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Rural Policy Survey, 1986: The Battle for the Agenda[†]

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This article describes the federal government's rural policy activities during 1986. It emphasizes the interactions between rural and other policy areas and the prevailing influence of "politics". The Labor Government's rural policy-making in 1986 was preoccupied with the ramifications of the intensifying contemporary "rural crisis". This overshadowed the continuing, incremental additions to and reformations of the implementation of agricultural policy and processes that are integral to its policy management. Institutional and "political" constraints on federal policy also absorbed much of the government's attention. The year was dominated by a struggle between the Government and the National Farmers' Federation for the "agenda" of rural/agricultural policy. Within its self-imposed macro-economic constraints, the Government applied, with mixed success, a number of strategies intended to defuse the rural crisis. Somewhat surprisingly Labor ended the year in a better political position than objective economic and market circumstances would seem to warrant.

1. Introduction

Rural policy-making in 1986 was primarily shaped by the "rural crisis". At the beginning of the year farmer militancy, which had been gathering since the July 1985 Canberra demonstration, appeared determined to sweep away the federal Labor Government. In addition the market situation for most of Australia's rural exports worsened during the year, forcing a constant preoccupation with the trade implications of policy. Yet, through a combination of luck and some good management, the Labor Government ended the year, if not in better political array, at least no worse off in its efforts to control rural policy and its associated political disaffection.

This survey describes how the Labor Government carried out its rural policy

with this modicum of success. Apart from dealing with Labor's reaction to the rural crisis, it also describes the interrelated content of the "normal" day-to-day recurrent administration of primary industry policy.

Policy-making and implementation are not discrete activities. Nor does any policy area exist totally outside any interaction with other government policies. So any policy "field" comprises a complicated welter of interrelationships between policy formation and application, and between that policy set and other policies. To compound the confusion, the steady, incremental administration of a policy field can be dramatically disrupted by unforeseen political or economic events. Given these propositions, it is thus convenient arbitrarily to divide the description of any policy area into "recurrent" and "intermittent" aspects of policy-making.

Recurrent policies, like the evolution of administrative arrangements or the preparation of budget estimates, are those that occur either with regularity or predictability. They deal with problems that are largely foreseeable and are, at least to an extent, embedded in the institutional and administrative structures of policy-making and implementation. They encompass the whole policy field. Intermittent policy-making, often popularly described as "crisis management", is more reactive—to events that are usually both unexpected and

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probably beyond the immediate control of policy-makers. Intermittent policy questions arise with a dramatic disruption of one area within the broader policy field. These policy problems are more "political", in the conventional sense of that word. Intermittent policy challenges, by definition, attract significant media, client group and public attention, further compounding management difficulties for those responsible (principally politicians rather than bureaucrats, though the latter may have to find the answers!).

The field of rural policy in 1986 exhibited both aspects of this dichotomous policy management model. But though these aspects are conceptually distinct, they often intersect in practice. The exigencies of intermittent crisis management can profoundly effect, even divert, the planned development of recurrent policies and *vice versa*; the Labor Government's reaction to the evolving rural crisis was circumscribed by the constraints imposed by its planned macro-economic fiscal and monetary policies.

2. Recurrent Rural Policy-Making

The rural crisis dominated rural policy in 1986 because, unlike most instances of intermittent crisis, it involved a considerable part of the rural policy field. In those circumstances any recurrent policy implementation had to overcome the inhibiting effects of the preoccupation with that crisis. Nevertheless, important incremental additions to federal primary industry and rural-related programs were made. For convenience these can be described under five headings: infrastructure/institutional developments; marketing organization; advisory processes; fiscal developments; and industry regulation and management.

2.1 Infrastructure/Institutional Development

This area featured personnel as well as institutional changes. The year also saw the continued revamping of the structures carrying out rural research begun in 1985.

Departmental Reorganization

In February the secretary of the Department of Primary Industry (DPI), Duthie, was replaced by the head of the Economic Planning Advisory Council (EPAC), Miller. The move resulted from the Government's increasing political concern with the rural situation and reflected both Kerin and Hawke's¹ desires both for a more activist, responsive department and better utilization of its personnel. Miller's expertise on grain industry economics was a secondary factor in his appointment. Following this, DPI underwent a reorganization of its division structure, and also saw the creation of a new Bureau of Rural Science within the department. The new Bureau was to focus DPI's scientific capacities. The department's divisional structure was further streamlined by the formation of the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service—taking over animal and plant quarantine functions from the Australian Animal and Health Quarantine Service, and all major functions of the Export Inspection Service. Other important changes were the creation of the rural policy division and the corporate services division, these superseding the development and co-ordination and the management divisions respectively.

Corporate services was to centralize policy development and liaison and co-ordination functions more closely under the control of the Secretary. The new rural policy division strengthened DPI's inter-governmental negotiating capacities, reflecting the trade priority as Australia's dollar depreciated.

Within the Department of Trade (DOT) this emphasis also led to changes designed to further the marketing of Australia's rural produce. As well, DPI, Trade and Foreign Affairs established a high-level, joint group of officials to facilitate a co-operative approach to bilateral agricultural trade questions. This group has prepared the groundwork for future planning of Australia's primary produce marketing. In

¹ Minister for Primary Industry, and Prime Minister, respectively.

1987 the status and powers of the group are to be expanded. Rural industries were also well represented on the Trade Negotiating Advisory Group set up for the multilateral trade negotiations round.

Research Structures

Following the passage of the Rural Industries Research Act the previous year, 1986 saw a major expansion and rationalization of research bodies, with the stress on "practical" research that would assist the export drive. This was one of the reasons for the Bureau of Rural Science, which was to institute a focus for DPI's scientific functions as well as liaising with the appropriate state authorities.

