

DISCOURSES OF DEREGULATION IN THE AUSTRALIAN WHEAT INDUSTRY

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Following World War II, the Australian Wheat Board was established as a statutory marketing authority to be the sole marketer of the Australian wheat crop. This was intended to provide wheat farmers with security and stability, two goals that had characterised the approach of the Australian government towards agricultural policy in the 1950s and 1960s (Higgins and Lockie 2002; Botterill 2012a). It was an approach to agricultural policy that collectivised risk while protecting agricultural producers from fluctuating prices in global markets. Wheat was pooled and the returns from its sale were redistributed evenly among growers.

However, the situation changed significantly from the 1970s as deregulation became an increasingly dominant emphasis in Australian agricultural policy. The statutory marketing authorities were dismantled and commodity markets such as Australian domestic wheat were deregulated. The process accelerated during the 1980s with the increasing influence of ‘economic rationalism’ and free market logics on public policies (Tonts and Haslam-McKenzie 2005; Pritchard 2005; Banks 2005; Cheshire and Lawrence 2005; Botterill 2012a, 2012b, 2011). The process continued apace during the following decade. As Sinclair *et al.* (2015: 115) summarise the situation:

Between the 1970s and 1990s rural policies were re-shaped as successive Australian governments embraced a neoliberal ideology. Market liberalisation was adopted as policy in the belief that agricultural industries would be more efficient and productive and, thus, better placed to compete in global markets: deregulation would play a vital role in flushing out inefficient producers.

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Tonts and Haslam-McKenzie (2005: 184) describe the neoliberal reforms implemented throughout the 1980s and 1990s in sectors such as agriculture as representing a 'radical shift away from the post-war policies and regulatory frameworks based loosely around the principles of Keynesian economic management'. Successive Australian governments sought to rescind trade barriers, privatise State-owned assets and authorities, and implement deregulation programs in key industries (Tonts and Jones 1997; Tonts 1999; Tonts and Haslam-McKenzie 2005; Cahill 2007). The ongoing existence of statutory marketing authorities, government underwriting programs and assistance was regarded as an impediment to competition (Banks 2005; McCorriston and MacLaen 2007; Sinclair *et al.* 2015). The process of change culminated with the deregulation of the domestic and export wheat markets, in 1989 and 2008 respectively, (Baker 2018, 2021).

The impacts of these policy changes contributed to consolidation of farms and high numbers of farmers exiting the industry (Tonts 1999; Pritchard 2005; Dibden *et al.* 2009; Sinclair 2015; Clarke and Alston 2016). Tonts (1999: 581) describes how these shifts coincided with declining farm incomes (in real terms) and high interest rates during the late 1980s and early 1990s, threatening the financial position of smaller farm businesses. Many smaller farmers were displaced by larger farms, which contributed to a shrinking farming population (Tonts 1999; Pritchard 2005). Between 1981 and 2011, the number of farmers in Australia declined by 40% to 106,200 (ABS 2011). Drought periods contributed to some of the farmer exits, but government policy for structural adjustment accelerated the departures of farmers seen to be less efficient and productive, all in the name of enhancing allocative efficiency (ABS 2011; O'Keeffe 2019).

These changes had considerable impacts on rural communities. Declining farm populations threatened the viability of smaller towns and precipitated the withdrawal of services from many rural areas, which contributed to a further loss of employment and further outmigration of rural populations (McKenzie 1994; Tonts and Jones 1997; Tonts 1999; Gray and Lawrence 2001). Yet, as Tonts (1999: 582) describe:

Despite this, both federal and state governments have remained committed to an economic rationalist approach to public policy, arguing that a more competitive economy, achieved through market forces and minimal state intervention, is more likely to improve levels of rural economic and social well being than the general provision of public services and infrastructure.

This article analyses documents published between 1970 and 2000 to see how this shift from a collectivist approach to a market-based policy was made possible. The documents include reports by government departments and authorities, policy papers and media releases published by political parties and industry lobby groups, as well as articles published in rural and metropolitan newspapers. Through consideration of these sources, we can develop a better understanding of the discursive construction of a situation in which the rationalities of efficiency, competition and self-reliance were portrayed as policy truths, seen as essential objectives of common-sense policy making. It also reveals how these ideas then came to be adopted by farm lobby groups pushing for reduced government intervention in other sectors and areas of policy that they saw as adversely affecting their interests. The primary focus of the article is on the wheat industry during the period from 1970 to 2000, tracing the emerging influence of concepts such as efficiency, competition and individualism in farming discourses, and the influence of these ideas upon policy.

