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The role of agrarian sentiment in Australian rural policy

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Abstract

Politics has famously been described as the ‘authoritative allocation of values’ and the political science literature has discussed the mechanisms through which different values are represented in the policy process. Much of this research has focused on explicitly stated values that can be identified as competing interests in the community. This chapter discusses the existence of an apparently pervasive value in Australian agricultural policy development, which is rarely articulated and is not represented by an identifiable interest group or ‘watchdog’. The value is agrarianism. Agrarian imagery and appeals to national identity are frequently used to explain rural policy decisions. This is ironic, given that in recent years rural policy in Australia has been dominated by neo-liberal economics with an emphasis on structural adjustment, productivity improvement and deregulation—goals that are apparently at odds with agrarian values. This chapter will explore the influence of agrarianism in Australia, including its limiting impact on the level of policy debate and its role in sustaining the National Party as a force in Australian politics.

Introduction

Politics has been described as the ‘authoritative allocation of values’ (Easton 1953:129) and the public policy literature discusses how values are incorporated in policy development processes and how decision makers balance the conflicting values that inevitably arise. Almost every policy decision involves a compromise between differing objectives, many of which are anchored in particular values: the trade off between inflation and unemployment is a clear example in economic policy, as is the balance between wages and profits. With a few exceptions, the discussion of values in the policy process has focused on identifiable values promoted by particular advocates within the policy community. Using agrarianism in Australia as an example, this chapter will argue that this interpretation of the role of values is superficial—that there exist deeper, fundamental values in a polity that do not need advocates, as their influence is

pervasive. These values might not even be recognised or named but their impact can be seen.

This examination of agrarianism in Australia arises from a simple question: why is there so little public critical analysis of rural policy in Australia? Rural policies are rarely subject to the general scrutiny that applies, for example, when welfare, education or health policies are considered. When public interest in rural issues is aroused, it tends to be in response to events such as drought, which evoke general sympathy and support for government efforts to provide subsidies or other forms of government intervention. Why is such unquestioning support not forthcoming for other groups in the community, such as the unemployed, the disabled or single mothers? This chapter argues that this sympathetic response is the result of a residual agrarianism in Australian culture, which is shared by many developed countries, which dates back centuries, and which attributes to farmers certain virtues and idealised characteristics that generally place them beyond reproach. What makes this agrarianism interesting in Australia is that this country is one of the most urbanised in the world and, with a highly efficient agricultural sector, has one of the lowest levels of government support for farmers. In multilateral trade negotiations, Australia has criticised the United States and, more particularly, the European Union for farm policies that are seen as trade distorting and economically inefficient. Ironically, the motivation for these policies is much the same agrarian sentiment that motivates sympathy in Australia for farmers in difficulty and which provides the basis for the image cultivated by the National Party in differentiating itself from its opponents and from its coalition partners.

The chapter is set out as follows. The first section describes the characteristics of agrarianism, its history and its Australian manifestation, 'country-mindedness'. The second section draws on the political science literature in examining the role of values in the policy process, and finally the chapter examines agrarianism and politics, specifically their role in sustaining the National Party and insulating rural policy from critical analysis.

Agrarianism and country-mindedness

In his fascinating history of agrarianism, Montmarquet (1989) tracks the idea and its many interpretations from the early classical thinkers, through the French physiocrats and Thomas Jefferson, to Wendell Berry in the twentieth century. His book illustrates the point made by rural sociologists that the agrarian concept is both nebulous and malleable, and that it can be used rhetorically for apparently contradictory purposes (Beus and Dunlap 1994; see, for example, Halpin and Martin 1996:21). The seminal definition of agrarianism is provided by Flinn and Johnson, who identify the following five 'tenets of agrarianism':

- *'farming is the basic occupation on which all other economic pursuits depend for raw materials and food'*
- *'agricultural life is the natural life for man; therefore, being natural, it is good, while city life is artificial and evil'*
- farming delivers the *'complete economic independence of the farmer'*
- *'the farmer should work hard to demonstrate his virtue, which is made possible only though [sic] an orderly society'*
- *'family farms have become indissolubly connected with American democracy'* (Flinn and Johnson 1974:189–94; italics in original).