In April the government announced the membership of the Australian Special Rural Research Council (ASRRC). This council initiated a process of creating 14 industry-based research councils, with the avowed aim eventually to achieve a research expenditure level of 0.5 per cent of gross value of rural production. In October the ASRRC outlined its 1986-87 program and its first 5-year development plan. For the current fiscal year outlays were to be \$1.5 million (versus \$700,000 in 1985-86). The council's stated research priorities were improving economic efficiency, research into new plant and animal industries, and the training of research workers. The Wool Research and Development Council was the progenitor of the rationalization of existing industry research bodies. The Grape and Wine Research Council, proclaimed in October, was an example of the reorganization of those areas of product research previously without statutory funding.

In the past the Government's rural economic research agency, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), has been criticised by farmers and state departments' field officers for the impracticality of much of its research and for being isolated from the everyday concerns of farmers. The government was sensitive to these charges, as indicated by the 1986 personnel changes in the bureau.

The resignation of Stoeckel as director led to the appointment of Bain, whose merits (apart from his intimate knowledge of primary industry regulation, and marketing and trade negotiation) included 5 years' experience as a stock agent.

2.2 Marketing Organisation

The continuing problems with the balance of payments leant urgency to the improvement of Australia's trade performance. In the rural policy sphere this affected marketing regulations, saw the encouragement of new export products, and the reorganisation of statutory marketing authorities. As a related development, the necessities of increasing trade provided impetus for the expansion of the Department of Trade's agricultural commodity-oriented overseas representation.

The most crucial market regulatory change was to remove most of the existing controls on livestock exports. This substantially conformed with the suggestions of a report to the government by the Australian Meat and Livestock Industry Policy Council. The export permit system was abolished, except for merino breeding animals and breeding materials. Certification and documentation procedures for export inspection were simplified, and inspection charges were to be overhauled to more accurately reflect the cost structures of each class of livestock. As this policy area is administered on behalf of the Commonwealth by the States, these reforms will take some time to implement.

New products are an obvious means of negating the effects of the declining terms of trade for Australia's traditional rural products. Developing new markets can also remove domestic gluts. In June a Grape Export Committee was set up with the intention of improving Australia's table grape export performance. Some funding was promised from adjustment assistance funds allocated to the dried vine fruit industry.

Statutory Marketing Authorities (SMAs)

As part of the general reform of the public sector, begun with the earlier Australian Public Service reforms, January 1986 saw the announcement of new general policy guidelines covering the then existing ten primary industry statutory marketing authorities (SMAs). This initiative resulted from the Government's intention to make all its business authorities more economically efficient as well as responsive to governmental direction. However, a lack of responsiveness was not seen as so great a problem for the primary industry SMAs, which have traditionally seen considerable ministerial intervention. Rather the new guidelines sought to augment the autonomy of the SMAs, this prompted by a particular concern to improve their economic performance. This was more consistent with the deregulatory policies that the Government had applied to other sectors of the economy.

The five key principles of the new guidelines emphasized the SMAs' business-like nature, and their boards' corporate autonomy and accountability mainly to their industries.

The guidelines also provided that where the producer organization was the defined consultative body for the marketing authority, substantial funding (up to 50 per cent) could be provided to fund the producer body. This mechanism was consistent with the Minister's predilection for the incorporation of producer groups into the policy-making process.

This new-found autonomy will probably not be without complications. Tensions on these authorities between producers' representatives and commercially-minded management will persist.

During 1986, the Government committed itself to major reform of the marketing structures and arrangements of the wool, dairy, pig meat, honey, and wheat industries.

Following the first review of the *Wool Industry Act* since 1972, proposed new administrative arrangements for the industry were announced in November.

These concentrated on delimiting the roles of the Wool Corporation and the Wool Council, giving the former more day-to-day autonomy and the council a supervisory role. The administrative changes are to be legislated for in 1987. The Australian Honey Board was also the subject of similar restructuring, to be implemented when the present board's tenure ends in 1987. The Wheat Marketing Amendment Act, passed in June, similarly amended several Acts relating to wheat marketing, and gave the Wheat Board more commercial autonomy.

Greater difficulties have dogged the restructuring of the dairy industry. But after 3 years of negotiations between the federal Government and the individual State Governments and industries (plus the defeat of an earlier attempt by the Senate in 1985), changes to dairy marketing arrangements and the Australian Dairy Corporation were enacted. The reforms will supposedly reduce over-production, improve the product mix, and generally make the industry more equitable, deregulated and market-oriented. The Government has undertaken to monitor the new system, with major reviews to take place in consultation with the industry and the Dairy Corporation in 1988-89 and 1991-92.

In mid-October Kerin introduced legislation to set up an Australian Pork Corporation as part of the restructuring of statutory arrangements for the pig industry. The corporation will supplant the Pork Promotion Committee and will have wide marketing powers. Following Kerin's "corporatist" pattern, an Australian Pig Industry Policy Council is also foreshadowed.

An agricultural marketing focus was evident in two significant overseas appointments in 1986. In March Dawkins² appointed Australia's first Agricultural Counsellor to the Australian embassy in Tokyo. And Duthie (Miller's predecessor

² Minister for Trade

as DPI Secretary) was appointed, with ambassadorial rank, as Australia's special trade envoy to the European Community (EC). Duthie was to deal directly with European Community member governments, rather than just the commission. This appointment, together with the BAE's CAP report (Stoeckel 1985), led to the piqued community's secretariat cancelling its regular ministerial meetings due later in the year in Canberra.

The foreign policy aspects of agricultural trade were highlighted by Australia's decision not to join the United States of America-inspired trade boycott of Libya (which would have reduced our live sheep trade) and by the signing of a co-operation treaty with the Soviet Union in November, the first treaty Australia has entered into with that country for over a decade.

