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The Way I Saw It; the Way It Was: The Making of National Agricultural and Natural Resource Management Policy, John C. Kerin. Published by APO, Melbourne, VIC, 2017, 713 pages.

John Kerin dedicated his book ‘to all the good people who enter the political fray and work to make things better, but particularly those of the Australian Labor Party’. It is a valuable record of a dynamic time in Australian politics when significant changes in agricultural and natural resource policy occurred that will appeal to a wider audience interested in the historical record of events during the period from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s and beyond.

John Kerin grew up in country Australia in the 1940s and 1950s, as did a number of other agricultural economists prominent in the profession over the past 40 or so years. Many of us relate to that part of history. His upbringing and that experience of simple country life on a small farm with its many challenges obviously affected his thinking and actions when he reached the apex of the policy formation and implementation structure in Australian agriculture as Minister for Primary Industries or Primary Industries and Energy between 1983 and 1991.

His CV includes occupations such as axeman, forestry worker, brick setter, farmer and businessman, economist at the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (1971–1972 and 1975–1976), politician and more. He was first elected to the Australian Parliament as Member for Macarthur in the years of the Whitlam Government (1972–1975) but served a much longer period as the Member for Werriwa (1978–1993). During that time, he became Opposition spokesman on Primary Industry in 1980, and Minister for Primary Industries in 1983, extended to Primary Industries and Energy in 1987. In 1991, he served as Treasurer for a short period before moving to Transport and Communications and was finally Minister for Trade and Overseas Development in 1992–1993.

After politics, he continued to have a big influence on Australian Agriculture. Some of the positions he held were Chair of the Australian Meat and Livestock Corporation, and Chair of the boards of several Cooperative Research Centres including Soil and Land Management, Sustainable Production Forestry and Australian Weed Management. He also chaired a long list of state and national institutions that were involved in forestry, fisheries, stored grains, biosecurity and wool research. He further held honorary positions as Deputy-Chancellor, University of Western Sydney, was chair of the Board of Governors of the Crawford Fund, and President of the ACT Branch of AARES.

The book is an extensive but very readable account of John Kerin’s early life, through his political career, to life after politics. There are 21 Chapters and an appendix (his CV). In the introduction, he states that the book is a source document that records the making of agricultural and natural resource management policy at national level during 1983–1991, a time of transition in

the world's and Australia's economies when Kerin was an Australian Government Minister, with some relevant commentary before and after that period. There are chapters on growing up in country Australia in the 1940s and 1950s, learning about life and work, then getting involved in community politics.

For many readers, the most interesting sections of the book will be the various chapters on Australia's main primary industries. There are chapters on cattle, sheep and livestock meat industries; a whole chapter devoted to wool, the Reserve Price Scheme, the Merino export ban, and the wide comb dispute. Then follow chapters on the grains industry, dairy, sugar, commercial fisheries, horticulture and forestry. He also comments on natural resources, land and water, drought and natural disasters. The impact of severe drought and natural disasters on farmers in Australia meant that agricultural policy needed to address the social dimensions of farming and related industries, the topic of another chapter.

Following a relatively long period of rural prosperity in Australia after the Second World War, economic circumstances in the rural sector in Australia in the early 1980s were depressed and new measures to address disadvantage in rural areas were needed. Specific social policies that would assist people living in non-metropolitan areas were introduced including social assistance programs that improved marketing skills, addressed farm safety issues, encouraged greater participation by women in farm organisations, and tried to improve health and education outcomes.

From my personal perspective, two of the most important policy initiatives taken during John Kerin's time were expansion of the role of Rural Research and Development Corporations and winding up of some significant statutory marketing schemes.

The final chapter in the book is titled 'Politics and policy and what I learned'. Three quotes introduce this final chapter. Two of them are pertinent in today's era of fake news and political instability:

There are in fact two things, science and opinion, the former begets knowledge, the latter ignorance. Hippocrates

They don't want to know how much you know until they know how much you care. President Theodore Roosevelt

Kerin said he grew to understand the notions and realities of power from his experience in politics but did not understand how significantly the business community and their attendant legal advisers, working in conjunction with the business-owned media, were influencing political decisions in Australia. He admitted that the Government of which he was a part was often in catch-up mode in regard to agricultural policy but nevertheless set in place some policies that have proved to be of considerable benefit.