This description encapsulates two important features of agrarianism. First, agrarianism rests on the belief that agricultural pursuits are inherently worthwhile and wholesome. Montmarquet (1989:viii) summarises this as 'the idea that agriculture and those whose occupation involves agriculture are especially important and valuable elements of society'. Farming pursuits are regarded as conducive to the development of moral behaviour and thinkers such as J. S. Mill and Thomas Jefferson advocated small-scale agriculture for social rather than economic reasons. Mill argued of small-scale peasant agriculture as practised in Europe that 'no other existing state of agricultural economy has so beneficial effect on the industry, the intelligence, the frugality, and prudence of the population...no existing state, therefore is on the whole so favourable both to their moral and physical welfare' (Mill 1893:374).

Griswold (1946:667) explains that, for Jefferson, 'agriculture was not primarily a source of wealth, but of human virtues and traits most congenial to popular self-government. It had a sociological rather than an economic value. This is the dominant note in all his writings on the subject.'

More recently, Wendell Berry (1977:11) linked the demise of small-scale agriculture to the rise of undesirable characteristics of exploitation, waste and fraud, suggesting that modern life had caused a 'disastrous breach...between our bodies and our souls'. His contrast between the exploitative mind and nurturing is consistent with earlier interpretations of agriculture's worth, which extends beyond the economic to the moral. As well as promoting virtue, agricultural activity is seen as valuable because it is regarded as the starting point of civilisation—without settlement, art, culture and other pursuits that depend on large groups of people could not have evolved. Settlement allowed for specialisation. Agriculture, as opposed to hunting and gathering, provided the basis for settlement.

The second important characteristic of agrarianism is that it is half of a dichotomy, the other half of which is non-farm life and which on all counts fails to measure up to the morally superior, if economically inferior, status of farming. Flinn and Johnson (1974:194) refer to the agrarian perception that 'city life is artificial and evil' and they go on to argue that '[w]ithin agrarian belief there is pride, a certain

nobility, in what man accomplishes by the sweat of his brow. There is suspicion about a man who makes a living by using his head and not his hands.'

This dualism was evident in Jefferson's thought. Initially, he hoped that the United States would remain an agrarian society, allowing Europe to house manufacturing activity and cities and their associated social problems. He argued that:

The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. (Cited in Griswold 1946:668)

In the Australian context, Don Aitkin has summed up agrarianism as country-mindedness. The term is of uncertain origin but is traceable to the beginnings of the Country Party in the 1920s. Aitkin's formulation of the characteristics of Australian agrarianism reflects many of the points just discussed: the wholesome nature of agricultural activity and the contrast between the virtues of farming and the unpleasantness of urban life:

(i) Australia depends on its primary producers for its high standards of living, for only those who produce a physical good add to a country's wealth.

(ii) Therefore all Australians, from city and country alike, should in their own interest support policies aimed at improving the position of primary industries.

(iii) Farming and grazing, and rural pursuits generally, are virtuous, ennobling and cooperative; they bring out the best in people.

(iv) In contrast, city life is competitive and nasty, as well as parasitical.

(v) The characteristic Australian is a countryman, and the core elements of the national character come from the struggles of country people to tame their environment and make it productive. City people are much the same the world over.

(vi) For all these reasons, and others like defence, people should be encouraged to settle in the country, not in the city.

...

(viii) But power resides in the city, where politics is trapped in a sterile debate about classes. There has to be a separate political party for country people to articulate the true voice of the nation. (Aitkin 1985:35)

Point five is of particular note given the highly urbanised nature of Australian society and it is also important in the context of the influence of agrarian ideology

on Australian culture. Stehlik et al. (1996) describe the notion that Australians are

essentially rural creatures transplanted against our will in urban metropolises around the eastern seaboard of the continent. To many of us 'the bush' evokes a natural, pristine essentially good place which may be less than the city we live in, but somehow it is still morally our national conscience. We respond emotionally to the ideology of the pioneering spirit, the challenge against the unknown, the concept of 'the rural'.