2.3 Advisory Processes

The government sought advice for two main reasons: either to achieve better policy development and co-ordination, or to control the debate in particular policy areas. In the former case, the advisory mechanism was more likely to be a committee of government or industry officials, in the latter instances statutory bodies were more often used. Trade imperatives again dominated developments in the administrative co-ordination of the Government's agricultural advisory processes. The major statutory advisor continued to be the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC), which presented several reports of import to the agricultural sector during 1986.

Administrative Advisory Developments

Following the rural White Paper in April (Kerin 1986), the Government convened a high level group comprising senior officials, representatives of key statutory marketing authorities, and the rural producing and exporting community, to advise it on bilateral agricultural trade policy. In June, chaired by the Secretary of Trade, the first meeting of that group took place to specify objectives and develop a

comprehensive action plan for improving Australia's agricultural trade performance.

Other departments complemented DPI's activities in overcoming the adverse terms of trade. For example, in October (Industry, Technology and Commerce Minister) Button established a specialist Anti-dumping Tribunal to improve the administrative capacity needed in handling dumping issues. A professional staff of about ten, mainly drawn from Button's department, was to formulate its own guidelines to test injury and whether or not duty should be applied.

Institutional Advisory Developments

Perhaps the most important institutional innovation in 1986 was the creation of the Rural and Allied Industries Council (RAIC).

Announced in the April White Paper (Kerin 1986), it was not until mid-October that the membership of the council had been determined: Kerin as chair; Crean (Australian Council of Trade Unions President); McLachlan (National Farmers' Federation President); Dillon (Professor of Farm Management, University of New England); Connell (chairman of Rothwell's merchant bank); and Vaughan (chairman and managing director of Dalgety). Miller, the DPI secretary, became the council's executive officer. Kerin said the Government wanted expert advice in devising rural sector policies and disclaimed any description of the RAIC as a "corporatist" peak council. Despite this, the emphasis upon broad representation—including from non-farm group areas such as industrial relations, finance, processing, transport, marketing and storage—and the stress upon consensual dispute settlement, mark the council as potentially the rural equivalent of EPAC. The inaugural meeting was held in December, and the main topics discussed were interest rates and international markets.

Some statutory initiatives in co-operation with the states—as, for example, for the Murray/Darling and in the area of soil conservation—are partial exceptions

to the scheme of agenda control by the creation of such bodies as positioned above.

During the year the federal Government and the governments of N.S.W., Victoria and South Australia foreshadowed the creation of a Murray/Darling Basin Commission. Although 40% of Australia's agricultural produce is derived from the Murray/Darling Basin, it faces severe environmental problems of salinity and land degradation. Late in August the first meeting of the Murray/Darling Basin Ministerial Council was held to examine these problems and to consider expanding the existing Murray River Commission into the Murray/Darling Basin Commission. It has been mooted that the new commission will oversee, not just water management, but all land and environment matters.

1986 also saw the inaugural meeting of the joint Federal/State Australian Soil Conservation Council. The Australian Conservation Foundation and the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) were invited as observers, perhaps to assist Kerin's attempts to overcome Treasury resistance to expenditure in this area.

Official Inquiries/Industry Assistance

A number of IAC interim and final reports of relevance to rural matters were released in 1986. The IAC continued to play an ambivalent role in rural policy advising, being an activator of and an arena for policy issues and conflict, as well as an institutional mechanism for government in deflecting political pressures. By carefully phrasing IAC inquiry terms of reference, governments shape the discussion agenda of policy.

The year began with the reports on the vegetable and vegetable products industry. These proposed marked reductions in tariff assistance over a two year period, which was consistent with general governmental policy directions. But the reports stimulated the formation of the Australian Vegetable Industry Council (AVIC), which lobbied against their major

recommendations. The Government held talks with the AVIC to discuss the recommendations and, resulting from these discussions, proposals were to be put to Cabinet in early 1987.

One spin-off of this inquiry came from its criticisms of Australia's international air freight policy, the IAC arguing that the policy's main objective seemed to be to limit effective competition to protect Qantas revenues. Kerin supported this argument and had some minor successes in encouraging changes in the Aviation Department's policy (see 2.5 below).

In July the IAC released a report recommending a bounty of 12.5 per cent on Australian-manufactured cultivation machinery, to replace the 15 per cent tariff on imports. The government commitment to reduce the costs to farmers of industry protection measures shaped this IAC inquiry. In late October Button introduced the appropriate legislation, giving effect to an undertaking in Kerin's April White Paper, though the Budget had by then cut the level of this assistance to 10 per cent.

The tactics of political displacement were also seen in the crop and rainfall insurance and rice industry inquiries. The crop insurance report was released in July; its conclusion that there was no compelling evidence to justify subsidization of crop or rainfall insurance schemes legitimized the Government's disinclination to subsidization. In August, as a result of ricegrowers' complaints about United States of America (U.S.A.) dumping on the world market, the Government asked the IAC to inquire into the industry's needs for short-term assistance. In October the IAC released an interim report recommending against short-term assistance on efficiency grounds, arguing that there would be no significant loss of resources from the industry as most milling and marketing decisions for the 1986 crop had already been made and the 1987 crop sown. The Government accepted the IAC's recommendations, but sought to minimize any political damage by requiring the IAC to report further on the 1988 crop.

The use of the IAC to deflect the more importunate demands of industry was again adopted with the citrus inquiries. In November the IAC released an interim report on the citrus industry which recommended against special short-term assistance and industry requests for both an increase in tariff protection and a return to sales tax exemption for fruit juice drinks that contained at least 25 per cent Australian product. The Australian Citrus Growers' Federation responded by asking the Government to ignore the IAC's recommendations, saying that the industry needed at least 18 months to restructure. The Government decided against further increases in tariff assistance. However, the automatic reduction in the tariff which occurred on 10 December was reversed less than a week later. The Federal Government also proposed matching state funding for carry-on loans to citrus producers under Part B of the Rural Adjustment Scheme.