He noted that the need to adapt to change and the future potential of agriculture would only be maximised by discerning international trends, tracking market demands, backing expenditure on research and by being aware of the changing intellectual base to agricultural production from cutting edge science and technology. Therefore, the need to pursue policy reform was constant but in a society as politically conservative as Australia's change and reform will always be slower than it could be.

In 2013, when he wrote the chapter, Kerin believed that we had an immense store of proven factual knowledge in Australia to deal with many critical, ongoing issues that governments seemed unwilling or unable to tackle. He observed that Australia's best-trained minds were racing ahead of what politicians could or would sell to their electorates, and the gap between what could be achieved on the basis of what was known and what was achievable was widening. He concedes that research should inform policy and policy should be evidence-based, but the political system often fails to adhere to these principles. He attributed this to the adversarial, conservative political system, with uninterested voters and the growing power of interest groups and large private firms and entities beyond the control of government.

He acknowledged that we do have many innovative agricultural producers though they are rarely featured because the media typically focuses on bad news, prejudices, celebrities or stereotypes. He was also critical of farm organisations that also often relied on the comfort of past certainties and delayed adaptation to change.

He was convinced of the importance of education, of research and development, and of an emphasis on resource management as being the essential elements of all agricultural policy but observed that growth in agricultural productivity was slowing. Since 2011, the average growth of Australian agricultural productivity has only been about 1% per annum, limiting the sector's ability to cope with continuing decline in its terms of trade. Many observers attribute this to falling levels of investment in research as governments and firms cut spending, as well as the impact of drought, with rising energy costs a crucial factor.

Another fundamental reality that Kerin learned was that, because Australia is an agricultural exporting nation, we cannot ignore the world. He visited some 78 countries and observed the way agriculture was carried out in many of them. He believed that Australia should be involved in international agricultural research for the benefit of its farmers and for those in developing countries.

Kerin also learned that it is just not possible to be a good policymaker if you do not foster trust. He observed that political leaders everywhere talk about trust but all too often do not mean what they say. In his opinion, political parties and their spokespeople need to develop the capacity to consult appropriately, to communicate, and then to decide what can be done.

Kerin shares a lot more than just his insights into agricultural policy formation. He was an observer from the backbench in the years of the

Whitlam Government (1972–1975) and a Minister in various roles in the Hawke/Keating Governments from 1983 to 1995. He developed a strong belief in responsible cabinet government and was dismayed that seems to have lost the importance it once had with a concentration of power in the Prime Minister's Office and a tendency to move towards presidential-style rule. He believed that the best parliaments, ministries and cabinets were those in which there was a broad spread of experience and expertise with ministers serving the Australian people and that, in government, one worked for all Australians regardless of their political preference.

Kerin's idea of government was a process whereby decisions were taken after due consultation and consideration by Cabinets and which were informed by evidence, research and experience and then announced and debated in the Parliament. He believed the best decisions were the ones where the most thought, thorough analysis, and preparation was involved but recognised that sometimes decisions have to be made quickly without the opportunity for such a process.

This book records the unique experience of a boy who grew up on a small farm in country New South Wales to become Minister for Primary Industries and the person with considerable influence on the making of agricultural policy in Australia for nearly a decade. It is a particularly valuable record of the events and sometimes personalities that both encouraged and delayed change in the Australian agricultural environment. John Kerin believed that there should be more public education about policy formation processes and felt that those who had the privilege of being involved in national policymaking should put their thoughts and experiences on record and reflect on the way policy was developed. He succeeded in that endeavour.

His book probably has most appeal to other professionals in the agricultural science and agricultural and resource economics professions who lived and worked in the same era as John Kerin. He learned an enormous amount about Australian agriculture, farm people, rural organisations and the political process. I hope we can learn from his experience to make better decisions in future.

MALCOLM WEGENER

The University of Queensland, Brisbane Queensland, Australia

Email: malcolm.wegener@uq.edu.au