Popular culture in Australia draws on this type of rural imagery with television programs such as *A Country Practice*, *McLeod's Daughters* and *Blue Heelers* drawing on the rural myth with their portrayals of rugged individuals with hearts of gold facing hardship with stoicism and good humour. Many of these shows include cynical city types won over by the simplicity and basic goodness of rural living. Australian athletes have been dressed in Driza-Bones and Akubras for Olympic opening ceremonies and the Sydney 2000 Olympics drew on rural iconography in its welcome to the world. As Finkelstein and Bourke (2001:46) point out, advertising also draws on the rural–urban contrast, reinforcing this image as 'an enduring and successful element in the formation of Australian culture and identity'.

The rural myth is further strengthened by its links to the other great source of Australian identity: the ANZAC legend. Although it is debatable how accurate the sentiment is, there is a perception that Australia's diggers in World War I came disproportionately from the 'bush' (Botterill 2006:25–6). Farm groups occasionally exploit this link between the bush and the ANZAC legend—the most recent example of which is in a media release by the National Farmers Federation (NFF). Drought-affected farmers in Australia were offered free holidays in New Zealand by the Federated Farmers of New Zealand and the airline Jetstar donated 100 free air tickets to facilitate farmers taking up the offer. When it appeared that farmers might lose their drought-related welfare payments while on their free holiday, the NFF lobbied the government to change the rules. The government complied and the NFF put out a media release announcing the change, including the following statement: 'When times are tough farm communities stick together, and we appreciate our NZ counterparts' understanding and outstanding generosity very much. It is one of the best examples of the ANZAC tradition...digging in and giving each other a hand when it's needed most' (National Farmers Federation 2007).

The role of values in Australian rural policy

As with all policy areas, agricultural policy is developed against a backdrop of conflicting values, such as the differences between environmental and production

values and between importers and exporters (for example, over the stringency of quarantine requirements). In his seminal work on incrementalism, Lindblom (1959) argued that one of the advantages of incremental policy development was the capacity for policy to address values that had been overlooked in earlier iterations. He described the policy process as serial and remedial and he argued that this was an effective way for policy to be developed. He also argued that for this process to work successfully, each value should have a watchdog that focused on particular aspects of the policy to ensure that it was represented. More recently, Thacher and Rein have made a similar argument about strategies for balancing values in policy development. They suggest several approaches that can be adopted to address value conflict. The first of these, 'policy cycling', is similar to Lindblom's serial and remedial incrementalism, suggesting that policymakers 'focus on each value sequentially, emphasizing one value until the destructive consequences for others become too severe to ignore' (Thacher and Rein 2004:463). The second strategy they identify is the construction of 'firewalls' that divide responsibility for different values among institutions 'ensuring that each value has a vigorous champion' (Thacher and Rein 2004); the similarities with Lindblom's watchdogs are clear.

The interesting aspect of these approaches is that the analysis focuses on identifiable values—values that have clear advocates and that can be easily identified in the issues being debated in a particular policy area as different perspectives on complex social problems. Rokeach (1979:55) goes as far as arguing that 'there are no terminal or instrumental values that will be "left over", that are not the focus of specialization by at least one social institution'. An alternative perspective is that some values operate at a deeper cultural level and are not articulated in policy debate. Feldman (1988:418) argues that widely shared core values and beliefs 'may be so pervasive that their presence in everyday politics often goes unnoticed'. Sabatier refers to 'deep core' values that are exogenous variables in policy advocacy and 'are very resistant to change—essentially akin to religious conversion'. They consist of 'fundamental normative and ontological axioms' (Sabatier 1988:144). Williams is one of the few writers who points to explicit values and those that are not:

some values are, indeed, highly explicit, and appear to the social actor as phenomenal entities: the person can state the value, illustrate its application in making judgments, identify its boundaries, and the like. Other standards of desirability are not explicit; and social actors may even resist making them explicit. (Williams 1979:17)

Different mixes of values will deliver different policy outcomes. In Europe, agrarian values are clearly influential in the policy settings of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Ockenden and Franklin (1995:1) argue that 'the CAP provides evidence that agriculture carries a cultural and social significance far

in excess of its economic importance. The policy is neither an afterthought nor an expensive irrelevance, but the manifestation of the unique place of agriculture in the psyche of industrial societies.'

