Unity Study Committee on October 28 that year, described the UFWA-APPU merger, officially signed on August 13, as "unexpected".¹¹ It appears that the graziers were caught on the hop by UFWA which was now "in a stronger position" relative to the Graziers' Association with an enlarged membership, estimated between 25,000 and 27,000 but probably less, according to Harman. In the 1960s Graziers' Association membership generally ranged between 10,000 and 11,000 and UFWA, through amalgamation, had further widened the gap. This put it in a stronger position when it finally got down to talking seriously to

¹⁰Reported in the *Albury Border Mail*, July 17, 1963, and the *Orange Daily* of the same date.

¹¹An extract from the paper is held at the ANU archives, N123/204.

the Graziers about amalgamation. Harman said the whole question of amalgamation with the APPU had been decided by the July, 1968, UFWA conference, in "a few minutes", and UFWA had lost nothing, keeping its name, its staff, its building and its president. "It was obvious that UFWA would remain dominant in the new body" and Harman went on to quote an unnamed UFWA councillor who said in 1966 that "if we are going to talk to the APPU, it should be on the basis of takeover, not amalgamation". Harman concluded that it was "virtually one of takeover".

UFWA in NSW was following the lead of first, South Australia in 1966, and, shortly afterwards, Victoria, where its wheat-sheep counterpart organisations united with state divisions of APPU to form state general purpose organisations similar to the Western Australia Farmers' Union. The APPU had never established a branch in Western Australia. UFWA and the APPU were both organisations with a one-big-union philosophy, but APPU was prepared to disappear in the cause of unity. UFWA, with a membership and financial backing that dwarfed the NSW division of APPU, was happy to oblige it. Richmond claimed that the merger of the FSA and the WWA was a total success, due largely to the focus of the new organisation on the problems associated with wheat. UFWA then looked for new fields to conquer. He wrote:

If it were the dominant concern of the first UFWA president, Max Ridd, to be occupied with the creation of wheat storage (1962-67) then it was the preoccupation with the second president, Claude Renshaw (1967-71), to be involved with amalgamations. Having established a successful combined organisation, UFWA was determined to carry out unification where possible and the next few years saw a wide variety of organisations come under the UFWA umbrella.¹²

¹²*Op. cit.* p.80.

UFWA amended its constitution to allow for special commodity sections to be incorporated, enabling it to bring into the fold the NSW division of the APPU, the NSW Apple and Pear Growers' Association, the Bathurst Fruitgrowers' Association and the NSW Vegetable Growers' Association. The amalgamation with APPU brought with it a significant number of dairyfarmers, but in 1971 UFWA accepted that its dairyfarmers should be part of the unity movement in that industry and they left UFWA to join the NSW Dairy Farmers' Association which brought together the manufacturing milk and the fresh milk sectors of that state.¹³

The final and biggest challenge for UFWA was unity with the Graziers' Association and this would not be another "takeover". The Graziers may have had a membership less than half that of UFWA but its progressive scale of subscriptions, whereby large producers and corporate members paid considerably more than small producers, and shrewd investments made it more than a match when it came to financial resources. The Graziers had always spent more money attracting skilled staff and, while sometimes at odds with the federal branch of the Country Party over tariffs, they had considerable political clout and had more success at public relations and dealing with the media.¹⁴

From the Graziers' side there was also growing interest in farm unity and, for some, state unity was a necessary prelude to federal farm unity. If the Graziers and UFWA, the dominant organisations of a state that produced about a third of the nation's farm produce, united then the new body would have the power and finance to determine how its members were to be represented at the federal level. The writing was on the wall for the Australian Farmers' Federation, which emerged in 1969 following the amalgamation of the National Farmers' Union and the Australian Primary Producers' Union. This was not the "one voice" long sought to represent farmers at the federal level and match the influence of the

¹³*Ibid.* pp. 80-81.

¹⁴Based on the author's experience dealing with farm organisations as agricultural writer for the *Australian Financial Review*, 1966-72.

manufacturing lobby and the ACTU. The AFF suffered the same problems as the NFU in being denied any real power by its constituents and denied adequate staff and resources. It operated out of a small Canberra office comprising an executive officer, a secretary and clerical support. Importantly, the AFF did not represent the specialist woolgrowers of the Australian Woolgrowers and Graziers' Council whose most powerful constituent was the Graziers' Association of NSW. Many graziers saw a fully representative and effective one farm voice on the horizon, but this would only come after the Association achieved unity with its old protagonist, UFWA.

Unlike UFWA, the Graziers were not interested in uniting with fruit or vegetable growers, or the state division of the APPU which embraced a variety of small farmers, including dairyfarmers. The Graziers' Association was formed by wool and beef producers although, in the 1960s, many of its members took up wheatgrowing as a major enterprise. Its only interest was in UFWA which, despite the addition of small-scale farmers to its ranks, remained predominantly a broad-acre organisation of wheat-sheep producers. Wheat and wool items dominated the agenda of UFWA conferences. As recorded earlier, the Graziers' Association, as was its style, approached the question of unity with great caution. In 1967 it set up a Unity Study Committee to examine the pros and cons of unity in great detail. Its first report of April, 1968, did not attempt to commit the Graziers in any way to amalgamation with UFWA, and went to some length to highlight the great differences between the two organisations and the different type of membership. It is not unfair to say that the report was more than a little disparaging of UFWA.

The caution of the study group was warranted at that stage, just a few years after the bitter referendum battle over a reserve price for wool. The Graziers secured their winning "no" vote but ended up with even fewer friends within UFWA. The two organisations remained in strong competition for membership, with their district organisers competing for new members from the ranks of the non-committed and attempting to entice farmers to leave one

organisation for another or to take out dual membership. One, possibly apocryphal, reason given for dual UFWA-Graziers Association membership was that people signed up just to get a persistent organiser off their backs. The records of the Graziers' Association contain a number of letters from members advising head office that UFWA organisers were active in their regions, recruiting members and on occasions forming new branches. In June, 1962, the Graziers' Association general secretary, W.E.L. de Vos, wrote to C.K.B. White, of Duramana, near Bathurst, noting "that you write about the formation of a branch of the United Farmers at Bathurst and I have since seen press reports of the meeting held there. I agree with you that it is necessary for the Association to improve its public relations in that area".¹⁵

UFWA sought to take advantage of the large swing by graziers into wheat in the 1960s by trying to get them to switch allegiance. It proclaimed its primacy as the traditional voice for wheatgrowers and its record as a champion of wheat stabilisation compared with the Graziers' preference for the free market. Wheat was second only to wool as a divisive factor between the two organisations. The Graziers' Association revealed its deep concern about the vulnerability of its wheat growing members to overtures from UFWA in its response to a letter from a member, E. May-Steers, dated May 7, 1967. May-Steers reported to head office that it was increasingly difficult to get new members, and with most land holders turning to wheat, "even our own members are expressing the opinion that they get more help from U.F.W.A. in their wheat problems, than they do from this Association". The Association replied stating that it had noted May-Steers' concern "with the difficulties in getting new members, and even the problems associated with holding existing members now that they are turning to agricultural production". May-Steers was urged to refute the doubters by pointing to the work of the Association's Agricultural Committee with economist, Ken Baxter, as secretary,

¹⁵Dated June 22, 1962. N92/229.

and the fact that "we are now a full member of the Australian Wheatgrowers' Federation".¹⁶

The Graziers' Association, as noted in an earlier chapter, had a long and difficult battle getting representation on the AWF and its main opponent was UFWA which, as the FSA, was a foundation member of the AWF and had provided the NSW grower representatives on the Australian Wheat Board since its inception. UFWA's hostility increased when the Graziers' Association supported, but did not officially endorse, candidates for positions on the NSW Grain Elevators Board. UFWA general secretary, Allan Johnston, made this clear when addressing a gathering of wheatgrowers at Temora, in 1967, in support of UFWA candidates for the Elevators Board elections. The UFWA candidate for the Temora region, Harold Balcolm, he said, was opposed by W.L. Ridley who was supported by the NSW Graziers' Association, "the same organisation which opposed wheat stabilisation":

Even now, Mr Ridley is reported as accusing Mr Balcolm and the U.F.W.A. of living in the past by dwelling on the theme of stabilisation. Show me the wheat grower who would move back to the shockingly disorderly system of selling wheat through individual merchants on a "catch-as-catch-can" basis".¹⁷

Johnston stated that the Graziers, after opposing orderly marketing in any form, were now trying to hitch their wagon to the achievements of others. He was not impressed with grazier candidates who claimed that being only supported by their organisation, and not endorsed, gave them greater independence to act for all wheatgrowers. He made it clear to the meeting that UFWA endorsed candidates were beholden to UFWA and asked his audience to imagine how an elected member to the board could

¹⁶Extracts from May-Steers' letter and the Association's reply (author not named) are contained on one page. N92/1347.

¹⁷*Lake Cargelligo News*, September 8, 1967.

function without an efficient machine to guide and advise him. Here UFWA was displaying a hardline attitude to the role of its representatives which alienated many in the Graziers' Association.

The first report of the Graziers' Association Unity Study Committee, as recorded earlier, claimed that UFWA conferences were, at times, whipped up into "mass hysteria" by orators who played on emotions whereas the larger farmers (read graziers), while capable of emotional and prejudiced decisions, preferred a quieter approach. The report went on to talk about attitudes to marketing boards. Small farmers, the report said, elected their board representatives and let them get on with the job while the larger farmers took a livelier interest, and "often feel (and are) just as capable as those sitting on it, are suspicious of elected representatives' power anyway, and so criticise freely and frequently".¹⁸ The Unity Committee was, in effect, saying that UFWA representatives on boards were left alone by the rank and file to follow the "party line", whereas anyone supported by the Graziers' Association could expect criticism and questioning.

The differences between the two organisations were considerable and aggravated by claims and counter claims that each side was trying to take the credit for the work of the other. However, behind the external bickering, the unity candle flickered and it was becoming more clearly understood that unity in NSW could not be achieved without enormous ramifications at the federal level. A united NSW farm lobby would either have to choose between the AWMPF and the AWGC to represent it federally or seek a new and stronger voice. There was really no choice, there had to be a new body, and NSW, which provided the bulk of the funds needed to run the existing federal bodies, would eventually get its way. Unity moves in NSW were to be the death knell for the Australian Farmers' Federation, which lacked the resources, money and the power to be an effective "one voice" for the farming community.

¹⁸p. 21.

THE COURTSHIP

The first report of the Graziers' Unity Study Committee of April, 1968, highlighted the deep divisions between the Graziers' Association and UFWA but, nevertheless, the Association's annual conference, held that month, passed a resolution that the Unity Committee "be kept in existence to study and recommend areas in which unity may be achieved".¹⁹ The committee was also advised by the Association's chief executive officer, Ick-Hewins, "that you cannot get men into co-operation until they have had actual experience working together, and to build up confidence in, and some respect for, one another". This was relayed to the committee as the personal opinion of Ick-Hewins but "working together" became an important forerunner to serious unity negotiations. What former UFWA economist, Hylda Rolfe, described as a "culture of hate" among the rank and file was not evident among the executives and senior staff of the two organisations towards the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s.²⁰ Richmond noted that by the late 1960s UFWA and the Graziers were presenting joint submissions to government, and this exchange relationship led "to a desire for total cooperation".²¹

The two sides were drawn together in adversity. Drought, depressed wool prices and rising farm costs hit all farmers, whatever their allegiance. In March, 1970, farmers took action, independent of their organisations, to bring their plight home to both government and the urban communities. *The Land* of March 5 reported that 1,000 primary producers met at Jerilderie demanding that state and federal governments implement short-term plans to give them relief from the cost-price squeeze. On March 26 it reported that "a monster army of 10,000 farmers from all parts of Victoria and the Riverina, made a powerful protest against rural

¹⁹See minutes of the August 27, 1968, meeting of the unity committee. N123/204.

²⁰Telephone interview, July 19, 1993.

²¹*Op. cit.* p.144.

economic burdens in the streets of Melbourne on Monday". A week later, on April 1, there was a street march in Perth, led by its organiser, Mrs Jean Rowe, described in *The Canberra Times* of April 3, as "a farmers' wife from Kulikup".

These events took place on the initiative of farmers and they put pressure on the established farm organisations to make stronger demands upon Government for urgent financial assistance. Rural recessions were a danger period for farm organisations as UFWA's predecessor, the FSA, discovered in the 1930s when several breakaway wheat organisations sprang up in NSW and were only reunited under the UFWA banner in 1962. In NSW, in 1970, the recession and drought gave birth to the Rural Action Movement which, according to Richmond, posed a threat to UFWA.²² RAM was established by Tooraweenah farmer, Noel Stevens, and soon spread interstate. Like previous rebel groups without organised links with government, marketing boards or other farm organisations, RAM enjoyed the luxury of being able to talk tough, and this included threats to withhold livestock from market unless higher prices were paid and marketing reforms were introduced. RAM's style of operation ensured wide media coverage and rising support among sections of the rural community.

UFWA, Richmond wrote, gave its field officers directions to counter the RAM threat to its membership and undermine its influence, but within two years it had joined RAM in a joint petition to the NSW Government for the establishment of a sheep meats marketing board. He criticised UFWA for being foolish enough to follow the lead of RAM, and many of its own members, in demanding a board that failed to materialise in the face of opposition from the NSW Department of Agriculture and the private meat trade. However, UFWA survived intact and RAM faded from view.²³ Even before RAM surfaced as a radical group which could entice membership and financial support away from UFWA and the Graziers' Association, these two established bodies were under intense

²²p.150.