Neoliberalism as a discourse

Neoliberalism can be understood as a discourse (Rose 1993; Jessop 2002; Springer 2012) that seeks to render ‘reality thinkable in such a way that it is amenable to political deliberations’ (Rose 1993: 289). As Rose argues, language is used by governments, or people who have intentions of governing, to construct and shape the world in a manner which can be made operable. Similarly, Peck and Tickell (2002: 381) contend that neoliberal discourses attempt to reconstruct the world in ‘their own image’, making interventions which accord with these discourses appear logical and rational. By shaping the social world to be understood in terms of efficiency and competition, choice and incentives, the discourse allows for the development of policies that promote these values (Peck and Tickell 2002).

The success of this attempt to change the policy agenda requires neoliberalism to appear not as an ideology but as ‘common sense’ (Dibden *et al.* 2009: 304; Springer 2012: 134-5). The establishment of this common sense involves the normalisation of principles such as allocative efficiency, allowing them to be applied as ‘the dominant metrics of policy evaluation’, in the sense that policy should aim to maximise allocative efficiency (Peck and Tickell 2002: 394). Alternative values and logics are marginalised, set

outside the bounds of common-sense thinking (Stenson and Watt 1999). This leads to the ‘authority of truth’, and the capacity of discourse to construct a dominant ‘truth’ which shapes how social issues may be interpreted and understood. It thereby legitimises or de-legitimises people’s actions and behaviours (Rose 1993; Stenson and Watt 1999; Anderson 2010). This process is made possible through the role of experts portrayed as being disinterested producers of knowledge (Rose 1993; Higgins 2001; Peck and Tickell 2002; Anderson 2010). Because of this connection to expert knowledge, neoliberal discourse is presented as apolitical (Peck and Tickell 2002), reflecting both common sense and an unimpeachable truth.

To understand the impact of these processes in a specific instance, such as wheat farming and wheat marketing in Australia, we need to analyse how deregulation was framed as a logical, common-sense response to the particular situation in the industry. Seeking to do this, my research builds on studies that have analysed rural policy change within Australia through a post-structuralist lens (Herbert-Cheshire 2000; Higgins 2001; Higgins and Lockie 2002; Cheshire and Lawrence 2005; Tonts and Haslam-Mackenzie 2005; Lockie and Higgins 2007). In particular, it adapts Higgins’ (2001) analysis, which showed the ‘different ways in which seemingly inevitable forms of regulation are constructed through economic knowledge as “rational”, “truthful” and necessary, and the forms of “restructuring” that accordingly emerge’. In a similar vein, this study aims to understand how concepts such as market competition and efficiency became so entrenched in agricultural policy making, with deregulation of markets and supply chains portrayed as being inevitable and essential policy changes. It shows how collective-based policy, such as statutory marketing, is problematised and positioned as being oppositional to ‘common sense’ policy. The analysis probes the following questions:

- What ideas and issues are problematised through these discourses, and how are they represented in relation to farming and farm policy?
- How is the rationality of efficiency, competition, self-reliance and free markets represented in the documents studied in this research and how does it shape policy debate?
- How is this rationality constructed as a response to the problematisations identified in this study?

Central to the research process is the examination of a wide range of documentation, including reports produced by Australian Government departments and authorities such as the Industries Assistance Commission (later known as the Industry Commission and then Productivity Commission), submissions to inquiries conducted by the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC), the Royal Commission into Grain Storage and Handling and submissions to this inquiry, industry reports and policy papers produced by Australian state and federal political parties and lobby groups such as the National Farmers Federation (NFF), as well as newspaper articles featuring commentary by politicians, farm industry leaders and farmers. The reports and articles were mainly sourced from collections in the Public Record Office of Victoria and State Library of Victoria. The analysis of their content and impact is presented here in chronological order, focussing on the relationship of the discursive changes to the policy changes over the three decades. As always with document-based research, it should be recognised that the selection of documents shapes the findings: voices expressing different opinions may not be captured and comments made in newspaper articles may not reflect the full scope of the policy debate which took place at the time. Nevertheless, what can be clearly seen is the increasing influence of concepts such as efficiency, competition and productivity during the 1970s, their increased prevalence and application to policy in the 1980s, and their further developments during the 1990s to frame the construction of a business-minded, competitive and individualised farmer identity.

1970s: constructing farms as ‘viable production units’

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, agricultural economists began to exert considerable influence over policies affecting Australian rural industries (Higgins 2001; Pritchard 2005). As Higgins (2001: 372) argues, the ‘practices of agricultural economists were central in constituting the viability of some farmers as a widespread problem of national economic significance, seen to require new forms of governing’. At the time, Australian agricultural policy was characterised by a high level of government intervention through statutory marketing boards, underwriting of commodities prices, using tariffs and subsidising inputs such as superphosphate fertilizer. LeCouteur (1971: 10) criticised the prevailing policies for supporting ‘un-economic production’, claiming that policy

should support productivity, which should be ‘considered not only from the viewpoint of effective managerial use of resources but also in relation to the extent to which the production is designed to meet a known or prospective consumer need’. These ambitions underlaid the *Industries Assistance Commission Act*, legislated by the Whitlam Government to ‘improve the efficiency with which the community’s productive resources are used’ while recognising the interests of ‘consumers and consuming industries’ (*Industries Assistance Commission Act 1973: 22.1*).