The complexity of the politics of many rural-related issues, and the consequent political utility of official/statutory inquiries, was nowhere better demonstrated than over the issue of the costs of freight handling. One of the reasons for the removal of the Executive Director of the Grains Council, Wearing, was his persistent public criticisms of the costs and inefficiencies of grain handling, transport and storage. For this issue, apart from the Grains Council, the sensitivities of the trade unions and various State governments were also significant complications.

In his April package Kerin announced a Royal Commission into the domestic transport, handling and storage of wheat. The Government said that Royal Commission status was given the inquiry because of the complexity of the issues and the need to obtain all the evidence required to develop optimal solutions. The main problem to be overcome before the commission's establishment was to get the relevant States to agree to the inquiry. Opposition to it came principally from the State bulk handling and railway authorities

especially the Western Australian and Queensland authorities. They feared embarrassing disclosures of high costs and inefficiencies, with little prospect of compensating political benefit. To circumvent this opposition, the Government announced that the Royal Commission would concentrate on future arrangement rather than on any defects of the existing system. The commission will report in July 1987.

2.4 Fiscal Developments

This was an area in which the government was under considerable political pressure to emulate its conservative predecessors in "solving" problems in the rural sector by expanding government expenditures. The parlous state of agriculture in a period of market crisis added to these pressures. The Government's difficulty was that to "pork barrel" the rural sector would reverse its macro-economic strategy of reducing dependence on monetary policy in favour of the fiscal discipline of the trilogy. Increasing the deficit would probably cause further inflationary depreciation of the dollar, necessitating even greater wage discounting than already anticipated in the budget. Leaving aside the resulting higher interest rates, farmers (and miners) might benefit from a declining dollar. But for Labor the electoral returns were likely to be negative. However, within the constraints of its macro-economic strategy, the Government did maintain its rural-related expenditures. But it did so within well-defined objectives of augmenting the long-term efficiency of Australian agriculture, resisting difficulty here is to separate those actions that were a result of the intermittent political management of the rural crisis (discussed at 3.2 below) and those that were more consistent with the recurrent implementation of the Government's long-term rural policies. Assuming such distinction is not artificial, the government's recurrent fiscal policies for the rural sector can be described under the headings of budgetary, rural adjustment, and marketing expenditure measures.

The 1986–87 Budget

Because it maintained outlays on the rural sector despite considerable cutbacks elsewhere, the budget received a reasonable reception from most farmer organizations. However, four particular decisions were criticised: fertiliser subsidies; export inspection charges; and the taxation of wine and fruit juice products.

Criticism of the withdrawal of the subsidy on imported fertilisers argued that it imposed higher costs and benefitted only small, inefficient monopolies which did not produce the products demanded by farmers. The budget continued the Government's policy to seek 50 per cent cost recovery for inspection services, and most rates rose from 1 October (with the exception of the meat export charge). Discussions continued with the meat industry on the feasibility of a fee-for-service charging arrangement to encourage additional cost efficiencies and services.

Another contentious budgetary measure was the rise in the sales tax on wine from 10 per cent to 20 per cent. This decision was part of the Government's policy to manipulate taxes to reduce the price discrimination against beer, in particular low-alcohol beers. Kerin justified this impost by the much lower tax rates on wine than on other beverages, arguing that taxes still accounted for under 15 per cent of the retail price of wine, less than half the rates on beer and spirits.

The 10 per cent sales tax on previously exempt fruit juice products (products with at least 25 per cent Australian fruit juice content) antagonised the Australian Citrus Industry Council. In its defence the Government pointed to the IAC inquiry (see above) and claimed that, if the tax exemption had continued, it would have raised the industry's overall protection to around 72 per cent from its current level of 47 per cent.

Rural Adjustment

The Government has consistently maintained that the Rural Adjustment Scheme (RAS) is the key policy instrument

to alleviate structural pressures on the rural sector. In the 1986/87 Budget the RAS received the increase in subsidy funding of \$22 million promised in the April White Paper, thereby allowing the states to lend approximately \$220 million at subsidized interest rates.

Much of the rural adjustment policy of 1986 was announced in the April White Paper, and is here classified as intermittent crisis management (see 3.2 below). But there were some activities in this area that are more obviously in the nature of recurrent rural adjustment administration.

In March the Minister announced an additional \$600,000 for interest subsidy for the remainder of that financial year to meet immediate financial needs under the Rural Adjustment Scheme. This allowed the States to lend a further \$25 million—for debt reconstruction, farm build-up, and farm improvement—to producers with promise of long-term viability. In September adjustment assistance for the wine grape industry was boosted by an additional \$3 million for the vine-pull scheme, this funding being on a two dollars-for-one basis with the participating states.

Marketing

Outlays in this sphere are principally for market development and surveys. The importance attached to agricultural marketing was shown in the August budget, when agricultural marketing expenditures were increased even though marketing programs for manufacturing were cut back.

Market surveys are an activity of growing importance in an environment of tightening international markets. These surveys are carried out regularly for the fisheries and other industries. A natural expansion of these occurred in February, when the Government gave \$400,000 in special grants to the Australian Meat and Live-stock Corporation to finance one of the most comprehensive market surveys undertaken to date. These surveys, in both the U.S.A. and Japan, were the first

projects approved under the government's four-year, \$7 million meat and livestock marketing program first outlined in 1985.

2.5 Industry Regulation/Industry Management

We have arbitrarily differentiated industry regulation and management. In the former case the DPI is not necessarily the regulatory authority. And it may not have significant, direct involvement in the industry, though the regulatory process itself has profound consequences for the rural sector. In the management case the DPI has direct regulatory authority, and considerable personnel committed to the control of the relevant industry. In 1986 the important regulatory matters were international and domestic freight arrangements, fertilizers, and plant variety rights, while fisheries and forestry issues predominated in the DPI's industry management activities. The fertilizer issue also demonstrates the blurred boundary between recurrent and intermittent policy-making.