²³pp.150 and 328.

pressure to do something about the plight of farmers and, as their members were suffering the same hardships, joint action was considered necessary. In August, 1970, history was made when a joint delegation from UFWA and the Graziers was heard by the NSW Cabinet on the rural crisis. They received a sympathetic hearing from the Premier, Robin Askin, according to the Graziers' official newspaper *Muster*, and, shortly afterwards on August 6, he accompanied the joint delegation for talks on the crisis in Sydney with Prime Minister, John Gorton, and his Minister for Primary Industry, Doug Anthony.²⁴

Other joint activity followed but progress towards greater cooperation actually began almost a decade earlier with the establishment of the Australian Wool Industry Conference, the so-called "wool parliament". Representatives of UFWA and the Graziers were prominent on the AWIC representing their respective federal organisations, the AWMPF and the AWGC. Once the graziers, in the face of drought, the lowest wool prices in 26 years and rising costs, accepted a reserve price plan for wool the way was open for co-operative action through the AWIC. As recorded earlier, the Graziers annual conference of April, 14, 1970 adopted the Moree resolution for a single wool marketing authority and the following edition of *Muster* explained why in an effort to placate its readers who remained loyal to the free auction system:

It is a measure of the desperate situation that the Australian wool industry finds itself today that the annual conference of the Graziers' Association of NSW should have voted so decisively last week in favour of a single marketing authority for the entire Australian wool clip. This striking departure from previous policy has naturally excited widespread comment, and may well have important repercussions in the future. The Minister for Primary Industry has described it as "without precedent". But then, so is the present situation,

²⁴Editorial in *Muster*, August 12, 1970.

which includes what one delegate called a "disastrous" price fall, "gloom throughout the industry" and an "atmosphere of despair".²⁵

The Graziers' vote of 96 to 40 for a single wool marketing authority on April 14, 1970, was followed just one week later by its acceptance by the Graziers' federal organisation, the AWGC, and the following day by the AWIC. The "Moree" motion was moved at the AWIC by the AWGC president and former Graziers' Association president, Bruce Wright, and seconded by the president of the AWMPF, R.V. Sewell. The Graziers' and UFWA, through the AWIC, were presenting a united front on wool marketing, the issue which had caused the most bitterness between them in the post-war period. The major barrier to grazier-farmer unity had been removed. AWIC delegates from both sides were able to put into effect the advice that Ick-Hewins gave the Graziers' Unity Study Committee in 1968, that you cannot get men to cooperate until they have had actual experience of working together and gaining respect for each other.

Ick-Hewins' replacement as general secretary of the Graziers' Association, John White, explained that leading members of his organisation and UFWA travelled overseas on International Wool Secretariat study tours and got to know each other personally. They found that their conceptions about different types of farmers were out of date. White said that while it tended to be true that graziers were on the right and farmers on the left there were "both right wing farmers and radical graziers". More farmers discovered that graziers were prepared to "get their hands dirty".²⁶ Some of the lingering distrust by farmers of graziers was further broken down when the AWIC, in November, 1971, unanimously supported a new wool marketing organisation that would have the power of acquisition over the national clip. This was never adopted as government policy despite its strong advocacy by the Australian Wool Corporation. However, there was consolation for woolgrowers

²⁵Editorial, April 22, 1970.

²⁶Interview, Sydney, January 29, 1992.

in 1974 when the Whitlam Government agreed to change the flexible floor price for wool to a fixed annual price with the support of the graziers.

The Graziers had finally hoisted the white flag. In 1970 they had accepted a single marketing authority which had power to operate flexible reserve prices to ease the up and downs of the market but, by 1974, they gave way on fixed floor prices and were tightly stuck in the protectionist web, where McEwen and UFWA had always wanted them. Chislett, a resolute opponent of organised marketing, resigned as AWGC economist in 1970, but came out of retirement in 1990 to remind Australians that fixed floor prices had cost them dearly. It has resulted in a massive stockpile of unsold wool and a heavy debt attached to it. He wrote:

The great Australian wool industry has met a fate that is not uncommon among those who defy the market, deny individuals the liberty to exercise their choice in disposing of the fruits of their labour, and subvert democracy.²⁷

However, Chislett's views had lost favour in the 1970s. Many graziers believed they could no longer afford the free auction system for selling their wool and needed the protection of a floor price. Others, however, saw that their dreams of farmer-grazier unity at state and federal level would not be realised unless the graziers gave way on wool. With the long wool battle over, the thaw between the two groups quickened. Richmond said that "by 1971 it was becoming common to read that the UFWA president was confident that a joint submission would be made once UFWA and Graziers' could agree on certain basic issues".²⁸

Despite the co-operation within the AWIC, and the joint submissions, the Graziers decided not to push too hard on unity.

²⁷G. D'a Chislett, *The Wool Industry in Crisis in Economic Witness*, Australian Institute for Public Policy, November 29, 1990. p.7.

²⁸*Op. cit.* p.147.

White explained that in the early 1970s the Graziers realised that "it was not yet time for a National Farmers' Federation because of the bitter fights between the two groups in NSW in the 1960s and a vote on unity would have been lost".²⁹ But by 1974-75, he said, the outlook for unity was improving with the "radical end of the farming groups becoming much more conservative and being led by thoughtful conservative people, and the super-conservative elements being replaced by more progressive people".

A sign of changing attitudes was the motion passed by UFWA General Council in August, 1974 that UFWA branches "be urged to invite members of the Graziers' Association to attend meetings as observers".³⁰ President, Rod Black, told the same meeting that a permanent standing committee of representatives of both organisations on industrial issues had been established for more than two years and, on most occasions, agreement had been reached on important industrial matters. There began in 1975 a process whereby the two organisational presidents, Rod Black (UFWA) and Jack Doohan (Graziers) spoke on the prospects for unity at the annual conferences of the other. And White, as the chief executive of the Graziers, addressed both conferences on the costs and benefits of amalgamation. But of greater significance were the decisions taken at both 1975 conferences to establish a joint working group:

to prepare a detailed procedure for amalgamation of the two associations for the consideration of membership in order that members may determine by Conference decision and referendum whether amalgamation is to be affected".³¹

²⁹Sydney interview, January 29, 1992.

³⁰Minutes of the General Council meeting, August 28, 1974. N123/702.

³¹*Report of the Working Group on Amalgamation of the Graziers' Association of NSW and the United Farmers and Woolgrowers' of NSW*. Published as a supplement in *Muster*, February, 1976.

The working group was high powered and jointly headed by the two presidents. Apart from Black, the UFWA team comprised two senior executive members, E.L. O'Brien and Milton Taylor, and the chief executive, Bryan Regan. On the Graziers' side, Doohan was assisted by two members of the Graziers' own unity study group, Michael Davidson and Dick Eldershaw, and John White. The Graziers' Association of the Riverina, yet to amalgamate with the NSW Graziers had one representative, F.W. Fischer. It was a sign of improving relations between the two sides, and the genuine quest for unity, that UFWA conceded to being outnumbered five to four by graziers.

The working group's report began by stressing that neither side was being forced into amalgamation. Each had substantial assets, and could continue to operate satisfactorily despite inflation, and the inevitable budgetary constraints. The prominence given to this statement, in bold type, was to assure the rank and file that there was no coercion, or takeover implications, in the unity negotiations. Unlike the 1968 amalgamation of UFWA and the NSW division of the APPU, which occurred with little fuss or questioning and with UFWA retaining its name and control, this proposed amalgamation had to be approached with care. UFWA had about double the membership of the Graziers' Association but the Graziers could more than match its rival in wealth and influence. There was no doubt that many graziers thought they were "marrying down" and there were farmers who resented mixing with the "silvertails" who had joined the woolbrokers in the 1960s campaign against a reserve price scheme for wool.

The advantages of amalgamation were spelt out in the report as the elimination of costly duplication, resolving policy differences within a single organisation, desirable policy no longer deferred because of grazier-farmer divisions, a higher proportion of resources being directed to Federal representation, and increased total membership by eliminating "division" as a continuing complaint of potential new members. The disadvantages were the risk of complacency through the removal of competition between the two organisations, that two equally valid policy proposals could arise which should be placed

before government, internal harmony and cohesion could be reduced, and the establishment of splinter groups could be encouraged.

In a letter to Ronald Anderson, the editor of *Primary Industry Newsletter*, White said the most significant advantages were the elimination of duplication and the direction of more resources into federal representation, and that these overrode the major disadvantages. These were the removal of competition between the two bodies and that splinter groups could be encouraged.³² On federal representation, the report makes the direct point that once UFWA and the Graziers amalgamate their respective parent bodies, the AWMPF and the AWGC, would have to unite. Because NSW farmers provided a third of the funding of the existing federal commodity organisations they held the whip hand. It was a question of the farmers and graziers of the other states agreeing to amalgamate or placing federal funding at risk. The working group recommended that the AWGC, the AWMPF and the Australian Wheatgrowers' Federation unite as the Australian Graziers and Graingrowers' Federation with constituent Woolgrowers', Cattlemen's, Graingrowers' and Industrial Councils and an affiliated Producers' Council. This was the first, but not the final, outline of what was to eventually become the National Farmers' Federation, the long desired "one voice" of a united Australian farming community. It was also the death knell for the Australian Farmers' Federation, the feeble attempt at national unity which lacked money, resources, power and the presence of the graziers.

The AFF was held in such low regard that one of its major constituents, the AWMPF, was party to the working group report that outlined proposals for federal unity without consultation with the AFF. The AFF responded to the working group's paper saying that it was "carefully thought-out" and noting that amalgamation in NSW "would require some adjustment at national level as well".³³

³²Letter dated March 1, 1976. N92/1372.

³³See *Australian Farmer*, a roneed newsletter issued by the AFF, March 16, 1976.

The AFF said that inquiries made of the working group, after the report was released, found that the group felt rather "presumptuous" in drafting proposals affecting the AFF without consultation with it. The AFF found some consolation in the fact that the proposals for federal unity were open to negotiation, but the working group report made little mention of the AFF. It was forced to assume that the role it played in attending to the federal interests of the smaller farm industries would be taken over by the proposed Associated Producers Affiliated Council which would be offered affiliation with the Australian Graziers and Graingrowers' Federation. However, as we will discover in the next chapter, the federal unity proposals in the working group report were supplanted by superior ones that led to formation of the National Farmers' Federation.

The AFF made a counter offer to the working group's report by proposing a joint secretariat in Canberra comprising itself, the Australian Wheatgrowers' Federation and the Australian Wool and Meat Producers' Federation, the parent body of UFWA. However, UFWA President, Rob Black, said that, while he had originally sponsored the idea of a federal secretariat, he was now behind the working group's report and the AWF was opposed to moving its office to Canberra from Melbourne where it was accommodated in the Australian Wheat Board building.³⁴

THE WHITLAM LABOR GOVERNMENT AND FARM UNITY

While the 1970 decision of the Graziers to join UFWA in seeking a single wool marketing authority removed a major impediment to unity there was another event in the early 1970s that gave the unity drive a big push—the election in December, 1972, of the Whitlam Labor Government. For the first time in 23 years the Country Party was not a partner in a Federal Coalition Government. There was a Government in control which owed its existence to the

³⁴Black's comments were reported in a statement by AFF president, Don Eckersley, in the *Australian Farmer* of March 16, 1976.

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Helen Stokes
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Dear Helen,
My Ph.D. Thesis - To Speak with one Voice - The Quest
by Australian Farmers for Federal Unity - has an ERROR of
fact on Page 202. I say that Rep Patterson was the
Federal Member of Parliament for the seat of Capricornia but
his seat was Dawson.

I knew it was Dawson but wrote Capricornia and
failed to pick up the ERROR despite many readings of the page.
I hope this can be rectified. Sorry for my
incompetence.

Kind Regards
Tom Connors

Dr Brian Thomas Connors
Ph.D. Awarded March 28 at UWA.

trade union movement and had few friends within the farming community.

John White explained that during the 23 years of Coalition Government the representation of farm interests could be accomplished by telephone calls from the presidents of farm organisations to ministers in Canberra. Even if you did not like Jack McEwen, he said, that was how representation was done.³⁵ In power now was a party with different priorities, a different support base and with a ministry that contained no farmers. Whitlam appointed a former merchant navy officer, Ken Wriedt, as his Minister for Primary Industry, overlooking the two men who in opposition had spoken most on rural issues, Al Grassby and Rex Patterson. It was soon made clear by Wriedt that any past promises made by Grassby, who held the rural NSW seat of Riverina, such as a maximum three per cent interest rate on farm loans, did not bind him or the new Government.³⁶ The appointment of Wriedt, a man whose only "rural" experience was as a stevedore in Hobart supervising the loading of apples on ships bound for Europe, was a clear signal to the rural sector that Whitlam had changed the rules. Grassby, who was considered favourite to be Minister for Primary Industry, had made too many rash promises to boost his popularity with the farmers of his electorate and it would have been embarrassing to put him in a position where farmers expected loans at his promised three per cent. Grassby was given Immigration and Patterson, a former senior officer of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and Member for the North Queensland seat of Capricornia, Northern Development.

In 1985 Whitlam reflected on his time as Prime Minister and recalled that his incoming Government rejected the McEwen dictum that it was the function of the Country Party to carry out the will of farmers as "extraordinarily narrow, self-interested and even

³⁵Interview, Sydney, January 29, 1992.

³⁶Recollection of the author who was Wriedt's press secretary.

corrupt".³⁷ He said it represented a serious abdication of the responsibilities of modern government with the largest producers speaking for rural industry and little departmental or independent scrutiny of their demands. Whitlam did not see the interests of large farmers as being in tune with either small producers or the inhabitants of country towns. Subsidy schemes and taxation concessions were to the advantage of large producers with high marginal tax rates. Whitlam argued that the implementation of social policy in country towns had been largely ignored and "it thus became the task of my Government to rationalise the uninformed, unrepresentative and inequitable nature of rural policy in Australia".³⁸

The Whitlam Government used several means to influence changes in rural policy. In 1973, Whitlam commissioned a Green Paper on rural policy which, he recalled, "emphasised the need for less benevolent financial assistance to rural industries"; the ending by Wriedt of decades of grower majority membership of the wool, dairy and apple and pear marketing boards; and the conversion of the Tariff Board into the Industries Assistance Commission. The IAC was instructed to examine applications by rural organisations for government assistance, whether by way of subsidy, bounty, import embargo, import quota or tariff, in what Whitlam described as "an independent and rational fashion removed from the day-to-day political pressures often exerted on governments by lobby groups".³⁹ The establishment of the IAC meant that farm organisations had to present detailed submissions for the continuation of assistance measures and argue them before the IAC. This, and the concomitant activity of coming before the IAC to argue against industrial tariffs, took a lot of time, cost money and used up scarce resources. Unity was a way of significantly easing this burden.

³⁷Gough Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government: 1972-1975*. Melbourne, 1985. p.263.

³⁸*Ibid.* p.263.

³⁹pp. 264-5.

Initially the farm organisations opposed the IAC and were fearful that the Labor Government saw it only as a way of reducing farm support measures. However, it was not long before the Graziers' Association and the AWGC accepted the IAC as a place to put to rest the widespread belief that farmers were being featherbedded. Their submissions stressed their low levels of protection relative to secondary industry. The IAC did not recommend the wide dismantling of farm support and, in 1976, the AWGC president, Peter Roberts, told the National Party Minister for Primary Industry, Ian Sinclair, that the AWGC opposed his suggestion that the rural industry matters not be referred to the IAC.⁴⁰ The Country Party, from the start, saw the IAC as getting in the way of its traditional relationship with farmers. There will be further discussion of the impact of the IAC on the Australian farm sector in later chapters.