In Australia, production values have dominated in recent years with policy emphasis on productivity improvement and competitiveness. The mix changes over time as different values gain ascendancy in policy debate (Botterill 2004). Rural policy communities are archetypal 'closed' networks (see, for example, Grant and MacNamara 1995; Smith 1992), which have a shared approach to policy and which exclude competing views from the process. The peak Australian farmers' representative body, the NFF, was established in 1979 and from the outset was at the forefront of neo-liberal debate. It has consistently advocated free trade, domestic deregulation and labour market reform and it has extended these policy prescriptions to its own sector. In its 1981 paper *Farm focus: the '80s*, the organisation stated that the 'NFF does not believe that any industry—rural, mining, manufacturing, or tertiary—whether highly protected or not—should be permanently shielded from the forces of economic change. The overall interests of the economy demand that all industries must participate in the inevitable adjustment process' (National Farmers Federation 1981:48).

As Lawrence (1987:79) wrote, in the 1980s, the NFF became 'one of the most vocal proponents of a deregulated economy and a free enterprise agriculture'. It was therefore at home in the agricultural policy community with the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) and the Commonwealth agriculture department, currently the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF). After several decades of highly interventionist agricultural policies in Australia, agricultural economists in the 1960s began to question policies of government intervention in agriculture (see, for example, Lloyd 1970; Makeham and Bird 1969; McKay 1967) and, by the 1980s, neo-liberal approaches to rural policy were firmly entrenched. While agrarian values were clearly articulated in the first half of the twentieth century (see, for example, Chifley 1946), they seemed to disappear from policy settings from the 1970s onwards. Policies have focused on deregulation, structural adjustment and productivity improvement, examples of which include deregulation of the dairy industry, privatisation of the former Australian Wheat Board and changes to regulatory arrangements for the wool industry.

The language of policy statements, however, does not necessarily match the reality of policy implementation and policymakers are not averse to appealing to agrarian sentiment when explaining decisions that might otherwise appear inconsistent with stated policy direction. Within the rural policy community there is no identifiable watchdog for what might be characterised as agrarian values; the main players have for more than two decades pursued neo-liberal policy objectives (Botterill 2005). The absence of a visible agrarian interest,

however, has not meant that these values have disappeared from policy. They remain an important socio-cultural phenomenon and appear to have an important role in protecting rural policy from rigorous critique, thus facilitating the emergence of inconsistencies in approach between rural and non-rural policies. These inconsistencies are disguised either by rhetoric that reflects overall government policy direction while hiding the reality of implementation or by the use of values-based language to justify inconsistencies when they are obvious. The National Party has been particularly effective at using agrarian imagery for this latter purpose and in defence of its position as part of the Australian political landscape.

A good example of the gap between the rhetoric and the reality is the National Drought Policy (NDP). Agreed by Commonwealth and state governments in 1992, the NDP was a watershed in government responses to drought. It followed the removal of drought from the natural disaster relief arrangements and was based on the principle that drought was not a disaster but part of Australia's climate. The NDP was based on principles of self-reliance and risk management and argued that drought was a risk to be managed by farmers like any other risk facing the farm business. The policy included a series of programs aimed at improving farmers' risk-management skills and introduced tax-effective financial risk-management programs aimed at encouraging farmers to build financial reserves on which they could draw in dry years. The policy included an important caveat: it introduced the concept of 'exceptional circumstances' to describe circumstances that were so extreme that even the best manager could not be expected to cope. In these conditions, further government support to farm businesses would be triggered, however, it was available only to businesses that were considered to have a long-term productive future in agriculture. Policymakers were concerned that drought relief not act as a de facto subsidy to otherwise unviable businesses.