Industry Regulation

Many of the improvements in regulating Australia's transport industries during 1986, though formally the responsibility of DOT and not directly involving DPI, benefited primary producers. First amongst these was the continuing improvements in waterfront efficiency resulting from the Webber Task Force into Shore Based Shipping Costs. The work of this Task Force was complemented by the December launching of a national Waterfront Strategy. This strategy was jointly negotiated between the relevant trade unions and industry with the Ministers of Transport (Morris) and Employment and Industrial Relations (Willis), who both described it as the most significant cargo handling development since containerization. December also saw the establishment of the Rail Industry Council, comprising representatives from railway authorities, unions and State governments. The council was charged with developing a strategy to improve the efficiency, viability and competitiveness of Australia's railways. Both measures have

the potential to reduce hitherto excessive off-farm costs in the long term.

As mentioned above (see 2.3), the incremental liberalization of international air freight policy during the year more actively involved DPI. This matter particularly concerned developing new primary industries, especially horticulture, which had been promised its own Corporation in the April White Paper. The principal changes to air freight policy in 1986 were the broadening of the definition of "primary produce" and the change in the regulations that allowed, after produce-carrying flights had reached 60 per cent capacity, the carriage of livestock or general cargo on the same flight. This will assist operators to sustain charter flights serving primary producers. The Government presaged a review of the effect of the changes after the 1986-87 season.

In October the Government introduced legislation for a plant variety rights (PVR) scheme for Australia. In support the Minister drew attention to various IAC inquiries—into Rural Research in 1976, Apples and Pears in 1985, and Vegetables and Vegetable Products in 1986—all of which advocated such action. Earlier in the year the independent inquiry by Professor Lazenby (Vice-Chancellor, University of Tasmania) had also endorsed the introduction of PVR legislation. Plant variety rights were supposed to enhance Australia's export competitiveness and give farmers access to new plant varieties. Acknowledging the political impact of some of the PVR's critics, the Minister's second reading speech emphasised that the legislation contained mechanisms to protect consumers, and that it would be reviewed after five years of operation.

PVR was an issue for the cognoscenti, a few administrators and scientific advisers, plus some small, though active, pressure groups.

During 1986 the regulation of the fertilizer industry attracted more public attention, much of it politically detrimental to the Government. As

mentioned above, the Government had courted unpopularity by imposing "anti-dumping" duties on imported fertilizers. Severe embarrassment for the Government resulted when in January the Western Australian Labor Government, convinced (incorrectly) that it faced electoral demise at the hands of the "rural revolt", persuaded the Commonwealth to exempt WA from these new duties. Farmers and State governments elsewhere were understandably incensed and reacted with demands that they too receive exemption. After a meeting between McLachlan and Hawke on 21 January, this was granted.

To restore some credibility to this policy-making process, it was decided to review the application of the *Customs Tariff (Anti-dumping) Act*. In February Button announced an inquiry headed by Professor Gruen (Economics, Australian National University). When released in April the Gruen Report suggested radical changes to the Act and criticised its use as a *de facto* protectionist measure. In October the Government rejected Gruen's recommendation that section 5 (9) of the Act be repealed. It opted instead to amend the Act by introducing a provision that anti-dumping duties would cease after three successive years of operation (although a new application for action would be permissible). Concurrently Kerin sought a customs review of the fertilizer issue; this is due in the first half of 1987.

Industry Management

The management of Australia's fisheries was probably the least contentious of the Government's primary industry activities in 1986. Changes to fishing research programs were implemented, and both the incremental improvement of existing and the introduction of new fisheries management programs continued without controversy. Also, in October fishing agreements with Taiwan and Korea were renewed.

In August a major revision of the funding and administration of the Fishing Industry Research Trust Account (FIRTA)

was disclosed. The Fishing Industry Research Committee was to be replaced by the Fishing Industry Research Council, which would have industry representation and assume responsibility for the FIRTA. Legislation to authorize these changes was to be presented to Federal Parliament in 1987. As part of the overall improvement of fisheries management, the Government decided to extend the fisheries adjustment program to all Australian fisheries. The program, designed to assist in reducing excess fishing effort, was originally applied to the Northern Prawn Fishery in 1985. A government grant of \$9 million over three years provided the necessary funding. Adjustment assistance was in future to be an integral part of the management of each fishery.

The recurrent development of management improvements also saw incremental management changes to several of Australia's declared fisheries.

Two new fisheries management regimes were introduced during the year: in September for the Great Australian Bight Trawl Fishery, and in December for the tuna longline fishery off the east coast of Australia. For some of the established management regimes, regulatory alterations were introduced under supervision by the relevant government/industry authority. Management Plan No. 3 for the Northern Prawn fishery was announced in February and, on the recommendation of NORMAC (Northern Management Advisory Committee), amendment to implement unit surrender provisions in April. The Southern Bluefin Tuna Management Plan was amended in February to make its quotas acceptable as loans security. In October quotas in this fishery were revised. The standardization of management procedures for Australia's fisheries saw the creation of the now-standard industry/government management advisory committee for the east coast fishery.

In areas where there were not the same formal joint control management schemes, regulation proceeded cautiously. In December the Fisheries Service released a

discussion paper considering management options for the southern shark fishery. To assess the export potential of longlining for tuna in the Coral Sea, some management controls were relaxed for two years. In the Torres Strait Protected Zone regulations were implemented to increase Islander participation in fishing and to establish dugong sanctuary areas.

A significant milestone in the constitutional arrangements covering Australian fisheries management was achieved in June, when management jurisdiction over the Bass Strait scallop fishery was vested in Tasmania and Victoria. This was seen as a forerunner for the rationalization of Commonwealth/State management jurisdictions over other Australian fisheries.