White recalled that the advent of the Whitlam Government coincided with other difficulties that emerged in the early 1970s. The wool industry, he said, was in dire trouble, governments were about to change, the exchange rate was being managed and manipulated upwards, the mining industry was growing and putting competitive pressure on the farm sector, the Greens were emerging and the manufacturing lobby was reaching its zenith. All these factors, White argued, were putting acute pressure on farmers to achieve more effective federal representation.⁴¹

It was a huge job for farm leaders to adapt to the ALP in power in Canberra, according to White, and he gave much credit to the first National Farmers' Federation president Don (later Sir Donald) Eckersley, who was quick to see that the change of government was a catalyst for farmer unity at the federal level. Eckersley, an unsuccessful Country Party Senate candidate for Western Australia in 1977, said the Whitlam years were a major factor in the creation of the NFF. Delegates to the Australian Farmers' Federation (Eckersley was president of the AFF, 1975-79) had talked about

⁴⁰See *Muster*, January, 1976.

⁴¹Interview, January 29, 1992.

federal unity from 1973 onwards.⁴² Eckersley was one of the few farm leaders to easily adapt to the change in government and quickly developed contacts with it. Some farm leaders continued to seek out the Country Party leaders, Doug Anthony and Ian Sinclair, on rural issues, but Anthony himself suggested that they should see Wriedt because he had the power to make changes, not Anthony.⁴³ Old habits died hard and some found it very difficult dealing with the party founded by their long term foe, the trade union movement. John White said that some of his colleagues were "shocked and horrified that I spoke openly and freely with Wriedt in the same way as I would with Anthony".⁴⁴

Farm leaders had to accept that they could no longer pick up the telephone and talk to a minister who knew the subject matter as well as they did and, importantly, shared the same political philosophy. They had not only to help educate the new Minister for Primary Industry (and White found Wriedt a "good listener") but there were also Caucus and its primary industry committee. Under the Labor style of government, Caucus committees examine legislation before it is put to full Caucus and the Parliament. Wise ministers develop good relations with the members of the relevant Caucus committees, and wise lobbyists do the same. The minutes of the February, 1973, meeting of the Executive Committee of the Graziers' Association record White stating that:

In the previous Government, new policy could be originated and influenced by communication with the appropriate department and the minister concerned. With the department and the minister persuaded, the minister could then hopefully persuade Cabinet of his point of view.

With the new Government, there is an important new element of policy formulation. There is now to

⁴²Interview, Sydney, January 28, 1992.

⁴³Author's recollection of a conversation with Anthony, in Canberra in early 1973.

⁴⁴Interview, January 28, 1992.

be a Caucus Committee in each area of ministerial responsibility.....It would seem desirable for the Association to progressively develop contact with members of the Caucus Committee as well as with the Minister, Senator Wriedt.⁴⁵

The minutes report the Secretary of the Department of Primary Industry, Walter Ives, telling White that his new minister was a man who had no preconceived ideas about his job but would be examining rural policy objectively on the advice of his department, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, commodity boards, rural organisations and others. On these grounds, White claimed, the "previous spasmodic statements of individual Labor politicians may be of less significance than we might otherwise have thought". However, the minutes warn, these statements should not be overlooked and "neither should the power and influence of the Caucus Committee". The executive committee minutes are a demonstration of White, as the executive officer of the Graziers' Association, trying to prepare the conservative executive which employed him for a radically new regime in Canberra. Two decades later White recalled that "the Association was very right wing and so was I, but I went on the front foot and quickly developed respect for Wriedt at a time when he was being described as just a sailor".⁴⁶

Former Graziers' Association economist, Ken Baxter, said that while it would not be publicly admitted, one of the factors influencing the merger of the Graziers' Association and UFWA was the election of a Labor Government at a time when the manufacturing lobby was strengthening and the Country Party appeared in decline. This combination of events, he argued, probably hastened the creation of a National Farmers' Federation.⁴⁷ The executive committee minutes back up Baxter's argument, and farm unity also received impetus

⁴⁵Minutes dated February 14, 1974. N92/1374.

⁴⁶Telephone interview, November 30, 1993.

⁴⁷K.P. Baxter, speech to the Victorian Farm Writers and Broadcasters Club. Melbourne, March 30, 1978. Copy supplied by Baxter.

from Wriedt's decision in 1974 to set up the National Rural Advisory Council.

This body, Wriedt explained, had been formed to provide him with "detailed advice on farmers' attitudes to policy matters affecting primary producers and on matters of concern to the rural sector generally".⁴⁸ The NRAC was an idea developed within Wriedt's office and without consultation with his department or farm organisations. The department which saw itself as a traditional line of communication between farm organisations and the minister, let its displeasure be known to Wriedt's personal staff. Although Wriedt asked for, and obtained, membership nominations from the major farm organisations, the NRAC concept was not well received by them. It was seen, wrongly as it turned out, as a group that could gain undue access to the Minister and supplant the advice of the traditional farm organisations. Wriedt did not calm concerns by declaring that he had appointed people to the NRAC without regard for their state or what farm organisation they belonged to because "I want the best people for the job... it will meet as necessary and will have regular contact with me".

The farm organisations, which opposed Wriedt's plan to end farmer domination of commodity marketing boards and appoint more experts in finance and marketing, did not welcome the NRAC but could not afford to stay aloof from a body that promised regular contact with the Minister. The 13 members of the NRAC included some prominent farm leaders, such as Jim Heffernan (president of the Victorian Farmers' Union), Michael Davidson (then vice president of the Graziers' Association of NSW) and Harry Bryant (UFWA General Council). It also included representatives of the Country Womens' Association and the Australian Council of Rural Youth as well as one person, Charles Cunningham, who, holding no position in any organisation, was there to represent the grass roots farmer. Cunningham's appointment disappointed some farm leaders

⁴⁸Press release, Canberra, August 15, 1974.

who believed the position was being wasted on this ordinary farmer from Western Australia.⁴⁹

Part of the reasoning behind formation of the NRAC was Wriedt's dissatisfaction with the Australian Farmers' Federation, the ineffectual "one voice" for agriculture which failed to provide him with the detailed advice he wanted on the rural scene. NRAC was, in a sense, to be his "one voice". He chose the members carefully and, despite early fears among farm organisations that a Labor bias could influence selection, only one member out of 13 was a known Labor voter. He was John Walsh, senior vice president of the Farmers' Union of W.A., and brother of Peter Walsh, who later became Minister for Finance in the Hawke Labor Government. The rest supported the conservative side of politics, some actively. NRAC executive officer, Brian Norwood, said that no major policy initiatives emerged from its deliberations, but it succeeded in keeping Wriedt informed on what farmers were thinking and was an alternative source of advice to the public service and farm organisations.⁵⁰ Wriedt suggested agenda items and NRAC raised its own and, over its short lifespan, NRAC discussed issues such as farm incomes, communications between farmers and city dwellers, the benefits of dollar devaluation and farm finance. Norwood accepts that NRAC was partly a public relations exercise to boost Wriedt's profile within the farming community, and meetings in regional centres were seen as part of this process.

NRAC did not survive the sacking of the Whitlam Government in November, 1975. The incoming National Party Minister for Primary Industry, Ian Sinclair, had no interest in such a body believing, according to Norwood, a former Sinclair staffer before joining Wriedt, that National Party members had their own rural contacts and knew the mood of the bush.

⁴⁹This and other comments on the NRAC are the personal knowledge of the author who, at the time, was Wriedt's press secretary and attended NRAC meetings.

⁵⁰Telephone interview with Norwood, December 1, 1993. Norwood was also Wriedt's senior private secretary.

THE BRIDAL PATH

The Land, as expected of a newspaper with farm leaders on its board, welcomed the report of the joint UFWA-Graziers' Association working group as "the blueprint for the amalgamation of the two major producers organisations in this state" and went on to editorialise that:

For generations now the great cry in Australian agriculture has been for those on the land to speak with one united voice. Over the years attempts have been made to reach such an ideal on both State and Federal levels. But until now the climate has never been quite favourable for the desired amalgamations, particularly among the major bodies. Now, however, a much more favourable situation has developed in NSW, largely due to the pragmatic attitudes of the leaders and executive officers of both organisations and a genuine willingness to make a positive step forward in the interests of the whole of Australian agriculture.⁵¹

The release of the report of the joint working group on amalgamation virtually set in concrete the terms of UFWA-Graziers' Association unity. The sections relating to the new branch structure, subscription rates, conference delegates, the new executive and its election, staffing and many other issues had been agreed in long and hard negotiations, and the rank and file of both organisations were warned that amendments should not be attempted, including any aimed at changing the name chosen for the united body, the Livestock and Grain Producers' Association. That name was one of the last decisions made by the working group and it was a difficult one. As John White explained in a letter to a member of his association, "considerable thought had been given to incorporating the words "Farmers and Graziers" in the title and his own choice

⁵¹March 11, 1976.

had been "Graziers and Grain Producers" but this was unacceptable to some group members. So was the title "The Farm Association of NSW". The chosen name, he said, was one that he had originally thought would have caused controversy, but the working group received little adverse comment.⁵²

The name argument was symptomatic of the lingering antagonism between UFWA and the Graziers' Association and, according to White, the "very late" agreement on a name that did not hint of a connection with either party was vital to secure the membership vote needed for amalgamation.⁵³ Because an extraordinary general meeting of UFWA had to record a 75 per cent "yes" for amalgamation and the postal ballot of both memberships required a 50 per cent response and a 50 per cent pro-amalgamation vote, great care had to be taken with the name. White explained that the use of either "Grazier" or "Farmer" was considered risky and would have cost votes. It was made clear to the rank and file of both organisations that, while it was up to them to make the decision as to whether amalgamation went ahead, there could be no quibbling about the details, whether it be the name chosen or any other aspect of the report of the working group. UFWA general secretary, Bryan Regan, made this very clear at UFWA's 1976 annual conference:

Imagine what would happen if we had left it open to the 13,500 members of UFWA and 7,500 members of the Graziers to amend the amalgamation proposal, and the form of the new body. If you vote in the affirmative on the motion before you, it will still take until January 1, 1978, before the new body is underway. If it was left open to you to amend I suggest it would be the year 2078 before it was underway.⁵⁴

⁵²Letter to S. Crichton of Molong, November 12, 1976. N92/1455.

⁵³Telephone interview, November 11, 1993.

⁵⁴Quoted in *The Land*, July 22, 1976.

NSW farm unity was, in a sense, an exercise in limited democracy. The leaders of both organisations wanted it and they had worked out the procedures for amalgamation, devised a constitution and a new name while discouraging rank-and-file debate. There would, however, be no arm twisting of the rank and file members to get a "yes" vote. Amalgamation had to be their decision if it was to stick and avoid the emergence of breakaway groups. UFWA General Council minutes of August 28, 1974, record that president Rod Black:

was adamant that no attempt be made to force amalgamation from the top or executive of both organisations. He said there should first be a groundswell from branch members of both organisations which should then permeate to the top.⁵⁵

As reported earlier in this chapter, there was some interest in amalgamation in country branches of both organisations, but little evidence of a "groundswell". Most support for amalgamation was created by the campaigning of the leaders and senior staff of both organisations, the appearance of warm fellowship they generated by attending each others' conferences and speaking on the need for unity and the promotion of unity in the Graziers' newspaper *Muster* and UFWA's *United Farmer* which were sent free to respective members. Of great significance was *The Land*, second only to the Victorian-based *Weekly Times* among the rural weeklies in circulation and featuring a large classified advertisements section that attracted many readers. In the mid-1970s, *The Land* had a weekly circulation of 42,000 to 45,000, about double the combined circulation of the *United Farmer* and *Muster* and several times that of its commercial rival in NSW, *Country Life*. By the 1970s, *The Land* was controlled by the media giant, John Fairfax and Sons Ltd, but its board membership included the UFWA and Graziers' Association presidents and one other farm leader sitting alongside the board chairman and Country Party member of the NSW Legislative Council, Sir Harry Budd, and several Fairfax nominees.

⁵⁵ANU Archives, N123/702.

The Land ran regular feature articles called "letters" from the presidents of both organisations in which they sang the praises of unity, and a number of editorials were devoted to the same cause, some preceding conference votes on unity and the postal ballot. Despite the Fairfax takeover, the newspaper remained a traditional rural weekly promoting, virtually without question, the causes of farm organisations, especially UFWA because of historical connections and large membership. The newspaper was eager to promote the cause of unity. It gave extensive coverage to the 1976 annual conferences of the Graziers and UFWA where delegates were asked to approve the holding of a referendum ballot and headlined its UFWA story with "A Rowdy 'Yes' For Unity" in describing how 400 delegates roared a unanimous "yes".⁵⁶

In speeches to regional and annual conferences, and in newspaper articles, farmers were urged to vote "yes" for unity, and it was impressed on them that it was their choice, not that of their executives. However, the rank and file had no say in the unity blueprint and were told that they could not amend it. It was set in concrete for two years, but at the first conference of the Livestock and Grain Producers' Association in mid-1978, brand new policies would be decided. The farm organisations were imposing policy from above while pretending to be carrying out the will of the rank and file. However, as Regan pointed out to UFWA conference delegates, it could take another 100 years to achieve unity under a purely democratic system. This was one occasion when the Graziers did not object to a bit of UFWA "demagoguery".

Unlike the bitter battle that surrounded the wool referendum of 1965, the campaign for amalgamation was one sided. While the report of the working group listed possible disadvantages of amalgamation they were quickly pushed to one side. The small minority of farmers who voted "no" to unity at conferences were rarely heard in the lead up to the referendum ballot, but there was a legal challenge launched afterwards by UFWA member, Frank

⁵⁶July 22, 1976.

Maguire. He appealed to the Federal Court of Australia, claiming that the submission to the industrial registrar to approve the referendum had been incorrectly signed. According to Richmond, Maguire's reasons for objecting were those he had propounded for some time; that amalgamation did not mean unity and that any unity would be destroyed through the Special Purposes Fund which he claimed had been incorporated into the LGPA at the insistence of the Graziers.⁵⁷ Maguire, in his appeal, cited the Watergate and Kemhlani affairs as the sort of scandals that can result from special and secret funds. The court threw out Maguire's challenge in November, 1977 to the great relief of UFWA and the Graziers and the January 1, 1978 starting date for the LGPA remained intact. However, despite the failure of the court challenge, the Special Purposes Fund was of concern to many UFWA members. They belonged to a non-political organisation and the LGPA was to be of similar ilk. The unashamedly political Graziers felt they had some explaining to do.