In 1994, the NDP was augmented with the creation of a welfare payment, currently called the Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment (ECRP), which was linked to exceptional circumstances declarations and this payment changed the whole tenor of the program. The first major shift towards a more agrarian approach was that the viability test did not apply to the welfare payment—so farms that were ineligible for the business support could be eligible for the welfare payment. This altered the incentive structure of the policy as the availability of the welfare payment made attaining an exceptional circumstances declaration more attractive, essentially undermining the objective of self-reliance and risk management. Instead of being motivated to manage a current dry spell, it was more sensible for farmers to make a case that the dry spell they were experiencing was particularly bad in order to access government support. In 1999, ministers went so far as to change the definition of exceptional

circumstances drought to elevate the impact of drought on income to the threshold criterion ('key indicator') for a declaration (ARMCANZ 1999:63).

Until 2005, the welfare payment had been paid at the same rate as other income-support payments available to the Australian community—for example, the unemployment benefit. In May 2005, the government announced that it was increasing by \$10 000 the amount that a farmer could earn before their drought payment was reduced (Truss 2005), meaning that farmers on drought relief could earn more than twice as much a fortnight as an unemployed person before losing any income support. Farmers are also not subject to any mutual obligation requirements. The May 2005 announcement passed unnoticed by the mainstream media. In its response to the announcement, the NFF continued to use the language of the NDP, noting that 'Australian farmers acknowledged the importance of preparing for, and managing, business climatic risks such as severe drought'. After welcoming the increased level of drought support, the organisation stated:

EC [exceptional circumstances] assistance is not about handouts or propping up marginal farmers, it is a responsible policy that aims to support viable farm businesses to preserve their natural and productive resource base during periods of severe climatic stress, so that they are in a position to rapidly recover and contribute to Australia's export economy. (National Farmers Federation 2005)

This type of apparent contradiction is not uncommon in rural policy debate—using the neo-liberal language of the NDP while welcoming an inequitable increase in support to farmers that is unrelated to economic outcomes.

The privatisation of the statutory Australian Wheat Board provides a further example of rural policy development that has occurred apparently without reference to broader policy approaches. Deregulation of the wheat market began in 1989 with the removal of the Australian Wheat Board's monopoly over the domestic wheat trade. This change occurred in a climate of general industry deregulation, which had been pursued by the Hawke Labor government from 1984. From 1990, the grains industry started a process of strategic planning that included consideration of the future of export marketing arrangements for wheat. The level of urgency associated with this consideration was increased from 1993 when the report into national competition policy (Hilmer et al. 1993) was published, which included a section on the anti-competitive nature of agricultural statutory marketing arrangements and a chapter on monopolies. In 1995, debate within the grains industry became focused on the future structure of the Australian Wheat Board, with a particular focus on the board's export monopoly—the so-called 'single desk'. Discussions and debate about the structure took place largely independently of government with the main players being the peak industry body, the Grains Council of Australia, and the Australian

Wheat Board. The Department of Primary Industries and Energy had a place in the discussions but did not advocate a strong position. This was consistent with the approach taken by consecutive Ministers for Primary Industries and Energy, Senator Bob Collins (Labor) and John Anderson (National). The final model was developed by industry and implemented through two tranches of legislation in 1997 and 1998. The outcome was a privatised body, AWB Limited, which essentially retained the single desk. The government did not drive the privatisation process, the Department of Finance did not have a central role in the process and the objectives for the privatisation were set by the grains industry, not by government. There is little indication that the government took strong action to protect the public asset associated with the export monopoly, marking the process as a 'very peculiar privatisation' (Aulich and Botterill 2007).