The only hiccup in the otherwise smooth management of the industry occurred in the northern pelagic fishery. A controversy, inspired by various pressure groups, arose over the number of dolphins drowned in the gillnet operations. An effective write-in campaign to federal ministers and MPs prompted action to mollify the conservationists. In May, Kerin instituted restrictions to the maximum length of pelagic gillnets to reduce dolphin mortality rates. In June the Minister announced an experimental long-line project to assess this as an alternative to gillnetting. The Commonwealth's Fisheries Development Trust Account paid two-thirds of the costs, with the Northern Territory's fisheries service providing the balance plus staffing.

In November 1986 Kerin tabled the National Forestry Strategy in the federal parliament. The strategy had been first proposed in May 1985, and had subsequently been amended after public comment and representations from various State governments. In 1987 it is hoped that the states will also adopt the Strategy and regulate their industries in conformity with its guiding principles. This implies that forest industries regulation exemplified planned, recurrent policy development. To an extent it did, but the management of the industry during

1986 was considerably diverted by a serious "intermittent" diversion: the imbroglio between the Commonwealth and Tasmanian governments over the export woodchipping industry.

There has been persistent tension between DPI and Heritage and Environment over woodchipping. For the most part previous disputes have been resolved in favour of DPI (and the woodchipping industry). The deterioration of Australia's trade position strengthened the pro-woodchipping position, as illustrated by the renewal of Tasmanian export licences in mid-1986. This renewal was accompanied by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the two governments in June. The Memorandum provided for the oversight of the environmental controls required of the industry by the Commonwealth through a joint DPI-Heritage and Environment Tasmanian Forestry Operations Advisory Committee. It appeared that bureaucratic honour had been salvaged and an accommodation reached between all the involved interests. Yet by the end of the year the two governments were embroiled in a serious conflict, with the Commonwealth threatening to pass legislation giving it control over Tasmania's woodchip industry.

Though ostensibly over the interpretation of conditions of the Memorandum, the disputation was essentially "political". In the second half of the year the Federal Labor Government became increasingly concerned about its standing in the opinion polls. These indicated some disillusion with the government from "traditional" Labor voters. Prompted by the example of the N.S.W Labor Government, the Federal Government decided to become more active in environmental matters and pursue the conservationist vote. Heritage and Environment consequently became more influential in its disagreements with DPI. Within the context of this sea change in the Commonwealth Government's policy agenda, previously minor disputes with the Tasmanians over the

administration of their woodchipping industry assumed greater significance. The Tasmanian Government would be electorally advantaged by confrontation with the Commonwealth, so they were loath to compromise or negotiate. In December the Tasmanian decision to allow logging in selected National Estate areas provoked the Commonwealth into threats of overriding legislation. This may be enacted in 1987.

3. Intermittent Crisis Management: the "Agenda" of the Rural Crisis

In 1986 the continuing deterioration in terms of trade for agricultural commodities confirmed the "rural crisis" as an item on the Australian political agenda. Together with macro-economic policy it became one of the core issues of federal macro-political management. As seen above, its importance meant that the tactical exigencies of the rural crisis frequently distorted the recurrent administration of rural policy.

3.1 The Policy Context

The Labor Government's difficulties in managing the rural crisis were extraordinary because of two, interacting factors that transcended the "normal" institutional complications of Australia's federal system and provided an extremely difficult context in which to manage the crisis. These factors were that the contemporary "crisis" was qualitatively different from previous crises (Aitken 1978), and that the "agenda" of this policy field was largely controlled by farm groups, for the most part politically hostile to Labor (Chatterton 1984; Gerritsen 1987). Some measure of control over its agenda became intrinsic to Labor's tactical handling of the rural crisis.

A Different Crisis

The current situation is more than a temporary "hog-cycle" supply-demand disequilibrium, as was, for example, the mid-1970s "beef crisis". The contemporary crisis is a fundamental disruption to the entire structure of world agricultural trade. Some elements—the decline in markets consequent on the international recession, and the effects of the import-substitution policies of some third world countries—may prove relatively temporary. But the trade distortions created by the agricultural subsidization of the European Community and the United States are for Australian trade more permanently serious (Anderson and Tyers 1986; BAE 1985).

The crisis also happened at a particularly disadvantageous time for Australia. A decade or so after the U.S.A. and Europe (Bowler 1986; Troughton 1985), Australian agriculture began undertaking the modernizing processes of output intensification, capital concentration and crop specialization from which inevitably followed a widespread restructuring of the rural economy and society (Hefford 1985). As occurred overseas (Cavazzini and Fuller 1982; Fuller 1983), the rural crisis exacerbated the economic and social dislocation intrinsic to that restructuring (Gerritsen 1987). The proliferating impoverishment of small farmers, who cannot offset the effects of declining farm receipts against other profitable activities, is one feature of the crisis. These farmers have in the last decade taken whatever "profits" they have been able to secure in the form of capital gains rather than income (Gerritsen 1987). The Labor Government's tax changes have reduced even that small gain. Usually sole or family proprietors, these farmers are the casualties of the "rural crisis". They provide the rank-and-file militancy of farm group politics.

The Farm Groups

Though not always the case (Lucy 1985), it is now a truism of Australian politics that farmers do not vote Labor. Indeed,

except for the 1983 election, even the Democrats outpoll Labor amongst farmers. Making policy for a clientele that is partisanly hostile is difficult. Making that policy in the contemporary economic circumstances was doubly so. Labor's problems with the farm sector were aggravated by the fact that conflict with the Labor Government is useful, even necessary, for the farm group leaderships. The contention with the Labor Government provides the farm group leaders with a solidaristic "ideology" that serves the dual functions of obscuring the internal contradictions within the farm groups and reasserting the ideals of a fading "countrymindedness" (Aitkin 1985; Veralletal 1985).