Both the Graziers' Association president, Michael Davidson, and executive officer, John White, attended the July, 1976 annual conference of UFWA and responded to concerns from delegates about the role of the fund in the operations of the LGPA.⁵⁸ Davidson told the conference that the LGPA fund would be modelled on that of the Graziers. It would be purely voluntary and a member who contributed was asked in broad terms to state how the money should be spent. Davidson said, "I do not recall a situation where members attached a specific purpose to the money contributed". This was apparently not necessary judging by the evidence presented in the previous chapter of the large sums going towards Country and Liberal Party campaign funds, and for the operations of the Country Party head office in NSW, with the broad support of members. White said the money was used by the executive in accordance with the policy of the Graziers' Association and "I am sure this will be the case in the new association". Under the terms

⁵⁷Richmond, *op. cit.* pp. 215-6. Richmond uses the spelling McGuire but UFWA documents (see General Council minutes of October 6, 1977, N123/702) use Maguire.

⁵⁸See *The Land*, July 22, 1976.

of the amalgamation the Special Purposes Fund carried on unchanged for six months after amalgamation took place on January 1, 1978 but, at the first annual general meeting of the LGPA in June that year, a resolution confirmed that the new body be non-political and that no direct donations be made to any political party.⁵⁹ Amalgamation also ended other types of assistance given by the Graziers head office to the National Party, such as the distribution of election campaign material through its country branches.

SOME HURDLES REMAINED

By early 1976 the unity movement looked unstoppable and although the biggest hurdle, the wool reserve price, had been cleared there remained other issues of dispute between UFWA and the Graziers. Next to commodity marketing, the two sides had argued most about tariffs. UFWA, with the vast majority of its members enjoying the protection of five year wheat stabilisation schemes, took a much softer line on industrial tariffs than the Graziers. Within the Australian Farmers' Federation, UFWA's federal body, the AWMPF, was associated with banana growers, sugar cane farmers, canned fruits growers and others who were protected against imports. But, apart from that, UFWA was an organisation closer in spirit to the ordinary wage and salary earners of Australia than the Graziers' Association, which began life as an industrial organisation and, with most of its members regular employers of labour, remained one.

UFWA's predecessor, the FSA was established not only with the support of land hungry farmers but with the backing of small businessmen and city interests who saw small scale farming, in contrast to massive sheep runs, as creating prosperous country towns with the fortunes of business owners and their employees going hand in hand with that of the small farmers. Because many small farmers supplied the domestic market with foodstuffs, it was important that there was an employed proletariat that could afford to buy the necessities of life at a fair price.

⁵⁹Telephone interview with White November 11, 1993.

UFWA's president, Rod Black, re-opened the tariff debate in his fortnightly "letter" in *The Land* on March 11, 1976. His precise motives in raising a contentious issue, when the unity bandwagon was rolling steadily along, are not known, but Black implied he had the Graziers in his sights when he began his letter by asking, "are primary industry organisations in search of an on-going economic policy, using the Australian manufacturing sector as a whipping boy"? He went on to expound the theme that primary industry could not sustain Australia's growing population and said thanks were due to the political giants of yesteryear (presumably John McEwen was one of them) that "we have built up a manufacturing sector that can sustain our growing workforce". Black urged Australians, who paid higher prices for goods produced behind tariff walls, to appreciate the benefits of better pay and conditions for workers than exist "in any other country". Because domestic demand was too low to allow the economies that came from volume product, Black asked was it reasonable to talk so glibly about inefficient Australian industries?

This was a bit too much for the Graziers. In its next edition of March 18, *The Land* ran a long letter from four members of the Graziers' Association's economic committee stating that while they usually agreed with Black they were "seriously concerned" that an ill-researched article, appearing to give blanket approval to tariff protection as a means of fostering industrial development, was printed in his name. The graziers, R.S. MacPhillamy, A.E. Nicholson, A.M. Orr and W.L. Ridley, argued that tariffs and quota protection increased the price of materials used by farmers to produce export commodities and, because of barriers to imports, the value of the dollar was forced up, thereby reducing returns from exports. The graziers said bluntly that defending Australia's industrial protection system was "certainly not in the interests of the farm sector".

Black returned to the fray in *The Land* of March 25, declaring that he always wrote his letters ("in long hand") and they were not ghosted by UFWA staff. He had been concerned for some time by academics and others stressing the need to dismantle tariffs and, he

argued, the nation could not afford it when unemployment was high. The UFWA journal, *The United Farmer*, ran Black's first letter as a news item on March 17, and the March issue of the Graziers' journal, *Muster*, featured a front page story headed "Why Primary Producers Get Steamed-Up Over Tariffs" arguing that tariffs deprived wool, meat and grain producers of an estimated \$543 million, or \$4,000 per producer. But then the curtain came down on the debate for fear that it could, if allowed to fester, endanger unity. Richmond wrote that the debate was eventually allowed to fizzle out, to the relief of the executives of both organisation:

The tariff issue had been a demarcation issue between the UFWA and Graziers over many years, representing possibly the greatest and most divisive issue of them all, apart from marketing reform. Not surprisingly, the *United Farmer* did not feature the controversy (with only one letter praising Black) nor did the *Country Life* or *The Land*.⁶⁰

The specialist rural newspapers, whether the official organs of farm organisations or privately owned, could be relied upon to "toe the party line", especially when UFWA and the Graziers were on the same side over unity. However, no sooner had the tariff debate ended when marketing emerged as a potential threat to unity because the Minister for Primary Industry, Ian Sinclair, decided to press ahead with major reforms to meat marketing. This was against the wishes of UFWA, which was particularly outraged at his plan to remove the farmer majority from his revamped meat marketing board. UFWA's obsession with grower-control of marketing board's went back generations to its predecessor, the FSA, and the radical wheat-sheep organisations of the 1920s and 1930s. The Country Party had seen political mileage in supporting what the majority of farmers wanted and its leaders publicly proclaimed that those who produced a commodity were best suited to market it. The Graziers did not agree and saw a greater role for experts in marketing, finance and promotion on marketing boards.

⁶⁰*Op. cit.* p.212.

This fitted in with their willingness to employ more experts within their own office than UFWA, to accept woolbrokers as fellow members of their association, and the ease with which they mixed with academics, scientists and other professionals.

As Minister for Primary Industry, Wriedt made marketing reform his major theme and opposed grower majorities on marketing boards, believing that no one should have a seat just because of their occupation. Wriedt wanted more expertise on the boards and explained to a rural conference in Perth in July, 1973, that he would be happy with farmer representation, but not if it meant denying a place on boards to people with special marketing skills. He caused further concern to UFWA by saying that, because board members had to be carefully selected, he opposed elections.⁶¹ UFWA not only wanted grower majorities but wanted growers elected to boards because its high membership, compared to that of the Graziers' Association, ensured greater farmer representation.

Wriedt was true to his word, despite the complaints from UFWA, and he replaced some farmers with business leaders and proven marketing specialists. A notable appointment was the chief executive of jam maker and fruit canner, IXL, John Elliott, to the board of the Australian Apple and Pear Corporation. It was no concern of Wriedt that Elliott was a rising star in the Liberal Party. However, by the time the Whitlam Government was sacked by Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, in November, 1975, Wriedt had yet to reform two major boards, the Australian Meat Board and the Australian Wheat Board, but his successor as Minister for Primary Industry, Ian Sinclair, decided to continue Wriedt's mission and turned his sights on the meat board.

Sinclair's reforms included a grower minority on his proposed Australian Meat and Livestock Corporation to replace the Australian Meat Board. UFWA felt betrayed, expecting the end of

⁶¹Address to a conference on *Agricultural Decision Making: Farming, Politics and Planning*, Perth, July 19, 1973. Proceedings published in *Farm Policy*, 1973. John Thompson Agricultural Centre, University of Western Australia.

the Whitlam Government to end the Wriedt reforms. President Milton Taylor said "we all thought Mr Sinclair was on our side. But we find he is doing all the things we criticised Senator Wriedt for doing".⁶² Taylor said Sinclair was trying to reduce producer membership on all statutory commodity boards, and he even feared a move against the wheat board when board elections came up later in the year. Taylor claimed that UFWA amalgamation with the Graziers could be jeopardised by the dispute with Sinclair over representation on the proposed AMLC. In the same *Country Life* article he is reported saying that if, given the choice between continuing to oppose plans for the AMLC or opting quietly out of the debate to ensure amalgamation went ahead, "he was sure UWFA members would forego unity". Taylor stated that the chance of a public rift with the Graziers, that could lead to a "no" at the unity referendums in the coming July, would not alter the UFWA stance on the AMLC.

The Graziers' leaders, who went along with the Sinclair reforms, were keeping their heads low rather than aggressively promoting them. It was not unfair to assume that Taylor's comments, that unity could be at risk, were another attempt to get Sinclair, a supporter of unity, to change his mind on board membership. The *Country Life* article, under the by-line of its senior journalist, Paul Myers, said that UWFA "may be" prepared to forgo amalgamation with the Graziers and call for Sinclair's resignation as Minister for Primary Industry. Myers, in the dutiful style of many rural journalists, was prepared to be used by Taylor in his attempt to put pressure on Sinclair. In the same article, headed "UFWA-Graziers Rift Over Meat Proposals: Threat to NSW Farm Unity", Taylor is quoted as saying that he did not really expect the AMLC issue to affect unity and the Graziers' president, Michael Davidson, as saying likewise. It is doubtful that Sinclair thought unity was at risk.

A week later *The Land* editorialised that unity was more important than what might happen on the AMLC, and warned farmers that "uncontrolled protesting could estrange members of the NSW Graziers' Association and the United Farmers and Woolgrowers'

⁶²*Country Life*, May 18, 1977.

Association soon to vote on unity".⁶³ *The Land* rationalised that the AMLC dispute was, in fact, another good reason why "like-minded farm organisations ought to press on with state and federal unity". Primary producers, it said, would always disagree among themselves, so it was far better to disagree under the one roof, think through their differences and then present a united front to politicians. Being closer to UFWA than the Graziers, *The Land* was in favour of grower-controlled boards and argued that if growers had presented a united national front to Sinclair he would have been reluctant to make changes. This was a slight slap on the wrist for the Graziers, the ones out of step, but they ignored it. *The Land* had an earlier dig at the Graziers for wanting to "infuse more free enterprise" into the five year wheat stabilisation plans by asking the Government to abandon the wheat stabilisation fund and instead guarantee that a proportion of export wheat received the home consumption price. UFWA wanted the Government to double the \$80 million fund used to subsidise export prices, and contribute to it on a \$2 to \$1 basis rather than dollar for dollar. The newspaper tactfully suggested that reasonable farmers would settle that difference while leaving no doubt that it supported a strengthening of wheat stabilisation.⁶⁴

THE MARRIAGE

Despite the wrangles over tariffs and marketing, 1977 was the last year for both organisations as separate entities. The die had been cast two years earlier when the 1975 annual conferences of both UFWA and the Graziers' Association voted by large majorities in favour of amalgamation and the setting up of the joint working group to lay the ground rules. Early in 1976 every member of each organisation received a copy of the group's report setting out the

⁶³May 26, 1977. The "uncontrolled" protesting was by the Cattlemen's Union which responded to low beef prices and the AMLC proposals by blocking access to saleyards, shooting aged cattle before television cameras and other tactics. The Union and UFWA were seen as allies in the campaign for a grower-majority on the AMLC and stable prices. There will be more about the Union in the next chapter.

⁶⁴March 24, 1977.

advantages and disadvantages of amalgamation and the procedures for achieving it. Procedures included UFWA establishing a United Farmers and Woolgrowers' Industrial Association of NSW to facilitate amalgamation with the Graziers' Association, a registered industrial organisation. UFWA was registered under the Companies Act and this required it, despite the pro-unity vote at its 1975 annual conference, to hold an extraordinary general meeting to allow all members to vote on amalgamation, either from the conference floor or by proxy. This was held on May 4, 1976, and while the vote recorded just over 80 per cent in favour of amalgamation, the overall vote was low.

The low UFWA vote was the main reason the target start-up date for the LGPA was postponed from January 1, 1977 to January 1, 1978. Under rules laid down by the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, 50 per cent of the members of each organisation had to vote in the postal ballot, and 50 per cent of those had to record a "yes" vote to bring about amalgamation. The Graziers' Association's chief executive, John White, recalled that "it became clear that if we rushed for January, 1977, we would be taking the vote too early because a lot of people had not studied the issues surrounding the amalgamation".⁶⁵ By 1977, he said, it was realised that there would be no difficulties in getting a "yes" vote but there remained concern about whether 50 per cent of the members from each organisation would take the time to respond to the postal ballot. More time was required to publicise the issues and according to White :

we used *The Land* newspaper, which was on side, to give publicity to the issues and we bought some advertising space that encouraged it to give us editorial coverage. That made our job easier. Both organisations made use of their own newspapers while the ABC's Country Hour and other radio programs showed interest in the topic.⁶⁶

⁶⁵Interview, Sydney, January 29, 1992.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

The year's delay was a tactic that worked and the Australian Electoral Office reported to the Industrial Registrar of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission on August 1, 1977, that 74 per cent of Graziers' Association members voted in the postal ballot and, of those, 93 per cent said "yes". For UFWA, the turnout was 68 per cent, with 94 per cent saying "yes".⁶⁷ History had been made with this high response and overwhelming "yes" vote.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS The old antagonists, the farmers and graziers of Australia's strongest farming state, had agreed to unite. Farm organisations had united before, but this was different and its implications for Australia's rural lobby were tremendous. Farmers and graziers had not only united but had come together as a general purpose organisation, something graziers had previously found repugnant. The pressure was now on graziers and farmers to unite in the other states, while federal organisations were left in no doubt that they had a choice- either unite or find that a third of their funding, that normally supplied by NSW affiliates, would no longer be available.

NSW farm leaders had a hidden agenda when they first began to talk seriously about state amalgamation in the early 1970s, and that was the establishment of a National Farmers' Federation, the "one voice" that farmers had been seeking for decades. NSW unity was the major hurdle to be overcome in gaining farmers a voice in the national capital that would match that of business and the trade union movement. In January, 1978, when the LGPA became a reality, the NFF was just 18 months away from opening its doors in Canberra.