Thus, it was argued that agricultural policy should support the contribution of agricultural industries to the national economy, rather than assist farmers who were deemed to be ‘unviable’ (Nevile 1971; Gray 1971). This led to the developing agricultural policy focus on maximising productivity and allocative efficiency, claimed to be in the best interests of Australian society. As expressed by Mauldon and Schapper (1974: 164), ‘society’s economic interest is for people and resources to move from less productive uses to more productive uses, rather than to remain in their traditional uses’. This portrays farms as resources, farmers as responsible for maximising the productive use of those resources, and allocative efficiency as essential in transitioning resources from the least productive farmers to the most productive farmers. Mauldon and Schapper (1974: 164) suggest that the extent of the situation:

calls for assessments of actual and potential economic viability of individual farm businesses. It calls for assessments of actual and potential economic viability of individual farm businesses. It calls for assessments of prospective economic returns to farm resources in the event of their reallocation to other farm businesses or to other sectors.

Such assessments are claimed to dispassionately determine the economic prospects of farm businesses responding to the widespread problems of farm viability which the authors describe. LeCouteur (1971: 13) argues that policy should aim to create ‘production units [farms] which can be self-sufficient in the long term’, which also required identification of what constituted a ‘viable production unit’. This language decouples farmers from the land and from farming, thereby constituting a more complete ‘economisation’ of farming. It also signals an important shift in the dominant strand of thinking about Australian agricultural policy, making distinctions between efficient and inefficient, viable and unviable, good and bad farmers. These distinctions are made easier through the reductionist perception of farms as production units, and farmers as atomised individuals tasked with maximising the productive use of farm

resources. LeCouteur (1971: 10) suggests that farmers who are likely to be self-sufficient are those who exhibit 'sound farm management' practices, by 'fully utilising the latest technology to achieve economies of scale'. Similarly, Mauldon and Schapper (1974: 49) highlight the gulf between the farmers who 'fail', and the 'other farmers [who] survive this competition and continue to prosper [...] They seek opportunities for profit and growth'.

This shows an emerging discourse around farm failure, positioning farmer values, attitudes and decision making as the key cause of farm viability problems. Farm efficiency, productivity and competition are presented as 'modern' approaches to farming and agricultural policy, contrasting with measures such as producer-controlled marketing boards that Campbell describes as 'an anachronism in modern, Western societies' (1979: 197).

Early to mid-1980s: constructing individualism, efficiency and choice as policy truths

These developing discourses of farmers and the agricultural sector can be observed in policy documents centred on the debate around wheat marketing deregulation. The Industry Assistance Commission's 1983 report, 'The Wheat Industry', helped shape the public debate (IAC 1983). It portrays regulation as overly complex, burdensome and unnecessary (IAC 1983: i), saying that: 'This tangled web of legislation which surrounds wheat marketing was designed, apparently, in response to perceived problems associated with unfettered market forces'. This problematises wheat market regulation and the initial basis for adopting it. The report also criticises statutory marketing, contending that it increases marketing costs, creates inefficiencies, and minimises the choices available to growers. It positions efficiency as a central policy goal in wheat marketing and makes a shift towards the policy ambition of maximising growers' choice.

Freeing up the market to put money in growers' pockets

The period following the publication of the 1983 IAC report coincided with relatively poor returns for growers, resulting in increased concerns about the viability of wheat farming *per se*. At a meeting of 500 farmers in the New South Wales town of Moree in September 1984, 'growers were

warned that wheat production was now largely unprofitable and that many could be squeezed out in the near future' (*Australian Financial Review* 1984¹). Collective organisation was said to be contributing to what were framed as escalating and prohibitive costs, with John Hyde, former Liberal Member of Parliament, and Peter Urban of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) contrasting these costs with the money that growers may have saved had deregulation been implemented (*The Land* 1984a; *The Land* 1984b). Urban claimed that regulated export markets cost growers \$68 million that year (*The Land* 1984c); while Grain Growers of Australia argued that the oil seeds, sorghum and barley marketing boards lost \$8.6 million between 1980 and 1984 (*The Weekly Times* 1985). Alan Pearlman, Secretary of Grain Growers of Australia Limited, explained that, at an upcoming meeting, 'we will be telling grain growers [...] that we want to free up the market in Australia to put more money in their pockets [...] The inefficiencies and poor performance of the Australian monopoly system is almost scandalous' (*Australian Financial Review* 1985; *The Land* 1984b).