The contradictions of rural politics revolve about the "traditional" rivalry of commodity-based groups and the possibilities of internal, "class"-based divisions amongst farmers (Campbell 1968). The farm groups, the NFF in particular, are dominated by the larger, corporate farmers. One illustration of this is that McLachlan, the NFF President, serves on the board of Elders. Consequent upon this factor is the pursuit of big farmer and corporate "agribusiness" interests by the farm groups. Examples in 1986 were the successful campaign to prevent the tax quarantining of off-farm income; the continuing objections to the fringe benefits tax; and the NFF's role in the 1986 national wage case. The NFF's concentration upon these issues has the potential to expose latent "class" differences within Australia's farmers. So the Labor "enemy" is essential to divert these dormant contradictions.

The Labor Government also provides a convenient scapegoat to protest the declining social, political and economic position of farmers in Australia. Thirty years ago farmers were blessed with high relative incomes, a superior social status and, through the Country Party's position in the seemingly permanent conservative political hegemony, significant political power. Since then there has been a relative erosion of farmer incomes and social status. The farmer's rural pre-eminence

has virtually disappeared, a change aided by the decline of the small rural towns that the local farmers naturally dominated (Anderson 1978). Only the extensive cross-subsidization of rural services' costs remains (Kolson 1983; Seiper 1982). The waning of what Aitkin (1985) labels "countrymindedness", is a reflection of those social, economic and political changes. So opposition to the Labor Government combines self-interest as well as principle for farmer leaders.

3.2 The Labor Government's Crisis Management

The Government's continuing problem with the intermittent management of the rural crisis stemmed both from this political context and the comprehensive differences between its basic macro-economic strategy and that proposed by the NFF. The Government is operating a consensual quasi-"corporatist" system central to which is co-operation with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (Gerritsen 1986). This was fundamentally challenged by the NFF, which opposed both the ACTU's incorporation into the economic policy process and the centralized wage-fixing intrinsic to the system. The NFF joined the so-called "new right" in seeking to reduce the power of the trade unions, as it revealed by supporting the proprietor in the Mudginberri dispute. In this the NFF was calling upon a rich vein of hostility to the union movement amongst farmers. Particular macro-economic tactics, for example using monetary controls to deal with the trade deficit problem (which increased interest rates and has severely effected farmers), also contradicted NFF policy positions.

Given its unwillingness to disrupt its fiscal trilogy and engage in the "pork barrelling" traditionally the solution to rural problems, the Government was forced into alternative strategies. During 1986 it developed an unco-ordinated, five-pronged crisis-management approach,

which had some modicum of success. These varying tactics can conveniently be labelled "benign neglect"; "depletion"; "amelioration"; "symbolic satisficing"; and "restructuring the agenda".

"Benign neglect"

This was the tactic of riding out the rural revolt. It was based on the calculation that farmer disaffection would not be translated into seats lost at the next election. The argument assumed that the large rural service centres would be immune to the contagion of farmer political hostility to Labor because their voters' values are essentially urban (Hay 1985). This approach was soon abandoned as the NFF's \$15 million "fighting fund" guaranteed the farmers a potentially powerful influence and dramatically increased the political risks of this tactic.

"Depletion"

The depletion option had two components: attempting to accelerate the inevitable processes of "rural reconstruction" already underway (industrial depletion), and preventing the National Party from benefiting from the farm revolt by encouraging conflicts between them and the NFF (political depletion).

Industrial depletion aimed at reducing the number of unviable farm units. Accordingly \$1.8 million was added to Part C of the Rural Adjustment Scheme (RAS) in the April White Paper. Unfortunately for the Government this incentive for farmers to leave farming is the least popular component of the RAS (Kerridge 1978), so there was little political benefit to be garnered. The BAE estimated (in mid-1986) that about 7 per cent of farmers were "at risk", with negative expected incomes and a greater than 70 per cent gearing ratio. This indicated that very few farmers, even from those at risk, would abandon agriculture. Industrial depletion was not going to reduce the Government's problems.

The beginning of the year saw some satisfactory (from the Labor perspective)

tension between the Nationals and the NFF. In particular the National Party leader, Sinclair, has his farm group critics. But 1986 saw the Nationals gradually reduce the McEwenite legacy and embrace more deregulatory economic policies, thereby reducing the policy gap between themselves and the NFF. Though personal tensions between farm leaders, McLachlan in particular, and the Nationals continued, the Government was unlikely to be able to reduce farmer support for the party, farmers having no credible political alternative. Political depletion also did not promise much assistance to the Government's crisis management strategy.

"Amelioration"

For a government committed to fiscal rectitude the options to buy farmer support were limited. Attempts to do so, as in the Western Australian fertilizer case, could backfire and delegitimize Labor's claim that it eschewed short-term palliatives. The Government's efforts in this area were climaxed in the April White Paper, which tackled some of the more urgent of the farm sector's complaints: tariffs, interest rates, off-farm costs, and taxes.

The cost to the rural sector of tariffs was partly reduced by the replacement of tariffs and the two per cent duty on soil preparation and cultivation machinery by a \$39 million bounty scheme. The RAS initiatives (described above) were designed to address the high cost of capital. A combination of bounties and tariff reductions reduced the costs of agricultural chemicals by 33.3 per cent. The Transport Royal Commission promised to reduce off-farm costs for grain handling and carriage. The Government reversed its intention to "quarantine" losses from farm activities against taxable off-farm income. This was followed in May by changes in the valuation of rural land for asset-estimating purposes, after Social Security found that rural pensioners, especially farmers, had been disproportionately disadvantaged by the assets test. The BTEC (Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign) levy

was also reduced by 25 per cent. The expansion of the government's marketing activities (see 2.2 above) also met its claim to be more concerned with the viability of Australian agriculture in the long-term.