⁶⁷The letter to the Industrial Registrar certifying the result of the ballot is signed by O.W. Allerton, Acting Australian Electoral Officer for New South Wales. N92/1459.

PART FOUR: THE FINAL PUSH FOR UNITY

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE THREAT FROM THE NORTH

INTRODUCTION While the mid-1970s saw the farmers and graziers of NSW engaged in a courtship ritual before their January, 1978, wedding, Queensland graziers were wracked by a divorce so bitter that it threatened to prevent all Australian primary producers coming together federally to speak with "one voice". As noted earlier, the emergence of hard times often gives birth to rebel farm organisations that have a simple answer to all their problems-government intervention in the market. The beef producers of central Queensland believed they had the answer to disastrously low prices in a government-backed minimum price scheme but the United Graziers' Association of Queensland, their parent body, would not listen. Thus, at Rockhampton in 1976, the Cattlemen's Union of Australia was established and immediately declared its determination to unite the nation's cattle producers. The Union was swimming against the unity tide but had adopted a marketing philosophy that could attract membership away from the existing farm organisations. The Union not only had a deceptively simple solution for low beef prices but also a simple way of attracting attention to itself and gaining media headlines that rattled other organisations-it employed public relations experts ahead of economists.

Whereas economists might have argued whether it made sense to set a fixed price for a perishable commodity, the Union's public relations team and leadership had no such qualms. They were free to harangue and abuse their opponents and stage-manage events, such as saleyard blockades and the shooting of aged animals before the television cameras. And, as is the wont with radical groups, the Union proclaimed itself the champion of the repressed against the establishment. This chapter will concentrate on the northern threat to unity and how meatworkers helped (unintentionally) to halt the Union's southern march. The Cattlemen's Union flirted with trade unionists to gain an advantage over other farmers, ignoring the fact

that farm organisations, even if bitter competitors, have traditionally preferred each other's company to that of a trade union. The Cattlemen's Union paid a heavy price.

Chapter Eight discusses the renewed outbreak of farmer-grazier rivalry that surfaced at the first NFF elections and how the farmers won the ballots but the graziers became the guardians of NFF policy. The economic rationalist stance of the graziers went to extremes under the leadership of Ian McLachlan, severing relations with the Hawke Labor Government. Australian farmers were speaking with one voice, but the Government was not speaking to their spokesmen. It was rare for a national pressure group to get itself so far offside with the Government of the day and McLachlan's successor, John Allwright, had some fence-mending to do if the farm voice was to be heard in Canberra.

PREPARING FOR CANBERRA

At the June, 1977, meeting of the Executive Council of the Australian Woolgrowers and Graziers' Council, its president, Sir Samuel Burston, reported that he had held federal unity talks with the president of the Australian Wool and Meat Producers' Federation, Rod Black.¹ This was a month before the members of their respective NSW affiliates, the Graziers' Association and the UFWA, were to begin voting in their historic unity referendum. This was further evidence that the unity movement in NSW—the state with the strongest and richest farm organisations—was primarily concerned about federal unity to achieve the "one voice" that farmers believed would allow them to match the influence of the miners, the manufacturers and the trade unions upon the Federal Government. It was a realisation that busy, modern governments wanted to deal with peak organisations such as the ACTU, the Australian Council of Social Service and the Australian Mining Industry Council, and not waste time listening to a plethora of voices claiming to speak for the one sector. Australian farmers had little option but to speak with one voice if they wanted to be heard

¹See minutes of AWGC Executive Council meeting, Canberra, June 21-22, 1977. N124/5.

in Canberra. There was a growing agitation among the larger farm organisations, according to John White, "that the smaller people were taking up too much of a minister's time while the big issues withered on the vine, and that was why we had to unite and press hard on the big issues and be able to afford to do so".²

As detailed in the previous chapter, by the mid-1970s there had been an enormous change in primary producer attitudes. The farmer-grazier animosity, evident since last century and still prevalent in 1965 when the NSW Graziers' Association successfully campaigned for a "no" vote in the wool reserve price referendum, was receding. Tariff walls were being lowered, farm subsidies were being phased down and there was the growing realisation that the things that farmers had in common, such as concern over interest rates, the exchange rate, transport costs and trade union power, were more important than the things which divided them. Of overriding importance was the realisation that maintaining a strong farm voice at the state level, and obtaining one at the federal level, was being jeopardised by the continuing decline in the numbers of farmers, and consequently in the financial membership of the various farm organisations. Organisations had to unite to end the duplication of effort and afford the quality staff essential to match it in Canberra with the richer and long established lobbies. Farmers could no longer afford to be apart. Importantly, the federal bodies were under pressure from the LGPA to act quickly on the amalgamation issue or risk a loss of funding. The LGPA, which provided about one third of the funding for the AWGC and the AWMPF, warned these two bodies that they had only one year to get their act together because after that time, it would fund only one federal organisation.³

The overwhelming vote for unity in NSW was the starting gun for the federal organisations to move and Black was invited to attend the August 22-23, 1977, meeting of the AWGC Executive Council where it was agreed that unity discussions should proceed between the AWGC, its cattle wing, the Australian National Cattle Council,

²Telephone interview, January 17, 1994.

³Telephone interview with John White, December 4, 1991.

and the AWMPF.⁴ At that stage, the guidelines for federal unity were those set out in the report of the NSW working group on amalgamation which proposed that wool, meat and grain producers be represented by a federation combining the AWGC, the AWMPF and the Australian Wheatgrowers' Federation under the name, The Australian Graziers' and Graingrowers' Federation. The federation was to have four constituent councils, three representing wool, cattle and wheat and the fourth to be an industrial council, a clear demonstration of farmers' continuing concern about industrial relations and the power of trade unions. Minor commodities would be represented by an Associated Producers' Affiliated Council. As time passed this concept of federal unity was to be significantly altered.

Black told the AWGC meeting that immediate negotiations should be confined to their two organisations, with others coming in at a later stage, and with media comment restricted until negotiations were further advanced. However, the proponents of federal unity were determined not to let the groundswell of farmer opinion in favour of it, as demonstrated by the overwhelming pro-unity vote in NSW, ebb away and a tight deadline of January 1, 1979 was set for federal unity. A Working Group on Federal Amalgamation was established and at its first meeting on October, 18, 1977, it defined its objectives as:

To examine the various options open and to prepare recommendations on the questions of amalgamation and/or restructuring of federal farm organisations.⁵

The group, headed by Black on the AWMPF side and Burston from the AWGC, claimed that primary producers were prepared to devote a higher proportion of their total membership fees to the federal arena than in the past. They gave no evidence for this but Black and Burston were quoted in the rural press as saying that less money should be spent by farmers at the state level and more

⁴See N124/5.

⁵See Stage One Report of the Working Group on Federal Amalgamation, released on March 3, 1978. Z266/2.

federally. Black added, "we spend too much time and energy at the state level".⁶ This was a realisation that while the co-operation of state governments was essential in such areas as rural roads, rail networks, irrigation services and land management, the big issues such as interest rates, the exchange rate, industrial relations and economic reform were in the purview of the Federal Government. The budget for the proposed federal farm organisation had been estimated at \$800,000 annually, significantly more than the estimated \$500,000 spent by all farm organisations in Australia.

By early 1978 the big two federations, the AWGC and the AWMPF, decided that it was time to extend the unity discussions and the working group was expanded into the Federal Amalgamation Committee, which first met in Canberra on May 10, 1978. The new organisations represented were the Australian Farmers' Federation, the Australian Wheatgrowers' Federation and the Cattlemen's Union. The 15 delegates to the FAC comprised federal and state farm organisation leaders, along with a number of executive officers. Don Eckersley, destined to become the first NFF president the following year, was the voice on the FAC for Australia's dairyfarmers, fruit growers, cane growers and others who were part of the doomed AFF.⁷ The inclusion on the FAC of a representative of the Cattlemen's Union was a diplomatic gesture to entice this radical group on to the federal unity bandwagon. Like the wheatgrowers of the Mallee, the Wimmera and other marginal wheat areas in the 1920s and 1930s, the central Queensland beef producers of the 1970s believed in government intervention to ensure domestic consumers and processors paid a "fair" price for their produce and that marketing boards were dominated by primary producers. The Union was a throwback to an earlier era before farm leaders turned away from price fixing and other forms of support to concentrate on lowering costs. Like earlier rebel groups, the Union displayed such hostility to its former parent body that co-operation, let alone reconciliation, was virtually out of the

⁶See *Country Life*, March 22, 1978.

⁷Federal Amalgamation Committee: Record of First Meeting, Canberra, May 10, 1978. Headed "Confidential to members of Committee Only", a copy was provided by Eckersley.

question. The first chairman of the Cattlemen's Union public relations committee, Darrell Palm, described the split with the UGA, as:

a rebellion against one of the last bastions, one of the last pillars of economic/rural/social structures which emanated from the western part of Victoria. Out of this came the basic philosophy of the old school tie and the order of things, the order that you did not question anything.⁸

THE QUEENSLAND REVOLT

The establishment of the Cattlemen's Union was seen as a setback to the unity cause. A large majority of members of the Central Coastal Graziers' Association had not only deserted their parent body but set out to become the national voice of beef producers. Despite the fact that the Union's interstate expansion was restricted to small branches in NSW and the Northern Territory, it generated nationwide coverage by a skilful exploitation of the media. Apart from blockades of cattle sales and shooting cattle, widely publicised events included attacks on politicians: notably the vote of no confidence in the Minister for Primary Industry, Ian Sinclair, at the Union's Second Convention in Toowoomba in September, 1977. The motion against Sinclair, because he rejected grower control of the Australian Meat and Livestock Corporation, was a stage-managed affair to portray the Union as a fearless fighter for the welfare of producers. The Union publicly attacked Sinclair, despite the fact that the majority of its members were National Party supporters. As the mover of the motion, Ian Shannon, later explained :

we had a wonderful opportunity with all the press in the room. I would not know what Cassell (Union national director, Barry Cassell) did but he certainly stirred up a hornet's nest. Between the time of 8am in St. Patrick's Hall and 11.30 am, or whatever time

⁸Palm is quoted in *Cattlemen's Union: The First Decade*, by Penny Schmalkuche, Moorooka, Queensland, 1991. p.1.

it hit the fan, Cassell had notified the media all over Australia because they were all there.⁹

This was a style of public relations that the traditional farm organisations found difficult to cope with but, at the same time, there was a quiet envy of the ability of the Union to make the front pages of the metropolitan newspapers and prime time news bulletins on radio and television. Former Union national director, Rick Farley, said the Union showed the other farm organisations how to operate in the area of public relations. He argued that "because farmers are only four to five per cent of voters, if you want farm issues portrayed you have to turn them into public issues".¹⁰ It was essential that the Union be involved early in federal unity discussions otherwise, it would have fuelled suspicions, within the Union, that it was unwanted by the older organisations and they were being influenced by the UGA, its bitter state rival. Eckersley explained that "in federal unity we had the problem of the Cattlemen's Union animosity and suspicion but we helped get around that by inviting its president, Maurice Binstead, on to the Federal Amalgamation Committee".¹¹

Getting the Union on board was one thing. Another and more difficult problem was to emerge when the FAC sat down to allocate seats on the NFF's Cattle Council, among the various organisations representing beef producers, and to decide how Queensland was to be represented. The NSW amalgamation of the Graziers' Association and UFWA into the LGPA in January, 1978, set off similar moves in other states and, by 1979, farmers and graziers had united in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. Four of the six states now had just one organisation speaking on behalf of their primary producers. This made the appointment of state representatives to the various NFF commodity councils a relatively easy task compared with the two states, Queensland and Western Australia, which had failed to unite.

⁹Schmalkuche, *op.cit.* pp.81-82.

¹⁰Interview with Farley, Canberra, February 9, 1994.

¹¹Telephone interview with Eckersley, February 5, 1994.

Western Australia has two farm organisations, the Pastoralists and Graziers' Association, mainly representing the large cattle and sheep producers of the arid and northern parts of the state, and the Western Australian Farmers' Federation, which basically speaks for the wheat-sheep, dairy and fruit growers of the arable south-west. Former WAFF general president, Winston Crane, said that there had been a number of amalgamation committees over the years and at times, a lot of goodwill, "but something always kept us apart". The PGA, according to Crane, did not like WAFF taking an interest in pastoral matters while wheatgrowers, who were "always powerful" in WAFF, resented the PGA displaying typical grazier hostility to organised marketing and extolling a free trade philosophy.¹²

The first NFF executive director, John Whitelaw, said the Western Australian farm sector was very concerned with personalities and it was rare to have the leaders of both organisations in agreement on a need for unity.¹³ However, John White, a leading player in NSW unity, explained that while the PGA was small in numbers (about 1200), its members generally controlled large properties and could afford to remain apart. White and other proponents of federal unity saw little danger to their cause resulting from the lack of unity in Western Australia. Neither side, he said, was using muscle to resist federal unity "so we did not put pressure on them to unite at the state level".¹⁴ The major factor keeping the PGA and WAFF in favour of federal unity was that their respective parent bodies, the AWGC and the AWMPF, were in the unity vanguard. While the absence of state unity in Western Australia did not overly concern the FAC, it was a different matter in Queensland. The waves of unity that swept the southern states in the 1960s and 1970s left Queensland untouched and it has a dozen farm organisations operating within the state with three of them-the UGA, the Cattlemen's Union and the Queensland Farmers' Federation-all representing their state on the NFF.

¹²Interview Canberra, September 14, 1992. Crane entered Federal Parliament as a Liberal Senator for Western Australia in July, 1990.

¹³Interview, Canberra, January 7, 1994.

¹⁴Interview, Sydney, January 29, 1992.

As with Western Australia, the Queensland seats on the Cattle Council of Australia were decided by an independent arbitrator. In Western Australia, the WAFF and the PGA accepted one seat each, but in Queensland the UGA was angered by the Union being awarded three seats to its three. The UGA wanted four seats. This was symptomatic of the bad relations between the two Queensland organisations that began in 1976 when the Central Coast Graziers' Association split with the UGA to form the Cattlemen's Union. Ruth Kerr, in her authorised *History of the United Graziers' Association*, records how antagonism existed between specialist cattle and sheep producers going back to last century. The long running gripes of the cattlemen were that their annual levy to the UGA, based on stock numbers, was too high relative to what sheep producers paid, that the UGA executive was dominated by ageing, ultra conservative wool producers and that a cattleman had yet to become UGA president.¹⁵

The introduction of a fixed annual floor price for wool in 1974 coincided with a collapse in beef prices. The CCGA, whose members relied on the volatile beef export market to take 80 per cent of their produce, began a campaign for a stabilisation scheme that would set minimum prices for domestic sales of beef and pool domestic and export returns to provide a livable income to beef producers. The CCGA also wanted the UGA split into autonomous beef and wool divisions. Here the CCGA was echoing the occasional demands of specialist cattle producers that they should run their own affairs free of the control of the wool-dominated grazier organisations, like the UGA and its parent, the AWGC. This was a clear demonstration that many Australian farmers still only saw unity in terms of commodities produced and lacked a broader vision.