The grains industry continued to be treated differently when the legislation that embodied the export monopoly, the Wheat Marketing Act 1989, came due for review under the National Competition Policy (NCP). While the usual practice for NCP reviews was for the Productivity Commission to undertake the review, the Wheat Marketing Act was reviewed by a committee that included the former president of the Grains Council of Australia (Irving et al. 2000). The Productivity Commission made two submissions to the review (Productivity Commission 2000a, 2000b) in which it argued the case for the repeal of the export monopoly. The NCP review, in contrast, recommended that 'the "single desk" be retained until a scheduled review in 2004 by the Wheat Export Authority of the privatised AWB's operation of the "single desk" arrangement' (Irving et al. 2000:8), although it also stated that 'the main purpose and implementation of this scheduled review should be changed so that it provides one final opportunity for a compelling case to be compiled that the "single desk" delivers a net benefit to the Australian community' (Irving et al. 2000:8). The Commonwealth Government rejected this last recommendation. The National Competition Council subsequently found that 'the Government's review of the Wheat Marketing Act was open, independent and rigorous', however, it concluded that 'the Commonwealth Government had not met its [competition principles agreement] clause 4 and 5 obligations¹ arising from the Wheat Marketing Act' (National Competition Council 2003:1.8).

The single-desk arrangements for the wheat industry have come under more general public scrutiny since the Cole Inquiry into the Oil for Food Program and the revelations of AWB Limited's bypassing of the Iraqi sanctions regime (Cole 2006). It is, however, arguable that the interest in this scandal by the mainstream media and commentators was prompted by the possibility that senior ministers were aware of the behaviour rather than a considered critique of the rural policy underpinning the existence of an export monopoly in the hands of a private company.

Agrarianism, politics, policy and the National Party

An important beneficiary of agrarianism is the National Party of Australia, which first entered Australian politics in the early 1920s as the Country Party of Australia. Set up as a voice for rural Australians, the party grew out of farm interest groups that had been established from the mid nineteenth century. Richmond (1978:104) argues that '[m]any country people objected to the Labor Party and its talk of socialisation of land; but they also objected to the city domination of the larger non-Labor parties'.

The early Country Party therefore set out to establish itself as a third force in Australian politics. This position was clearly illustrated by the words of the first Country Party leader in the Commonwealth Parliament, W. J. McWilliams, on 10 March 1920:

The Country Party is an independent body quite separate from the Nationalists and the Labor Party. We occupy our own rooms. We have appointed our own leader and other officers. We take no part in the deliberations of the Ministerialists or of the Opposition. We intend to support measures of which we approve and hold ourselves absolutely free to criticize or reject proposals with which we do not agree. Having put our hands to the wheel we set the course of our voyage. There has been no collusion; we crave no alliance; we spurn no support; we have no desire to harass the government, nor do we wish to humiliate the opposition. (McWilliams 1920:250)

In spite of these protestations of independence, the party was, by 1922, in coalition with the Nationalists and it used its role in subsequent coalitions very effectively to gain cabinet positions and policy influence out of all proportion to its electoral performance. With dominance of the agriculture and trade portfolios, the National Party has managed to pursue farmers' interests effectively. Through the interventionist years, agrarian objectives were pursued openly. More recently, these values have been protected less transparently while still being drawn on rhetorically to retain National Party support. Apart from a general inclination to look after rural interests, specific National Party policies are not easy to identify. Woodward (1985:61) has described National Party policy as 'a strange blend of conservatism coupled with support for radical government intervention in certain economic and social areas'. In recent years, the dominance of the neo-liberal paradigm across government policy has blunted the party's capacity to deliver largesse to its constituency, however, it has achieved some expensive concessions to buffer the impact of these policies. For example, deregulation of the dairy industry in 2000 was accompanied by a \$1.74 billion structural adjustment package, funded by a levy on milk, which provided 'substantial adjustment payments' to dairy farmers (Truss 2000). This was augmented with packages to assist communities in dairy-farming areas. A further

\$159 million was added to the package in 2001. The Australian National Audit Office (2004:14) reports that 'some 30 000 farmers were granted [Dairy Structural Adjustment Program] payment rights, with an average payment right of \$54 300'. A further \$100 million was allocated to 7735 farmers (Australian National Audit Office 2004:16) under a Supplementary Dairy Assistance Package. This supplementary package was introduced to provide 'an additional one-off payment to eligible dairy producers who were severely affected by deregulation, and whose eligibility for DSAP was unintentionally limited' (Australian National Audit Office 2004:26).