The special assistance granted rural commuter airlines was an example of the successful amelioration of the consequences of government policy not specifically intended to have rural effects. Following the introduction of the aviation cost-recovery plan, these airlines were granted a \$2 million subsidy (which halved the burden of the new measures). This device fitted the Government's emphasis on aiding the rural community in general and not specifically farmers.

"Symbolic Satisficing"

This part of the Government's political strategy had two dimensions, the international and the domestic. The latter aspect involved an attempt to incorporate farmers into the agricultural policy-making process. Complementary to this were the activities of the Prime Minister's task force of Labor's rural MPs and the intensified marketing of the Prime Minister to rural Australia, such as with the well-publicized visit to Canowindra.

The Government's international endeavours provided its greatest successes in influencing popular perceptions of the rural crisis. In 1986 the Government adopted a very active posture in international agricultural politics. Threats were made that Australia would quit the International Dairy Arrangement. Highly-publicized efforts were made to have agricultural trade subject to the GATT. Australia spearheaded the creation of the "Cairns group" of agricultural free traders, which gathered valuable support in opposing EC and U.S.A. export subsidies. The Trade, Foreign Affairs and Primary Industry ministers co-operatively were very active in international fora pressing Australia's interest in a free agricultural commodity trade regime.

The Government's greatest success came from the Australian parliamentary delegation's lobbying visit to the U.S.A.

The Opposition and the Democrats joined Kerin in the all-party delegation, seemingly forgetting the political axiom that bipartisanship benefits governments not oppositions. The delegation had some successes, to the extent that even the NFF was temporarily disarmed. This exercise, and the proposed creation of a permanent lobby in Washington, aided the Government's rural crisis agenda: that the "crisis" was international in origin and not of its making. By the end of the year there was some evidence that many farmers saw the situation in that light.

On the domestic front there were also some successes. The creation of the RAIC began the incorporation of farmers into the policy-making process. The proposal for a Joint Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture and Trade would create further difficulties for the Opposition in distancing itself from the Government. Whilst conflict with the NFF continued—the Prime Minister had a widely-reported brief, acrimonious "meeting" with its executive in December—this was less politically damaging that it had promised to be earlier in the year. The Government was partly successful in creating the impression that, while it was willing to listen, the NFF was simply acting in a politically partisan fashion. This impression was reinforced a week after the NFF brouhaha when Hawke held a long meeting with Canowindra farmers.

"Restructuring the Agenda"

Central to the successful political management of any policy field is to have the debate conducted in terms that create a predisposition towards the policies advocated by the Government. The problem for Labor in 1986 was that the farm groups' agenda was diametrically different from its own. This was exemplified by the NFF's (1986) "White Paper" response to the Government's April package. The NFF ignored the agenda the Government had sought to create and attacked the fundamentals of Labor's macro-economic strategy. The

Federation advocated wholesale changes to monetary, fiscal and labour market policies along (so-called) "dry" market lines. The "white paper" also rejected the RAS interest rate subsidy scheme for needy, though viable, small farmers.

This latter point attacked the Government's preoccupation with equity—both between rural and non-rural claims on the Commonwealth's purse, and between the needy and the non-needy within the rural sector. Together with the attempt to blame the subsidy policies of the U.S.A. and the EC for the crisis, equity was the first of the other elements crucial to Labor's attempt at agenda reconstruction. The third was to refocus the "crisis" away from a preoccupation with commodity prices and towards its effect on rural communities as such (and not just farmers).

The reconstructed agenda targetted selected disadvantaged groups and highlighted the new provincial aid policies. Rural women and small farmers were identified as requiring special assistance. The April White Paper built on other women's programs with a Rural Women's Access Grants Scheme, which was to secure women better access to governmental services and to improve their employment prospects. The White Paper also designed a rural counselling scheme, both to improve the take-up rate for the various adjustment assistance schemes in operation and to furnish advice to farmers in difficulties. These measures were integral to a package to facilitate higher rural take-up rates for the whole range of general income security, health, social welfare and education programs. The high unemployment in rural towns was to be tackled by the Country Enterprise Fund. The intention of the Fund was to realize the economic potential of selected country towns and to assist regional adjustment to economic change. All these programs built upon an impetus from the Rural and Provincial Affairs Unit, created within DPI the previous year. This Unit was an institutional expression of Labor's attempt to supersede

the "traditional" DPI preoccupation with agricultural commodities and broaden the issues involved with rural affairs.

4. Conclusion

1986 was probably the most difficult post-war year for rural policy-making in Australia. For the Labor government, which was also afflicted with a partisanly hostile farmer clientele, these difficulties were multiplied. The objective economic situation of the farm sector, as seen in declining export incomes, worsened dramatically. The exigencies of the resultant "rural crisis" profoundly affected the otherwise routine administration of "recurrent" primary industry policy.

Nevertheless, the Labor Government implemented significant, incremental improvements in marketing, industry regulation, administrative and agricultural advisory processes. This development resisted (with few exceptions, such as fertilizers and woodchipping) the potentially destabilizing effects of priority of the day-to-day political management of the "intermittent" rural crisis.

In the area of intermittent crisis management the government proved more effective than could have been reasonably expected at the beginning of the year. Though it still had difficult problems with unreconciled farm groups, the Government did achieve some of its "damage control" objectives. Labor also partly re-oriented the policy debate about the rural crisis, and provided some evidence of its earnestness in seeking long-term solutions to that crisis. And the Government's attempts at reshaping the agenda of the crisis towards a recognition that it was international in origin and not of Labor's making, convinced most commentators and even some farmers. Somewhat suprisingly in the light of the economic context, the Federal Government was quite successful in managing rural policy and politics in 1986.

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