In 1974, just two years before the Cattlemen's Union was established, the AWGC responded to growing pressure from cattlemen and formed the Australian National Cattlemen's Council. Trebeck describes the formation of the ANCC as "largely a defensive measure by the AWGC in an attempt to head-off a split or splinter

¹⁵Brisbane, 1990. pp.114-5.

groups".¹⁶ AWGC overtures to the AWMPF and the Australian Dairy Farmers' Federation and their affiliates to join the ANCC were ignored and the AWGC remained its sole member, along with its state affiliates, including the UGA. The CCGA was not impressed with the ANCC, seeing it as under the thumb of the AWGC and therefore not an independent national voice for beef producers. The AWGC left the ANCC open to this charge by denying it financial independence. At the 1972 AWGC Convention, vice-president Toby MacDairmid, in successfully moving the motion for the establishment of the ANCC, declared that while it would deal with all beef matters its spending had to be sanctioned by the AWGC.¹⁷ The ANCC was never seen as much more than the beef section of the AWGC. It even had problems within the AWGC itself with its executive director, Baden Cameron, complaining to the 1977 AWGC Convention that ANCC activities were not as well known as they should be and that state affiliates of the AWGC were promoting their own identities on beef issues rather than that of the ANCC.¹⁸

The refusal of the UGA to support the CCGA's beef stabilisation campaign, which was backed by the State's National Party Government, and to establish a specialist beef producers' division, brought long-running antagonisms to the boil. The end result was the defection of a majority of members of the CCGA in 1976 to establish the Cattlemen's Union of Australia. Barclay recorded that about 1000 cattlemen and women attended the inaugural meeting on May 11, 1976, at the Leichhardt Hotel in Rockhampton, to endorse "a grass roots" organisation with concern for the livelihood of all beef producers. It would work towards the unification of all cattlemen within Australia "to present a single dynamic voice for the industry".¹⁹ At the first annual convention in Rockhampton in December, 1976, president, Graham McCamley, declared the Union:

¹⁶D.B. Trebeck, *Farmer Organisations*, Chapter 9 in *Agriculture in the Australian Economy*, D. B. Williams (ed.) Sydney, 1990. p.129.

¹⁷Minutes of the 1972 AWGC Convention, Sydney. N123/337.

¹⁸N123/338.

¹⁹Maree Barclay, *A Time of Crisis: The Genesis of the United Graziers' Association and the Cattlemen's Union of Australia*. B.A. research paper, Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education, May, 1983. p.16.

A down to earth forthright organisation prepared to roll up its sleeves and get on with the job of solving problems facing the industry. The best thing we ever did was to untie ourselves from a tired, inefficient, doddering organisation more interested in perpetuating its executive rather than members' needs. We are free to act aggressively on behalf of our members. That seems to be the only language politicians and other sectors of the industry understand.²⁰

The Union was certainly aggressive. It attacked federal National Party politicians for allegedly ignoring the plight of beef producers, declared other farm organisations too soft, blasted its critics, claimed sole credit for measures benefiting the beef industry and argued loudly that only the Union really cared for farmers and their families. The Union's ability to portray itself as the only organisation with a plan to save the beef industry and restore the viability of family farms added to its appeal to producers who saw it as standing apart from the UGA and other conservative bodies which opposed change. The fact that most other bodies representing beef producers rejected proposals to impose fixed prices on all beef sold on the domestic market as too risky merely added to the attraction of the Union to struggling producers. When the only Government to support fixed prices was the Queensland Government this gave the State's "nationalists" another opportunity to rail against "southerners" for refusing to help the beef industry in hard times. The National Party Government of Queensland set out to enhance its popularity with cattle producers by proclaiming its support for a minimum price for beef but was well aware that, to be effective, such a scheme had to operate Australia wide and that other states were opposed. To some extent, the Party was "exploiting" the Union by supporting its minimum price policy to gain kudos without any risk to its own coffers. This is a type of role usually played by political parties in opposition.

²⁰Reported in the first edition of the Union's newspaper, *The Cattleman*, December, 1976.

The argument that fixing the price of a perishable foodstuff like beef, a product that faced strong competition for the consumer dollar from lamb, pork, chicken and fish, could end in heavy financial losses, bore little weight with people anxious for a quick solution to their problems. The Union had that solution and the fact that few would agree with them meant little. It was a case of "us against them", and the Union's leadership portrayed the organisation and an underdog battling against the conservative do-nothings of the long established farm organisations and the federal Government.

THE CATTLEMEN, THE MEATWORKERS AND FEDERAL UNITY

The Union proclaimed a desire to unite all cattlemen and all farmers in the one national organisation, but did nothing to endear itself to outsiders by its aggressive posture and its overtures to the trade union movement, perceived by most farmers, especially the graziers, as an "enemy". As detailed in earlier chapters, the grazier organisations arose late last century in response to the demand of shearers for a closed shop. They began as industrial organisations and, until they merged within the NFF in 1979, employed industrial officers to appear before tribunals and put the views of primary producers against wage increases in national wage case hearings. To this day the UGA's full title is the United Graziers' Association of Queensland, Union of Employers; but its breakaway group, the Cattlemen's Union, moved at its first convention in Rockhampton in December, 1976, "that it investigate the feasibility of joining the Australian Meat Industry Employees' Union for the purpose of operating meatworks".²¹

While the UGA called itself a "Union of Employers", the use of the word "Union" in the title of its splinter group was considered a little provocative and aroused hostility. The Union showed its indifference to criticism by publishing a letter from a UGA supporter, John Edmunds, in the April, 1977, edition of *The Cattleman*, attacking the choice of the name "Union". Edmunds

²¹See Schmalkuche, *op. cit.* p.66

wrote that it was indicative of the policies of the Union's leadership and the logical end would be the socialisation of the industry. This, he said, was against the principles of free enterprise and family values. This was, of course, a far-fetched interpretation, but Schmalkuche writes that the adoption of the name at the foundation meeting in May, 1976, was a momentous decision and "somehow indicated that the group saw themselves as militant and ready to make some demands to make some changes". She argues that if the second choice "association" had been adopted it would have indicated a continuation of conservative gentility "that was a stamp of the rural organisations of that time".²²

Trebeck drew a comparison between the formation of the Cattlemen's Union and the AWMPF, which split from the established Australian Woolgrowers' Council (later the AWGC) nearly 40 years earlier. In both cases, the breakaway groups believed they had solutions to the marketing problems facing their industries.²³ The AWMPF wanted a reserve price plan for wool and the Cattlemen's Union a minimum price for beef. They both saw their parent organisations as conservative and dominated by wealthy graziers. The AWMPF was obviously successful in uniting farmers at the federal level to push for marketing reforms in opposition to the graziers of the AWGC. It survived until it merged with the NFF in 1979 and after a reserve price scheme for wool had been introduced earlier that decade. Many splinter groups of the post-war period folded within a short time, a notable one being the Rural Action Movement (RAM) which arose in the early 1970s in NSW to demand controls over lamb marketing. It only lasted a few years before fading away. However, the Cattlemen's Union has been the most successful breakaway group since the AWMPF, and Trebeck puts this down to two main factors. First, it was formed out of the CCGA giving it a geographical concentration of initial members which produced a cohesion of aims and an ease of communications and, second, several of its leading office bearers were already cattle industry identities.²⁴

²²*Ibid.* p.50.

²³*Op. cit.* p 129.

²⁴*Ibid.* p.129

Unlike most other breakaway groups, the Union employed skilled public relations staff and spent more money in this area than any other farm organisation. The May, 1978, edition of the independently-owned *Primary Industry Newsletter* reported the Union's public relations officer, Rick Farley, revealing that his budget was \$260,000 a year. The newsletter calculated, without providing its figuring, that each member was paying about \$30 a year for public relations. This was about equal to the annual subscription fees of other farmers to their organisations for all purposes.²⁵ The newsletter quotes Farley saying that "the Union had revolutionised bush communications and used public relations as a lobbying tool". Trebeck claims that the Union's prominence was gained by an almost total focus on public relations, and that this tactic raised both the ire and, at times, the envy of other farm organisations, but "whether it contributed substantially to improved policy or economic conditions for the cattle industry is another matter".²⁶

But what really raised the ire of other organisations and effectively blocked the Union's national expansion plans was its approach to the live sheep export dispute of 1978, just a year before the National Farmers' Federation was established. Woolgrowers belonging to grazier and farmer organisations united to fight the Australian Meat Industry Employees' Union which claimed that rising live sheep exports to the Middle East were costing its members jobs in Australian abattoirs. The AMIEU imposed picket lines around pens holding sheep in both Adelaide and Fremantle, to prevent their loading in ships, but were fought, and eventually defeated by the tactics of primary producers. They were led in South Australia by a prominent grazier, Ian McLachlan, who became the third president of the NFF, and in Western Australia by farmer, Don Eckersley, the first NFF president. The tactics used to beat the AMIEU pickets included secretly transferring sheep from Adelaide to the rural port of Wallaroo, where they were loaded by farmers before the AMIEU could re-organise; a public relations

²⁵May 25, 1978 edition.

²⁶*Op. cit.* p.130.

campaign to gain community support, and constant pressure on federal and state governments to resist AMIEU demands for a ratio of two or three sheep to be shipped as carcasses for every sheep sent live. In South Australia, where the dispute was most intense, the farmers of the United Farmers and Graziers' of South Australia and the graziers of the Stockowners' Association of South Australia formed a Combined Livestock Committee under the chairmanship of McLachlan to combat the AMIEU.²⁷ This smoothed the path for the later amalgamation of the two bodies into the South Australian Farmers' Federation.

The Cattlemen's Union refused to get involved in the live sheep dispute, for fear that the industrial action might spread to beef chains in abattoirs, and signed a deal with the AMIEU that restricted live cattle exports to those owned by Union members. This was a ploy not only in the selfish interests of the Union but directed at harming the UGA and attracting defectors from its ranks. Live cattle exports were small compared with sheep, but the Union had hopes of developing a substantial live cattle market with Japan. However, the Union had ventured where no other farm organisation had gone before and sided with a trade union against fellow farmers, and it went further and criticised the UGA for supporting the farmers of South Australia with manpower and money.

If there were any doubts that the NFF would not come to fruition they were swept away by the unifying spirit engendered by the live sheep export dispute. As mentioned in Chapter One, John White saw history repeating itself, claiming that "the spirit of unity which first emerged in 1890 was kindled anew in 1978".²⁸ White was making the point that, in 1890, the demands of the Amalgamated Shearers' Union for a closed shop united the pastoralists of Australia to form the first national organisation of primary producers, the Pastoralists' Federal Council of Australia. He

²⁷For a detailed discussion of the dispute see *The Industrial Significance of the Live Sheep Dispute*, address by David Trebeck to the H.R. Nicholls Society, Canberra, February, 1989. Copy supplied by Trebeck.

²⁸Address to Tocal College, NSW, November 9, 1979.

lamented that only the pastoralists united back in the 1890s. Wool was the only rural commodity under threat and pastoralists, in those days, could expect little assistance from the farmers and potential farmers whose prime concern was prising arable land from the clutches of the pastoralists. When small landholders came together in NSW in 1893, as the Farmers and Settlers' Association, to demand changes to land laws this formalised divisions between graziers and farmers which took almost 100 years to break down.

But the actions of the AMIEU in 1978 in trying to impose a ratio on the export of live sheep created a common enemy for primary producers. The Livestock and Grain Producers' Association of NSW, which united farmers and graziers in that state, claimed that the magnificent response of LGPA members in combating the live sheep export dispute "has set a seal on farmer unity in New South Wales".²⁹ The LGPA was then only four months old and would have considered itself fortunate to see such an unifying issue emerge so early in its life and following a long and, at times, difficult courtship. Primary producers may have had problems digesting the material coming from their organisations on microeconomic reform, the impost of tariffs on rural exports and the submissions which their advocates put to governments in pre-budget consultations, but they all understood what was happening when a trade union tried to stop them selling their produce. With the live sheep dispute, Australian farmers were united, with the exception of the maverick Cattlemen's Union, and the fight was being led by people who were among the leading proponents of federal unity and the establishment of the National Farmers' Federation. Trebeck had no doubt of the importance of the live sheep dispute for the NFF. Some years later he told the conservative industrial relations forum, the H.R. Nicholls Society, that:

It was important in providing a major fillip to farm organisation amalgamation, leading to the formation of NFF in the following year. It was important in that it brought to the fore the leadership talents of Ian

²⁹See *The Livestock and Grain Producer*, the official LGPA journal, April, 1978.

McLachlan, later to be President of the NFF. And it was important in that in so many ways it revealed the shortcomings of government and Governments.³⁰

The "shortcomings" were the difficulties farmers had in getting both the Labor Government of South Australia and the Coalition Federal Government to take action on the dispute and bring it to an end. The message of Trebeck's speech to the H.R. Nicholls Society was that farm organisations could not afford to wait upon the goodwill of government, even Coalition governments, to fix up their problems. In other words, the relationship between the farm lobby and government was no longer one of asking a friend a favour, as in the days of the McEwen era, but of taking the initiative to force a decision, whatever the view of government. In the case of the live sheep dispute there was a reluctance of the Fraser Government to take on the AMIEU, for fear of extending the dispute to other areas. This included an initial reluctance to encourage those hurt by the industrial action to test the new amendments to the Trade Practices Act. These included Section 45D, which outlawed secondary boycotts. The AMIEU, by preventing the supply of goods (sheep) from a third party (Elders GM) to a corporation (the Clausen shipping line), was presumed by farmers, livestock companies and shippers to be in breach of 45D.

The AMIEU had inadvertently promoted farm unity and helped keep the goal of a National Farmers' Federation on a true course. Rural commentator David Kidd wrote that, with the exception of the Cattlemen's Union, the AMIEU's stance gave great unity of purpose to farmers. He said that any doubts about the ability of farmers to work together nationally or of the NFF emerging in January, 1979, would have disappeared.³¹ It was not, Kidd argued, a good period for the Cattlemen's Union, which refused an invitation from other farm organisations to become involved in the live sheep dispute, preferring to seek special treatment from the AMIEU on live cattle

³⁰Address to the H.R. Nicholls Society, Canberra, February, 1989.