While the National Party's rhetoric continues to present its objectives in terms of being the sole true representative of farmers and rural people, in recent years that claim has become less convincing. Verrall et al. (1985:9) observe that 'the National Party has by no means a monopoly of the conservative rural vote' and they suggest that 'National Party seats are not typically rural and indeed...there is no typical National Party electorate' (p. 11). Nevertheless, the National Party's web site (<<http://www.nationals.org.au/About/values.asp>>) makes the claim that '[w]ithout [t]he Nationals, government policy would be determined by a substantial majority of city-based parliamentarians'. The implication is the very agrarian notion that city folk do not understand the 'bush' and cannot be trusted to protect rural interests. As has been argued elsewhere (Botterill 2006), while farmers and their representatives are not reticent about engaging in debates about non-farm policy, they are quick to cast doubts on the views of rural policy commentators who do not have direct ties to the bush. The Nationals also reflect the idea expressed in Aitkin's view of country-mindedness that what is good for the bush is good for the country. As Jaensch (1997:299) has argued:

As populists, the members of the party believe fundamentally in the virtue of rural people, rural interests and rural morality, not only for rural areas, but as a model for the whole country. It logically follows, then, that any actions which will protect, support and bolster rural people and interests are justified for the good of the nation.

The National Party taps into these sentiments very effectively. Nelson and Garst (2005) have looked at the role of values-based communication 'as a means to signify political identity and establish community with audience members'. They describe this as a 'social purpose of values-based language' and explore the impact this language has on the listening audience. They argue that 'values, like political parties, serve as important foundations for a citizen's political identity' (Nelson and Garst 2005:490). Brewer (2001) has also examined the issue of value framing in political communication and the links between value-based political messages and core values. He argues that:

value frames...share a feature that sets them apart from other sorts of messages: [t]hey associate an issue with a core value. Thus, a value frame

may shape opinion in a more subtle way as well: [i]t may encourage audience members to form opinions on the basis of the specific value invoked by the frame. (Brewer 2001:45)

In his study of parties and party systems, Sartori (1976:329) described the use of imagery in party promotion, noting that 'parties communicate to mass electorates via party images and...much of their electoral strategy is concerned with building up the appropriate image for the public from which they expect votes'. While the effectiveness of the National Party at engaging its supporters is not surprising, this chapter argues that the broader community shares the values being drawn on—thus generating support from a wider constituency than the party's small electoral base would suggest. The National Party is very effective at using images in its political messages that tap into agrarian values, among its own supporters and across the wider community. In Parliament, National Party representatives play up the urban–rural divide. Verrall et al. (1985:8) see this rural–urban cleavage as 'an essential and key notion in understanding Australian politics' and it has been used regularly as a basis for attack on the Nationals' political opponents. In a press release, Agriculture Minister, Peter McGauran (2006b), began his attack on the opposition spokesman with '[t]he Shadow Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has today reminded rural and regional Australia how little the Labor Party knows about drought'. Later in the same release, he again made the point that Labor was ignorant about rural Australia, stating: 'If Mr O'Connor had any idea of rural and regional Australia, he would know only too well that this region is part of the South West Slopes and Plains EC declaration' (McGauran 2006b). In apparent contradiction to this statement, but still playing on the city–rural divide, the minister had responded earlier in the year to the failure of O'Connor to win preselection for his seat with the following statement:

The forced exit of Labor's Agriculture spokesman, Gavan O'Connor, from Federal Parliament will be a serious loss to rural and regional Australia, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Peter McGauran, said today.

Mr McGauran said that, as a former dairy farmer, Mr O'Connor was the only member of the Labor Opposition to have a practical understanding of farming.

'Mr O'Connor has been a lone voice for farming inside a city-centric and union-dominated Labor Party,' he said.

'His dumping at the hands of factional bosses will rob Labor of the only practical understanding of farming and regional policy it has.