Similarly, John Elliott, then owner of IXL Elders, questioned the benefit of maintaining the AWB, stating:

I think there is an opportunity for people like ourselves to be helping to get the farmer a better return. Because if you work on commission as we would be, you do have a desire to really seek out the market, and you have got a financial interest in making sure that you do get something done (Grain FA 1984).

Through this period, a substantial discursive shift can be observed. The collective focus of statutory marketing is challenged in terms of its capacity to maximise efficient resource use; and the central focus of wheat marketing is framed narrowly in terms of costs and prices. Growers are encouraged to think of themselves as individuals and to be primarily concerned with the 'money in their pockets'. Because statutory wheat marketing had been popular among most wheat growers – and remained popular for many – this was a concerted effort to shift to a discourse that sought to individualise wheat growers and encourage farmers' rational self-interest.

¹ Public Records Office Victoria (PROV), VA 1057, Grain Elevators Board, VPRS 9698, P1, Historical Information and Reference Collection.

Supply chain costs and ‘inefficiencies’

Throughout the early-to-mid 1980s, farm viability concerns were connected to supply chain ‘inefficiencies’, particularly in relation to grain handling and freight. Numerous political and farming leaders described supply chain deregulation as essential to reduce growers’ costs (*Australian Financial Review* 1984; *The Land* 1984a, 1984b). For example, Michael Cock (President of the Victorian Farmers and Graziers Association), Peter Cook (Victorian Farmers Federation Grain Group), Trevor Flugge and Clinton Condon (Australian Wheat Board) and Don McGauchie (representative of Grains Council of Australia at the time) made particularly strident arguments supporting deregulation (*The Australian* 1989; *The Weekly Times* 1986; Australian Wheat Board 1986a, 1986b; *Stock and Land* 1986a; Cock 1986; *Australian Financial Review* 1984). Cock (1986) stated his view that:

The rail transport system has become the biggest parasite of all time...If eventually we can return to a real market based price system, efficient producers like Australian farmers, without government intervention, might win out under fair trading terms (Cock 1986).

Farm lobby groups claimed that the rail transport ‘monopoly’ led to ‘featherbedding jobs for railway workers’ (*The Weekly Times* 1989), arguing that subsequent inefficiencies were being underwritten by the performance of the farm sector, ultimately undermining growers’ returns (*The Australian* 1989; Australian Wheat Board 1986a).

Through intense public lobbying, representatives in the farm sector sought to accelerate arguments for deregulation in industries associated with agriculture. These arguments reproduced the emerging policy truth of competition as being critical to achieving ‘fairness’ and decreasing farmers ‘costs’ (*Australian Financial Review* 1984; Cock 1986; *The Weekly Times* 1989; Australian Wheat Board 1986b). This activism is reflected in McGauchie’s statement that:

The railways are using their monopoly powers to extract quite a rip-off. If we can break some of these monopolies down, it will create opportunities to improve the competitive position of farmers (*The Australian* 1989).

Although this opposition to regulation and monopolies contrasts with McGauchie’s continued support for statutory wheat marketing (*The Weekly Times* 1992; *The Australian* 1988), the adoption of these arguments

by farm lobby groups further entrenched discourses of competition and efficiency as unequivocally ‘good’ policy ideas within agriculture.

The slump experienced by the wheat industry, persisting throughout 1985 and into earlier 1986, led to frequent protest actions by growers (*The Age* 1986). In one instance, a truck driver from Canonundra was charged with dumping 23 tonnes of wheat outside Parliament House (*The Age* 1986). At the hearing, Magistrate John Dainer stated ‘I think every right minded person in Australian community has a lot of sympathy for the farmers’. Indeed, farmers were positioned as both the victims of Federal Labor Government policy and its primary opponents, with an editorial in *The Land* (1986a) stating: ‘There is no doubt that the farming sector is not getting the justice it deserves [...] Farmers are being crucified by government policies keeping interest rates up to support the Australian dollar and hold down inflation’. Similarly, Katherine West stated in the *Weekend Australian* (1986):

This year’s political agenda will be set by the most vehement opponents of Labor’s corporate state, the increasingly militant farmers. If the Hawke government is to be removed at the next election, it is the farmers who will lead the putsch.

Minister for Primary Industries, John Kerin, and Prime Minister Bob Hawke each contributed pieces to *The Mail-Times*, responding to this crisis (1986a; 1986b). According to Kerin, governments could ‘seek to create the best possible economic environment [...] so that farmers both know what the market signals are and have the opportunity to respond’. Similarly, Hawke stated that ‘Our objective has been to secure for Australia an environment which will permit and encourage efficient competitive Australian industries [...] to promote efficient marketing and production processes within the rural sector’ (*The Land* 1986b). Hawke and Kerin each framed ‘protectionist’ policies by other nations as the central cause of declining farm profitability in Australia, while repositioning the role of government as focusing on creating an economic environment promoting competition and efficiency, thereby enabling producers and consumers to respond to market signals.