³¹*The Weekly Times*, April 19, 1978. The planned January, 1979, starting date for the NFF proved optimistic and it was delayed to the following July.

shipments. The Union's president, Graham McCamley, responded to farmer criticism in an interview on the ABC radio program *AM* on April 11, 1978. He said that sheep farmers had not helped wheatgrowers beat an earlier ban on wheat shipments to Chile, so why should beef producers get involved with livesheep and risk the dispute spreading. If the beef chains stopped moving in abattoirs, the Cattlemen's Union would hold the sheep people responsible.

The National Director of the Cattlemen's Union, Barry Cassell, was, around the time of the sheep export dispute, making a tour of Victoria and South Australia endeavouring to establish branches of the union. McCamley's comments on the ABC could not have come at a worse time. Just what farmers thought of an organisation that promoted its own welfare ahead of the common farm good was demonstrated at a meeting in the South Australian town of Keith on April 12 (just a day after McCamley was on the ABC) to consider forming a branch of the Union. Kidd reported that at a meeting of more than 200 farmers, a vote on whether a branch of the Cattlemen's Union be formed in South Australia was lost by 187 votes to 13. The meeting passed two relevant motions, one stating that while the meeting did not approve of the behaviour of the Union it appreciated what it was trying to achieve, with the other congratulating Ian McLachlan on his handling of the live sheep dispute.

THERE COULD ONLY BE ONE NATIONAL BODY

The first executive director of the NFF, John Whitelaw, saw the attitude of the Cattlemen's Union as the greatest problem facing the FAC in the lead-up to the establishment of the NFF on July 20, 1979. It was also a factor in the failure to meet the earlier target dates of first January, and then March, that year. There was even some doubt, according to Whitelaw, "as to whether the Union would actually front up, thereby risking the establishment of a federal organisation with Queensland walking on the stumps of its legs".³² The Union could not be a national organisation, Whitelaw stressed,

³²Interview, Canberra, January 7, 1994

it had to be a part of Queensland or nothing at all. The big issue upsetting the Union was sharing state representation on both the NFF executive and the Cattle Council with its arch enemy, the UGA. Another problem was abandoning all intentions of becoming a national organisation and leaving the Cattle Council to be the sole national voice for cattle producers. The Union, despite the inclusion of its president, Maurice Binstead, on the FAC, vacillated between becoming a member or remaining an outsider. Maverick organisations can have difficulty embracing unity with those that they have spent much time denigrating. The Union campaigned for members on the basis that the grazier organisations were ultra-conservative and dominated by wealthy woolgrowers who shied away from meat marketing reforms because of their close ties with meat processors.

Just four months before the NFF came into existence the Union's national director, Barry Cassell, declared that the same people who had "done everything to damage and frustrate the Cattlemen's Union effectively will control both the National Farmers' Federation and the Cattle Council". The grazier groups, he said, representing just 15 per cent of "the true grass roots of rural Australia," had worked themselves into a position where they, with or without Union membership, would have 60 per cent of the vote on the Cattle Council.³³ Cassell went on to paint the graziers as clever agropoliticians who "I suspect by patronage and even worse but, overall, by sheer cleverness" had taken over the unity movement. The farmers had the numbers and the same marketing philosophy as the Union "but along the way, the farmers bungled it". The graziers pretended in public to want the Union on board but privately, Cassell charged, they had already taken a decision to exclude it. There is no evidence for this, but Cassell was displaying the typical Union chip-on-the-shoulder mentality. He even claimed that the push for federal unity was a grazier ruse to stymie the growth and success of the Union in rural Australia. But Cassell was partly correct in his claim that the graziers had "taken over" the

³³Cassell's Annual Report to Branch Executives of the Cattlemen's Union of Australia, Tamworth, NSW, April 1, 1979. An extract was released by the Union as a press release on the same day.

unity movement. As we will see later in this study, their dry brand of economics prevailed within the NFF.

However, there was another problem facing the Union: rising beef prices and a return to higher farm incomes. Prosperity is the enemy of splinter groups. They can prosper in hard times but the going is tougher for them when times are good. In good times, farmers get on with the job of boosting their incomes and are less interested in radical marketing reforms. Their enthusiasm for their farm organisations declines and there are fewer reasons to heap scorn on politicians. By 1979, the Union was trapped in a spell of high beef prices and many members had lost interest in its radical plans for meat marketing.³⁴ It had become just another farm organisation, but one whose past aggression had left it with few friends in other farm organisations, the bureaucracy or in politics outside the Queensland Government. It certainly lacked friends inside the Federal Coalition Government. The stunt pulled at the 1977 Union Convention against Ian Sinclair may have boosted the Union's image as a tough-talking organisation, prepared to upset some of its own members by publicly attacking a National Party Minister, but it was poor long-term public relations. Sinclair did not forget the attempted humiliation, and his comments in the Parliament on the Union's role in the live sheep dispute were an obvious payback. Asked by National Party backbencher, Sam Calder, if he was aware of the comments of McCamley, he said that no other issue had united farmers and graziers as much as the live sheep export dispute, and it had occurred at a time when there was a move towards federal unity. Therefore, Sinclair said, he found it nothing short of incredible that the Union allied itself with the AMIEU because it was concerned about the flow of live cattle exports. Sinclair told Parliament:

I think it ill becomes any producer organisation to seek to ensure that, perhaps, through some untoward sweetheart agreement with the trade union movement it will be able to continue to gain

³⁴See reports of the 1979 Cattlemen's Union convention in *The Land*, October 4, 1979.

the respect of those whom it purports to represent..... and would trust that every Australian producer would take note of the degree to which, when the chips are down, that organisation does not seem to be prepared to back the rank and file of those it purports to represent.³⁵

The Union faced the alternative of joining the NFF, taking its seats on the Cattle Council of Australia, and thereby having a say in beef industry policy making, or becoming largely irrelevant in the national arena. By staying outside the NFF, it would be leaving its old enemies, the graziers, in a much stronger position. It was the dispute over the allocation of Cattle Council seats that led the Union to pull out of NFF negotiations in early 1979, but a clever ploy by the NSW Livestock and Grain Producers' Association gave it a gateway into the NFF without too much loss of face. The LGPA gave one of its six seats on the Cattle Council to the NSW branch of the Cattlemen's Union. The LGPA executive officer, John White, said that although the NSW branch of the Union did not have enough members or cattle to gain them a seat on the Cattle Council, "we made a gesture, not just for the sake of the Cattle Council but in a wider cause of national farmer unity".³⁶ There was a quick response from the Union's president, Maurice Binstead, who convened a special meeting of the Union's National Council on May 21, 1979, to consider re-opening negotiations with the NFF. Binstead told the meeting that the LGPA offer created a different situation to circumstances existing when branch executives, voting at their Tamworth conference the previous April, decided to cease negotiations to join the NFF.³⁷ The Union was overwhelmingly a Queensland-based organisation, but the LGPA gesture to its NSW branch was seized upon by Binstead, a member of the Federal Amalgamation Committee, as a lifeline back into the NFF and the Cattle Council.

³⁵House of Representatives, *Hansard*, April 11, 1978. pp. 1345-1346.

³⁶Telephone interview, January 17, 1994.

³⁷Reported by Schmalkuche, *op. cit.* p.118.

The Cattleman of May, 1979, reported Binstead telling the Convention that federal unity was best for the aims of the Union. Without the Union, the graziers of the AWGC would be in a majority on the Cattle Council and the boom-bust cycle in the beef industry would go on unchecked. But, with three seats on the Cattle Council, the Union could form a majority with the farmers of the AWMPF and "we both want stabilisation". This appeared either wishful thinking or another effort by Binstead to rationalise the Union's quick reversal of the April decision to pull out of negotiations. The demand for stabilisation, or controlled domestic prices, was not strong outside the Union, and the only political support came from Queensland National Party.

The first Executive Director of the NFF, John Whitelaw, described the LGPA decision as not only "generous" but far-sighted in that the NSW branch of the Union faded after it accepted a place on the Cattle Council, where national policy for beef was devised, and became a weaker voice as an industry critic.³⁸ Today, the Union's NSW branch has no seat on the Cattle Council. John White explained that "some years later we took the seat back when the Union had a problem with funding it, mainly the result of declining membership".³⁹ Cynics might argue that the LGPA was well aware that a seat on the Cattle Council, where decisions were made, could silence its small but noisy rival which had exploited the fact that it had been left outside the decision-making process. In other words, the LGPA set a trap and the Union fell for it. The Cattle Council was able to hold its first meeting on July 19, one day before the NFF's inaugural meeting, because the Cattlemen's Union and the UGA accepted three Queensland seats each as a prelude to having the issue decided by an independent arbitrator. The arbitrator, appointed by the Queensland Law Commission, judged in September, 1979, that the three-three split was fair.

Apart from the lack of state unity, the other Queensland issue which caused concern to the NFF was the Union's continuing use of the title the "Cattlemen's Union of Australia". The executive

³⁸Interview, January 7, 1994.

³⁹Telephone interview, April 17, 1994.

committee of the Cattle Council of Australia passed a resolution in late 1979 requesting its president, Des Crowe, to write to the Union reminding it of assurances it had given the NFF in October that it would cease making public comments that appeared to be in competition, or in conflict, with the Council.⁴⁰ In October, the NFF senior vice-president, Michael Davidson, told the NSW Farm Writers and Broadcasters' Society that it had been agreed that once the NFF was established the previous national farm organisations would cease to exist. Yet the Cattlemen's Union continued, he said, to speak as a national body and thereby threatened the role of the Cattle Council. Davidson was not impressed with the Union's claim that UGA legal action against it, for alleged unpaid dues and the return of property, prevented it from dismantling its federal structure. He said the AWMPF and the AWGC were still legal structures, "but you haven't heard anything of them".⁴¹

The Cattlemen's Union, which had thrived on playing the role of a noisy rebel, found it difficult to conform to the discipline of national unity and its executive director, Rick Farley, responded rather sharply to Davidson. He said the NFF was yet to appoint a public relations officer and, while such a vacuum existed, the Union had no option but to respond to the queries of journalists about meat industry matters.⁴² However, Farley told the Union's September, 1979 Convention that membership of the NFF would downgrade the Union as a public pressure group. The Government, the meat industry and commentators, he said, would look to the Cattle Council of Australia as the legitimate national voice of the cattle industry, and Union policy "will always have to be converted into CCA policy to achieve Federal recognition while we retain membership in the NFF".⁴³

Farley was a skilled publicist, but he was also a realist and Whitelaw credits him with turning the attention of the Union to the

⁴⁰See minutes of the executive committee meeting, Sydney, December 13, 1979. N123/378.

⁴¹Speech reported in *The Land*, November 1, 1979.

⁴²*The Land*, November 1, 1979.

⁴³Schmalkuche, *op. cit.* p.121.

real problems facing them, such as the state of the economy, production and transport costs and industrial relations, and away from always seeking a quick fix through radical marketing changes. Whitelaw said Farley improved the organisation of the Union and "was the best thing to happen to it".⁴⁴ Farley, a former ministerial staffer in the Whitlam Labor Government, Nimbin resident and journalist, was a controversial appointment as Union public relations officer. Schmalkuche writes that numerous members claimed Farley was a "socialist plant" and a number of them resigned, but the Union's executive recognised his talents and this did not go unnoticed by the UGA. She quotes the former UGA executive director, Malcolm Blaikie, conceding that the Union was cleverer than his organisation because "they went not for economists and marketing experts, but went for publicists like Rick Farley, who knew the media". He said the Union received vast press publicity when it attacked politicians and industry figures "but we couldn't answer that because we were too conservative to indulge in mud slinging, so we suffered from it".⁴⁵

On the status of the Union, Farley wrote to Whitelaw on October 9, 1979, advising him that, at the Annual Members' Convention on September 19, constitutional amendments were passed giving separate identities to the Queensland, NSW and Northern Territory divisions of the Cattlemen's Union of Australia. References to a "national" council and a "national" president had been deleted. On the NFF and the Cattle Council, the Union became known as the Cattlemen's Council (Qld.). It had abandoned its national ambitions and became one of several Queensland organisations represented on the NFF, but it rejected reconciliation with the UGA. There were, however, enough people on both sides in the early 1990s promoting state unity and a referendum was held in December, 1993. Of the 2200 eligible UGA voters, 83 per cent voted for unity, but only 53 per cent of the Union's 2000 voters said "yes", falling well short of

⁴⁴Interview, January 7, 1994.

⁴⁵Schmalkuche, p. 56-57.

the 66 per cent vote required. The UGA leadership promoted the unity cause but the Union stood aside.⁴⁶

In 1992, the Union changed its name back to the Cattlemen's Union of Australia (Inc.) despite its membership beyond Queensland being restricted to 420 members in NSW. The NFF raised no public objection in the interest of farm unity. The Union's executive director, Jim Petrich, explained that while the Union was unhappy with the Cattle Council, because most of its members came from multi-purpose organisations like the NSW Farmers' Association and not from specialist cattlemen's groups, the Union believed in national unity and would retain membership of the NFF and the Cattle Council. The Union, Petrich said, no longer sought fixed domestic prices for beef and saw the most pressing issue as reforming the meat processing, handling and distribution industries to generate cost savings.⁴⁷

THE NORTHERN THREAT RECEDES

The Cattlemen's Union threat to national unity in 1979 was real enough. The existence of a separate organisation claiming to speak for Australia's cattle producers would have proved a headache for the NFF. The Union played by different rules and, with its simple solutions and concentration on public relations, it would have grabbed the media headlines, especially in the next downturn in beef prices. The Cattle Council would have wasted a lot of time and resources countering attacks on it by the Union and responding to its "solutions" to industry problems. The perception of national farm unity would have been dented by the existence of a maverick organisation agitated because its bitter rival, the UGA, was within the NFF and the Cattle Council. When it finally decided to join the NFF, the Union had lost much of its old fire because beef prices had improved dramatically. Most of its membership had stopped attending Union meetings and were getting on with beef production. It seems indeed fortunate for the NFF that 1979 was a

⁴⁶Information and voting figures supplied by UGA chief executive officer, David Moore, telephone interview, April 6, 1994.