'It highlights Labor's disregard for farmers by so unceremoniously sending its only ally into the political wilderness.' (McGauran 2006a)

Another National Party Senator described O'Connor as 'the quintessential city slicker. He rarely gets out of Melbourne, unless he is coming to Canberra, and he is trying to tell this place that he cares about rural and regional Australia!' (Nash 2005:97). Consistency of argument is clearly not important but appeal to the agrarian value frame is.

Although the long-term future of the National Party has been the subject of continuing speculation and discussion (see, for example, Aitkin 1973; Green 2001; Jaensch 1997; Malcolm 1989; Richmond 1978), the adoption of agrarian imagery by other political parties would not be a simple undertaking. Although the Liberal and Labor Parties have held and continue to hold rural-based electorates, they cannot simply pick up the National Party's mantle as the representatives of rural interests. Research by Nelson and Garst (2005) suggests that it is risky for a party to appeal to values with which it is not generally associated. They suggest that values-based political messages are persuasive but these messages are not well received if they come from an unexpected quarter. The research found that '[r]ival party speakers...were punished when they used unexpected language' (Nelson and Garst 2005:510). Brewer (2001:59) also cites research that finds that 'citizens may reject a frame when they perceive that it originates from the "wrong" side of the ideological or partisan fence'. This suggests that Labor Party politicians who use agrarian language are more likely to evoke suspicion and hostility than a positive response. The Coalition has tapped into this on occasion. For example, in a parliamentary debate in 1996, a Liberal member of the newly elected Howard Government stated:

I am pleased to see that the [M]ember for Hotham [Simon Crean] is here too, because he had a time as the Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, as some of you may well remember. They bought him a pair of moleskins and some elastic sided boots, and got him a Driza-Bone, with the tag still hanging off the back of it after six months. (Ronaldson 1996:669)

This imagery is effective at closing down debate. If you are not a farmer, you don't understand farming; ergo you are unqualified to comment on farm policy. When this is coupled with a general sympathy for farmers anchored in a residual agrarianism in the broader community, it creates an environment in which there is no political advantage to be gained from criticising farm policy and thus policy settings receive little analysis.

Conclusions

Williams (1979:26–7) argues:

To be able to infer causal sequences from values to other items, we need some evidence that the value or value system was present prior to or simultaneously with the explicandum, that its presence is associated

with a heightened frequency of the phenomena to be explained, and that there is a theoretically compelling connection.

The existence of agrarian values in Western culture is well established. These values have a long history and, although they have been used flexibly to support different objectives, their basic components are well documented. More research is needed on the causal link between agrarianism and policy outcomes, particularly in Australia, where the link is not explicit; however, the frequent reference to agrarian imagery by the National Party suggests the values are influential and, as Hutcheon (1972:184) suggests, deeply held values might 'not [be] themselves amenable to direct observation and measurement' and might be identifiable only by inference. A plausible explanation of the inconsistencies between rural policy and other analogous areas of government policy is the lack of analytical attention given to the former, which allows some areas of farm policy to develop with limited reference to broader government policy approaches. This chapter provides the examples of the provision of income support to farmers on a more generous basis than to other groups in the community and the unusual privatisation and subsequent National Competition Policy Review of the AWB. There is scope for further theoretical consideration to be given to the influence of deep socio-cultural values on policy.

This chapter has argued that Australian rural policy is influenced by agrarian sentiments that are common to many Western societies. At times in Australia's history, this agrarianism has been explicit. In recent years, as other paradigms have dominated policymaking, agrarian influence has been less obvious; however, it remains evident. Agrarian imagery is used in political debate and is important in differentiating the National Party from its electoral competitors, including its coalition partners. It is also effective in limiting critical analysis of policy settings. The public policy literature discusses the policy process as a balancing act, with decision makers confronting conflicting values that they must weigh up in arriving at policy positions. This literature generally assumes that values are explicit and that they are represented in the process by advocates such as interest groups or political parties. It is argued that this interpretation is too limited and does not recognise the influence of deep socio-cultural values that are so embedded in the community that their existence is not necessarily recognised. Agrarianism in Australia is such a value.

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Endnotes

¹ Clause 4 of the competition principles agreement refers to structural reform of public monopolies and Clause 5 addresses legislation review and reform.