Fostering self-reliance and efficiency

Throughout the 1980s, exit rates of farmers increased (Barr *et al.* 2005). Exit rates of young farmers grew sharply while the numbers of young

farmers entering the industry declined (Barr *et al.* 2005). The pressure on farmers, and the exhortations for them to improve efficiency, is highlighted by a 'D. Dodles' in a letter to the editor published in *Stock and Land* (1986b) which stated:

Inefficiency is a word being thrown around the nation to describe many farmers [...] I am one of these inefficient farmers and would like someone to point out where I can improve my cash flow and not say 'double your numbers' or 'get big or get out'.

This highlights how inefficiency is both portrayed as a problem caused by regulation but is also conceptualised as an individual failing, rather than a result of structural factors. This is emphasised by focussing on self-sufficiency and self-reliance, as in the Federal Governments' 1986 'Economic and Rural Policy Statement' which detailed the government's response to the crisis:

We will respond positively to the serious difficulties farmers are facing and work hard as a government both to help those in immediate need and to restore the sectors long term viability. We will do all that we can to maximise the farm sectors contribution to lifting our overall national economic performance (Commonwealth Government 1986: 8).

The solution to the crisis of farm viability is portrayed as being to facilitate farmer exits, which the Commonwealth Government claimed 'can improve resource allocation and add to the sector's long term productive capacity, particularly where farmers are heavily overcapitalised or too small to be viable in the longer term' (Commonwealth Government 1986: 37). Farmer exits are thereby framed as a necessary step to enhance the contribution of farming to the nation's economic performance. This discourse prioritises self-reliance, individualises farmers and shifts responsibility from governments to individuals and communities. At the same time, it rationalises these shifts by claiming that such measures would ultimately serve the nation.

Late 1980s: free markets, commercial independence, and self-interest

The IAC's 1988 inquiry into the Wheat Industry continued to develop the notion of growers' choice through free markets as being central to farm viability and profitability, claiming that statutory marketing limited the

'ability of growers to seek out new markets' (IAC 1988: 3). Under the heading 'Removing Regulatory Impediments', the report states:

In the Commission's view, the most significant contribution which the Government can make to improving the wheat industry's competitiveness, in a manner which ensures that the benefits are broadly spread throughout the community, is to remove those impediments which impede growers and buyers of Australian wheat from responding flexibly to market opportunities.

Market signals and market opportunities, stymied through the 'regulatory impediments' imposed by statutory marketing, are related back to growers' capacity to exercise choice and flexibility (Department of Primary Industries and Energy 1988: 3). Enhancing growers' ability to respond to markets was argued by minister Kerin to be a central responsibility of government, claiming that 'There is a need to shape the direction of the nation's grains industry towards a future where commercial independence, maximum efficiency and marketing flexibility will be key criteria' (Department of Primary Industries and Energy 1988: 2).

Kerin's quoted statement reinforces the emphasis on the capacity of growers to exhibit efficient use of resources and rational choice-making to support their own independence. A similar view can be seen in the IAC's reference to the 1982 Balderstone report to the Minister for Primary Industry (Balderstone *et al.* 1982: 88, cited in IAC 1988: 103) which stated that: 'The most appropriate system for agricultural commodities exposes producers and consumers to the prevailing market forces and at the same time possesses sufficient flexibility to be able to react to these forces'. Similar reference to 'market forces' occurs repeatedly in discourses around the farm sector throughout this period, as almost having a mythical power. At the same time, private grain trading companies are argued to offer great benefits to farmers, 'because of greater marketing efficiency resulting from the commercial disciplines to which traders are exposed' (IAC 1988: 112). The BAE contends that 'private grain merchants [...] would have greater incentive to identify and select less costly marketing channels' (1983, cited in Victorian Government 1987: 42). Throughout policy discourse during the late 1980s, private enterprise is portrayed as being critical to ensuring a viable farm sector and improving farmers' fortunes, while farmers are encouraged to prioritise their own self-interest through making choices which benefit them.

Free markets are conceptualised as being apolitical (IAC 1988: 112), while regulation is described as political. In January 1989, Lindsay Criddle of

the Grains Council of Australia spoke to *The Land* (1989) from a grains conference in the United States, claiming that:

What Australian growers have to do is look after themselves [...] We have to get all our structures away from politics and operate them on a commercial basis [...] It is abundantly clear our structures are based on a political ideology rather than commercial cost effectiveness.

This statement emphasises commercial discipline and cost-effectiveness as depoliticised and disinterested notions, forming the best basis for rational policy making. Criddle reinforces the shift towards supposed self-interest, which itself is framed as a rational response for Australian farmers to take, as opposed to the longstanding focus on collective marketing.