⁴⁷Telephone interview, March 14 1995.

good year for beef, otherwise unity could have been much harder to achieve. The good times and the Union's grave error of judgement in not supporting fellow farmers in the live sheep export dispute, ended its push south. The Union joined the NFF, proclaiming that it could now enlist the support of the southern farmers in pushing for a minimum beef price within the Cattle Council against the graziers. However, it misread the mood of the Council and quickly discovered this when Baden Cameron, the executive director of the AWGC's Australian National Cattle Council, was appointed to the same post on the NFF's Cattle Council. Cassell was somewhere near the mark when he claimed at Tamworth that the graziers had taken over the unity movement by "sheer cleverness". As discussed later in this chapter and in the next, leading graziers saw greater benefits in pushing their former staff into senior positions on the NFF and its commodity councils than in demanding leadership posts for themselves. When full time staff serve part-time executives, there are opportunities for staff to have considerable influence.

By the end of 1979 Australian farmers were virtually speaking "with one voice". State unity had not been achieved in Western Australia or Queensland, but all the major farm organisations in those states were members of the NFF with representatives on its commodity councils. Australia's cattle producers were speaking through the Cattle Council of Australia to the Federal Government, as were woolgrowers through the Wool Council of Australia and wheatgrowers through the Australian Wheatgrowers' Federation, later to become the Grains Council of Australia. Lamb and mutton producers had their Sheepmeat Council and sugar, cotton, dried fruits, dairy and rice producers also had their own councils, with all represented on the NFF Council. The original idea of commodity councils for the big three-wool, meat and wheat-and a multi-commodity council for the smaller commodities was abandoned. Some industries demanded their own councils but others, concerned about the costs involved, opted for the cheaper associate or affiliate membership.

The fifth NFF president, Graham Blight, said that the NFF developed through the big three groups, wheat, wool and meat, and the initial draft of the NFF had paid too little attention to the smaller farmers and they were wondering where they fitted in. Blight, a ricegrower, told the FAC that the NFF could actually end up with more farmers on the outside than inside because the most intensive industries had the most farms. Dairy, fruit and poultry farms were small in acreage and had a low value production compared with grazing properties, but there were more of them. They had to be accommodated. Blight argued, and the NFF needed their affiliation fees. Hence, the multi-commodity council gave way to a greater range of councils and different grades of membership and fees. This allowed smaller industries to be part of national unity and to take advantage of NFF services.⁴⁸

Since the NFF was established in July, 1979, there have been no defections of major consequence and no splinter groups have emerged to claim to speak for a commodity in opposition to the NFF. Egg producers left because the deregulation of the industry in a number of states undermined their capacity, Blight said, to fund their place in the NFF. It was not a philosophical problem, just a financial one. However, there was a philosophical issue with the tobacco growers. They left because they found themselves, as farmers highly dependent on tariff protection for survival, inside an organisation that was committed to reducing tariff levels in the overall interests of a more efficient Australian economy. The NFF could not argue for the maintenance of protection for the tobacco industry while calling for faster rate of reduction in industrial tariffs. Blight indicated that the tobacco growers and the NFF parted on good terms. "We understood their argument and they understood ours. Most of the small industries had at one time or another been dependent on a tariff".

⁴⁸Interview, Canberra, February 15, 1994.

FARMERS WIN THE ELECTIONS BUT GRAZIERS GAIN POWER

The first NFF elections was described by *The Bulletin's* rural columnist, Kenneth Graham, as a victory for the "agrarian left". The election of "farmers" of the AWMPPF over the "graziers" of the AWGC on both the NFF and the commodity councils was seen by Graham as heralding a change of emphasis by farm organisations away from economic rationalism and back towards more government intervention.⁴⁹ More will be said about the first election and continuing farmer-grazier rivalries in the next chapter, but it quickly became clear that the free market approach of the graziers remained dominant. The Cattlemen's Union's hopes that an alliance with the farmers of the AWMPPF would achieve its marketing reforms were a lost cause. The former Federal Minister for Primary Industry, John Kerin, had no doubt that "the NFF was always going to be the inheritor of the grazier broad-acre approach".⁵⁰ By this Kerin meant that the NFF would promote lower tariffs, low inflation, financial deregulation and other measures to make the economy more competitive. The NFF would not be seeking stabilisation schemes, or any measures that were aimed at protecting farmers from the laws of supply and demand. The NFF, Kerin said, was prepared to hold the line on tariffs and "things like that" because "the real economic rationalists have got hold of it." However, he was critical that some people in the NFF had "heightened views" about the pace at which reforms could be made to the waterfront and other industries and in deregulating the labour market. Kerin mostly found the NFF a force for rationality and good "compared with the people you had to deal with in sugar, dairy and wheat farmers, one by one".

The graziers may have been beaten by the farmers for key positions such as NFF president and commodity council presidencies, but they got their key staff into top positions on the NFF secretariat, and that proved significant. The Federal Amalgamation Committee appointed Major-General John Whitelaw as the NFF's first executive director for two main reasons. One was

⁴⁹August 7, 1979. "Kenneth Graham" was a pseudonym used by Ken Baxter, former economist with the NSW Graziers' Association. When writing on rural issues in the *Australian Financial Review* he used the name, "A.K. Holland".

⁵⁰Interview, Canberra, April 15, 1992.

his record in the army as an administrator, the second that he was a "cleanskin" having had no connection with any farm organisation. However, while Whitelaw administered the NFF and got it running efficiently, the main people preparing the policy documents, writing the speeches for president, Don Eckersley, and commodity council heads, and writing the submissions to government and the Industries Assistance Commission were former employees of the now superseded grazier organisations.

David Trebeck, the former executive officer of the AWGC, became deputy director of the NFF and, while AWGC economist, Ian Wearing, was appointed NFF chief economist, he very soon became the executive director of the Australian Wheatgrowers' Federation, which later changed its name to the Grains Council of Australia. The AWF position became vacant when the incumbent decided not to make the move from Melbourne to Canberra. Wearing had been encouraged to take on the job by Michael Davidson, former president of the Graziers' Association of NSW and by others from the grazier side "because they wanted to tart up the AWF on marketing issues".⁵¹ As spelt out in an earlier chapter, the AWF was formed in 1930 with the aim of achieving a national wheat stabilisation plan featuring fixed domestic prices and export price guarantees. It achieved this in 1949, but from the mid-1960s the AWF was fighting a rearguard action against efforts by governments of both political persuasion to attune the wheat industry with the laws of supply and demand.

The graziers saw the AWF as in urgent need of re-education and Wearing, a former economist with the Commonwealth Treasury, was given the task. However, Wearing, despite having some support within the AWF, was accused of pushing too hard for a free wheat market and was sacked in 1986. Wearing said that the NFF president at the time, grazier Ian McLachlan, accepted the dismissal without argument to keep peace with the AWF. When Wearing went to the AWF his position as NFF economist was taken by Andrew Robb, another economic rationalist, who went on to become executive director of the NFF and later national director of

⁵¹Interview, Canberra, October 26, 1992.

the Liberal Party. The first executive director of the Cattle Council of Australia, Baden Cameron, had held a similar position with the Australian National Cattle Council, the cattle arm of the AWGC and opposed to government intervention in the beef market. The former national director of the Cattlemen's Union, Barry Cassell, believed that the day-to-day power in any organisation rested with the chief administrative officer and organisations relied heavily on their advice. It was a foregone conclusion, cleverly reached by the FAC, Cassell said, that "the Australian National Cattlemen's Council will supply the Cattle Council's executive officer".⁵²

The first executive director of the Wool Council of Australia, Owen Rankin, had held a senior position with the AWMPF and, on the Council, he renewed links with its first president, Dick O'Brien, the former AWMPF president. However, this did not have any impact on the NFF which, from the beginning, stamped itself as an organisation whose priorities were the deregulation of the economy and the labour market. Trebeck left in no doubt where he stood on the question of government intervention in rural markets stating that:

the term orderly marketing should be deleted from the agricultural and agropolitical vocabulary..... Future marketing issues, thankfully, are more likely to be resolved by an assessment of the demonstrated economic merits of a particular proposal rather than by fundamental marketing ideology".⁵³

Trebeck said the second NFF Council meeting in October, 1979, passed a "whole swag" of policy resolutions that were basically

⁵²Cassell's report to the Tamworth meeting of Union branch executives, April, 1979.

⁵³Address to a conference on "The Political Economy of Free and Managed Markets for Agricultural Products", sponsored by the Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, November 18, 1980. Trebeck said he believed his views were shared by a large number of primary producers. Copy of speech supplied by Trebeck.

prepared by the staff and the office bearers. In regard to his own area of economic policy, the resolutions were "pretty straight down the line and the sort of stuff we (that is, the graziers) had run before, and I had the pleasure of seeing the principal economic resolution being moved by Dick O'Brien (AWMPF) and seconded by Bill Pyle (Australian Dairy Farmers Association)".⁵⁴ The resolution, according to Trebeck, was an omnibus one declaring a need for such things as for lower protection levels and greater competition throughout the economy. Ian Wearing recalled that prominent graziers, Sir Samuel Burston and Michael Davidson, encouraged O'Brien to move the resolution as a means of obtaining a farmer-grazier "united front" on the economic stance taken by the NFF.⁵⁵ O'Brien had been prominent for many years in the AWMPF and UFWA, two organisations whose members had supported government intervention, especially in the wheat industry, and who, in return for their own protection, had run a much softer line on industrial tariffs than the graziers. Writing as LGPA president in his regular column in *The Land*, Davidson declared that if anyone was expecting controversy at the Council meeting they were "very disappointed".⁵⁶

There seems little doubt that the staff of the NFF had considerable influence in the "education" of farmers, the people they were employed to serve. Farley gave Trebeck "enormous credit" for the economic directions the NFF took in the early days and for the production of policy documents. Staff had been prominent in the organisation, he said, and had, to an extent, educated farm leaders. The grazier organisations had been led by sophisticated and better educated leaders than the farmer organisations and gave their staff greater rein. Farley recalled that when he became NFF executive director the president was the former grazier leader, Ian McLachlan, who advised him "to get out there and run it (the NFF) as hard and fast as you like".⁵⁷ The NFF followed the grazier practice of employing experts who operated on a loose rein.

⁵⁴Interview, Canberra, January 27, 1994.

⁵⁵Telephone interview, April 19, 1994.

⁵⁶October 25, 1979.

⁵⁷Interview, Canberra, February 2, 1994.

The former National Party leader, Doug Anthony, was not impressed by either the NFF staff or the economic direction it had taken. The organisation, he believed, was being led by its economists too far down the path of free trade and economic deregulation. He singled out Trebeck as someone who would never accept the need for tariff protection to attract investment into an industry and who refused to live in a real world. He and the graziers even wanted to abolish protection for Australia's tobacco and sugar growers, Anthony said. It was symptomatic of the way the NFF operated that one of its staff could be singled out by a former political leader for attack. Anthony referred to an incident at the NFF office in Canberra in 1979, when he was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade: "Trebeck was being smart and I hit back at him".⁵⁸

If, as John Kerin argued, the NFF was basically a grazier's organisation, criticism from a National Party leader would be of little concern. As shown in an earlier chapter, the graziers were often at loggerheads with former leader, John McEwen, who accused the NSW Graziers' Association of wanting to destroy his party. With the NFF the primary producers of Australia were not only speaking with one voice but it was a non-party political voice. The NFF reserved the right to be political, but non-party political in the sense that it was ready to campaign at elections for or against policies put to the electorate by the parties running for office, but without supporting any party or any particular candidates. For example, at the 1993 federal elections, the NFF gave strong support to the goods and services tax advocated by the Opposition and after the election criticised the defeated Opposition for discarding it.

During the election campaign NFF president, Graham Blight, told the National Press Club in Canberra that the NFF was, by its constitution, non-political and it was no fault of its own that the Liberal Party had picked up the goods and services tax which the NFF had been promoting since 1988, and "we tried to sell it to

⁵⁸Interview, Canberra, June 2, 1992.

every political party".⁵⁹ The NFF, he said, would not endorse candidates and discouraged those from both sides who wanted to attend NFF meetings. The large amounts of money that flowed regularly to the National and Liberal parties from the NSW Graziers' Association ended when it amalgamated with UFWA in 1978 and there would be no political donations from the NFF. The NFF Fighting Fund, which began with a bucket collection at a farmers' demonstration outside Parliament House in Canberra in 1985 and quickly rose to more than \$14 million with business donations added in, has been used to primarily combat industrial disputes affecting farmers and to push the NFF industrial relations agenda.⁶⁰ Doug Anthony was annoyed that the NFF could raise such a large amount of money and deny any of it to the National Party. He claimed that a lot of the money had been donated by National Party supporters and went to an organisation that should be officially affiliated with the party but which had got out of touch with the rank and file farmers.⁶¹

CONCLUDING COMMENTS The determination of the Cattlemen's Union to be the sole voice of Australian beef producers threatened national farm unity. This was a demonstration of how a maverick organisation, espousing simple solutions to low incomes, has the potential to put a spoke in the wheels of the unity bandwagon. There is no guarantee that farmers, similar to those who split from the UGA, will not surface again, this time to challenge the authority of the NFF. The fact that the Cattlemen's Union has returned the word "Australia" to its title should keep the NFF alert to its activities.

The proponents of controlled marketing, like rabbits, are a permanent feature of Australian agriculture. They can be kept under control for periods but as soon as times get tough they break out again. As noted in Chapter Nine many NSW wheatgrowers,

⁵⁹Blight's comments were made when answering questions after addressing the club. Recorded and transcribed by the author.

⁶⁰Details from *The Farmers' Voice*, the official journal of the Australian Farmers' Fighting Fund, November 1993. Copy supplied by the NFF.

⁶¹Interview, June 2, 1992.

disturbed by fluctuating prices, are demanding a return to a regulated domestic wheat market. Scratch old UWFA-style woolgrowers and you are likely to hear them call for the return of the wool floor price. This places an onus on the NFF not just to push its free market agenda with government but to keep espousing its long term benefits to farmers.

A detailed analysis of the success of the NFF as the one voice of Australian agriculture is outside the scope of this study but the final two chapters will discuss pertinent factors surrounding the apparent success of the NFF and its reputation as a leading lobby group. They will include the development of a constitution which has avoided the pitfalls of past attempts at federal unity and the leadership given by the NFF in economic and industrial relations reform. Other important topics include the break in NFF-Hawke Government relations as the NFF flirted with the right wing Industrial relations forum, the H.R. Nicholls Society, and whether the arrival of the NFF finally put paid to the era of farmer-grazier warfare.