Critique of waterfront ‘inefficiencies’

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, farm lobby groups such as the Grains Council of Australia and NFF continued to reproduce discourses of competition, efficiency and free markets, particularly in their sustained criticisms of the ‘inefficiencies’ of Australian ports (*The Courier Mail* 1989; *The Northern Times* 1988; *The Weekly Times* 1988; Hollings 1989). As Lindsay Criddle argued, ‘inefficiencies on the waterfront cost grain growers \$30 million more than it should, due to overmanning on the wharves’ (*The West Australian* 1988). Statements such as this position farmers as being unfairly burdened by ‘inefficient’ collectivist policies and practices in other industries. As Criddle claimed, farmers were being ‘screwed by over-manning rorts and feather bedding by waterfront unions’, stating that ‘At the end of the day, it is the growers who have to pay’ (*The Land* 1988). Criddle argued ‘The time for action has come [...] The time is right to get stuck into the whole waterfront mess and it is appropriate for the grains industry, which is so dependent on port efficiency, to take the lead’ (*The Northern Times* 1989). Similarly, Don McGauchie claimed that the ‘grains industry’ was ‘fed up with the governments’ delays in reforming the heavily unionised waterfront’ (*The Courier Mail* 1989). As NFF Transport Director, Peter Barnard, argued: ‘You’d have to be wearing very, very dark glasses indeed not to see the inefficiency when a grain ship is being automatically loaded and there are as many as 20 waterfront workers just standing around’ (*The Weekly Times* 1988). Barnard stated that the NFF was ‘considering a joint venture with a major stevedoring company – on the condition that they will spearhead reform in work practices’ (*The Weekly Times* 1988).

Ultimately, McGauchie, as President of the NFF, formed P&C Stevedores with Paul Houlihan in the late 1990s to circumvent unionised labour and contest the Maritime Union of Australia's control of Australian ports, leading to one of the most significant industrial relations disputes in Australia's history (McGauchie 1998; Houlihan 1998). According to Houlihan (1998), this intervention was made possible through the Howard Government's introduction of the *Workplace Relations Act* in 1996:

You had the establishment of the Australian Workplace Agreements that meant that you could employ labour on the waterfront, or anywhere else for that matter, without being roped in to the existing industry standard. That meant that there then was the legal capacity to employ labour on the waterfront separate to, mind you, it had to be lined up with, but nonetheless separate to the terms and the conditions of the Stevedoring Industry Award.

Farm lobby groups continued to push for reform in areas such as industrial relations, in industries which were effectively outside agriculture, claiming that competition and efficiency were essential to support the farmer. Constructed as a self-reliant and resilient battler, 'the farmer' was held to be a pinnacle of Australian strength, hard work and resilience (*Stock Journal* 1992). This is further illustrated by farm lobby groups' ongoing focus on government subsidies provided to the motor vehicle industry, with some farm representatives claiming that agriculture was effectively subsidising such 'uncompetitive' sectors (*The Mercury* 1992; *The Canberra Times* 1992). As then NFF president Graham Blight stated in relation to the perceived generosity of these subsidies:

Why should we continue to keep picking up the cheque? If [Australian based motor vehicle manufacturers] can't compete they've got to get out altogether.

Farm lobby groups active through this period sought to reproduce discourses espousing the virtues of 'free' markets to argue for reduced government intervention and market deregulation in other sectors and industries. This furthered the legitimisation of the concepts of competition and efficiency in agricultural policy, including wheat marketing and farm assistance. This influence was articulated by Australian politician Tony Abbott, later claiming that:

Economic reform was an act of faith two decades ago. Now, Australians know it works. Twenty years ago, the impetus for reform came largely from the National Farmers Federation whose members were tired of

subsidising inefficiency. Rural Australia can claim much of the credit for the prosperity Australia as a whole now enjoys (Abbott 2000).

Farm lobby groups such as the NFF lobbied for deregulated markets, the dismantling of government-controlled monopolies and for substantial reforms to industrial relations. McGauchie (1998) rationalised this persistently pro-market lobbying, stating:

It hasn't always been popular, even among the farming community and probably less so today than ever, that NFF has taken the sort of approach that it has taken. Yet when you recognise that we export some 20 billion dollars' worth of product and import about 2 billion worth of agricultural products, it is easy to see why we recognise the need to open this economy up as much as we have attempted to.

The lobbying was claimed to be focused on ensuring that growers can maximise their returns through cost reductions said to result from opening all parts of the supply chain to market competition. The independent, self-reliant farmer is contrasted with constructions of lazy, inefficient and selfish unionised workers on the waterfront, and the inefficient and costly government-controlled rail and freight networks. This symbolism was used by farm lobby groups in their attempts to push for greater deregulation and reform in sectors supporting agriculture. It created a discourse that marginalised those farmers who did not perceive themselves as entrepreneurial and who supported collective marketing because of the solidarity among growers that it encouraged. The discourse also legitimised the actions of the Australian government, particularly during the Howard government period, in encouraging greater structural adjustment and deregulation of statutory marketing, all in the name of supporting farmers to become more entrepreneurial and market-oriented (O'Keeffe 2019).

1990s: shaping the business-minded farmer

In the early 1990s, environmental factors such as more drought undermined the viability of many Australian farmers. The capacity to respond to drought, among other challenges, was increasingly portrayed in policy discourses as an individual responsibility of farmers. This is exemplified by the repeated assertion that 'fitness' in farming is related to the capacity of farmers to be efficient, and to withstand challenges such as drought without relying upon government support (*The Australian* 1994; *The Age* 1994; *The Weekend Australian* 1992). This conceptualisation of

self-reliance in terms of economic ‘fitness’ and commercial performance is referred to in the report of the Drought Policy Review Taskforce inquiry, citing McInnes *et al.* (1990: 9):

self-reliance recognises the primary responsibility of individual producers for the commercial performance of their enterprises and for ensuring agricultural activity is carried out in an economically and environmentally responsible manner. This concept also recognises that governments should not intervene to distort market prices or outputs.

This definition constructs good commercial performance as an economic responsibility. As ALP Federal Government minister Simon Crean stated in relation to the 1992 National Drought Policy, the intention was to ‘encourage farmers to move away from a “handout mentality”’, adding that ‘There is no point delaying the inevitable for the farmer who will never make it’ (*The Weekly Times* 1992). NFF President Graham Blight stated in response:

To qualify for drought assistance under the [Rural Adjustment Scheme], farmers must be judged to have sound long term prospects in farming. Those who do not fall into that category will not be eligible for drought assistance [...] That is discriminatory and inconsistent with [...] the Government’s commitment to social justice (*The Weekly Times* 1992).

Such reservations aside, farm lobby groups generally legitimised neoliberal tenets of self-reliance, allocative efficiency, and competition, increasingly deployed by governments to rationalise the lack of support provided to farmers and rural communities impacted by drought, declining populations and reduced services. These discourses reproduced the IAC’s rationalisation of farming, with economically responsible farm practice frequently couched in terms of productivist farming methods (including farm consolidation, exploiting economies of scale and using technological inputs), developing a business-minded, market-focused orientation and encouraging farmers to be self-reliant and risk-averse (Anderson and MacDonald 1999; Industry Commission 1996; Department of Primary Industries and Energy 1996; NFF 1993; Burdon 1993). Economic failures of farms are interpreted as caused by farmers’ personal incapacity to adopt these economically responsible practices.

According to then Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, John Anderson, farm failure results from outdated work practices, poor management and under-investment in new plan equipment (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1996a). CSIRO scientist Dean Gaetz put it more stridently, saying that farmers who experienced difficulty were ‘idiots who

didn't learn', and who had 'not made sound business decisions' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1996b). Based on such views, farm exits are deemed essential for transitioning 'bad' farmers out of the industry and creating a 'younger and fitter' rural sector (*The Australian* 1994), thereby helping Australia to 'fully capitalise on its resource base and provide higher living standards' (Industry Commission 1996: 28). It is a discourse that constructs entrepreneurialism as central to the 'good farmer' identity, building on earlier notions of self-sufficiency and self-reliance but now differentiating between the 'good farmers' who were able to adapt to the changing economic and policy environment and the 'bad farmers' whose exit from the industry should be accelerated to create a more prosperous farm sector.

As Don McGauchie (1998) explained at the 1998 conference of the HR Nicholls Society:

Competition is not an end in itself. It is not a virtue of itself. It is something that we have to do in order to have more jobs and to have better jobs for the majority of our people. Of course, in that whole process we run into what I think is one of the great paradoxes and that is you have to shed jobs often to create new jobs. If you are going to continue to evolve the economy in a modern way so often you have to shed many jobs in order to open up the new ones that are there. Otherwise, of course, we would all be subsistence farmers. The logic is so obvious and yet it is not always clear to people who have to live through it.

This statement describes job losses through economic restructuring caused by competition as a necessary part of the evolution of economies – a logic that reflects 'obvious' common sense thinking integral to 'modern' policy making. Such examples illustrate how competition and efficiency came to be developed as policy truths, both in agriculture and more generally.

The 'Agriculture – Advancing Australia' package, implemented by the Howard Government, further extended the construction of good farmers as business-minded, entrepreneurial and self-reliant. Reflecting on this policy approach, Howard government minister Warren Truss (2000) said:

The government has assisted farmers to enhance their skills in such key areas as risk management, business planning and natural resource management. The modern farmer must be part producer, part market analyst and part natural resource manager [...] The AAA package has helped farmers to improve their business and risk management skills and to become more self-reliant.

These skill development programs, such as the Farm Management Deposits program and the Farm Business Improvement program, aimed to develop farmers self-reliance through skill development (Howard 1997; Truss 2000; Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry 2004). The construction of presumed skills such as business development, risk management and marketing as integral for the good farmer highlight the type of farmer that is being constructed in this process.

Conclusions

This article has sought to contribute to the existing literature on neoliberalism by analysing how its key values and ideas influenced policies and practices in the Australian wheat industry during the last three decades of the Twentieth Century. It shows that the discourse constructing the 'good farmer' as self-reliant and entrepreneurial and 'good policy' as maximising efficiency through free markets are closely interlinked. Each of these constructions was made possible through the network of discourses, including government reports, comments in rural press by farmers, politicians and industry leaders, government policy and reports and publications by industry groups.

The growing influence of mainstream agricultural economists on policy making from the 1970s onwards contributed to the emergence of concepts such as efficiency and competitive markets as central values around which agricultural policy should be focused, and to the marginalisation of alternative perspectives. As is evident in the work of Mauldon and Schapper (1974) and LeCouteur (1971), the construction of farms as 'units of resources' sought to minimise the significance of farmers themselves. What mattered was the productive use of farmland and that these resources were controlled by the most productive operators to ensure maximum benefit for the farm sector and the broader Australian economy. Thus, the exits of 'unviable' farmers from the industry was framed as beneficial outcome of good policy making. As previously noted by Pritchard (2005), this represented a radical departure from post-World War II agricultural policy, which created the framework for the larger-scale deregulation and privatisation initiatives that were implemented extensively in Australian agriculture, as well as other industries, throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

The IAC's influence was particularly significant in the shift from collectivist-policies, such as statutory wheat marketing, towards the focus

on 'free markets' evident in agricultural policy making. For example, the IAC (1983, 1988) claimed that collective wheat marketing undermined industry efficiency, restricted growers' choice and reduced growers' capacity to seek maximum prices for their grain. Arguments supporting collective wheat marketing had previously emphasised the need to protect growers but, in a context where allocative efficiency and the exits of less-efficient farmers had become key policy objectives, that former ambition was framed as being counterproductive. As this study shows, throughout the 1980s, farm lobby groups reproduced these constructions, pointing to the need to reduce 'costs' arising from other industries, such as transport and the ports, which were perceived to be undermining the viability of individual farmers. In this regard, reforms promising greater competition, efficiency and productivity through deregulated markets were positioned as essential measures to address the continuing economic malaise that was said to have been created by 'protectionist' policies. These reforms were posited to be inevitable, representing common sense thinking that would ultimately 'put more money in growers' pockets'.

The changing constructions of the farmers themselves is integral to this analysis. From the 1970s onwards, policy discourses created distinctions between the good farmer – framed as being modern, self-reliant, business-minded and entrepreneurial, and wanting choice and control over how they sell their wheat – and the bad farmer destined to depart the industry. As these ideas became more entrenched in the 1990s, policies such as the 'Agriculture – Advancing Australia' package sought to connect government support to farmers' demonstrated capacity to be 'business-minded'. Alongside concepts of competition, individualism and efficiency in policy making, such constructions were used to depict farm viability issues and farm failures as resulting from individual farmers' incapacity to act rationally and demonstrate modern, entrepreneurial decision making. Farmers were conceptualised less in terms of their relationships with communities or with the land, but as individuals whose potential for longevity in the industry and, by extension, longevity in their communities, was determined by their capacity to be competitive and conduct themselves as self-reliant individuals. This 'modern' conception of the 'good farmer' was positioned as an essential response to the inevitable opening up of markets to global competition.

These constructions also contributed to de-legitimising policies with more collectivist characteristics, such as statutory wheat marketing, that were portrayed as helping bad farmers to remain in the industry, at the expense

of good farmers, the nation and the consumer. Deregulation was thereby framed as an essential measure, serving to both facilitate allocative efficiency and support the entrepreneurialism of good farmers. In the name of supporting the overall productive capacity of the farm sector, farmers (particularly smaller-scale farmers) were marginalised in the dominant discourse and many of them effectively structured out of the industry.

Farm lobby groups performed a significant role in facilitating this shift. Claiming to support improved economic prospects for farmers, farm lobby groups reproduced the neoliberal discourses of competition, efficiency and self-reliance, legitimising these discourses in Australian policy making. 'The farmer' was constructed as an independent individual who was being unfairly punished by unionised labour and government monopolies; and this construct was used by farm lobby groups to argue for deregulation, privatisation and industrial relations reform. Ultimately, this served to further entrench policy 'truths' of rationalisation, competition and entrepreneurialism within agriculture and beyond, with governments, most notably the Howard Government, aiming to facilitate accelerated deregulation and structural adjustment in the name of encouraging allocative efficiency and productivity growth. Such policy shifts undermined the viability of many smaller farmers and rural communities.

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