

# Farmer Representation in Australia: Avenues for Changing the Political Environment

Darren Halpin  
Critical Social Sciences Research Group  
University of Western Sydney (Hawkesbury)

Peter Martin<sup>1</sup>  
Critical Social Sciences Research Group  
University of Western Sydney (Hawkesbury)

*This paper focuses on changes in the way Australian farmers have sought to influence their political environment. A taxonomy of avenues for change is constructed and used to illustrate the broad transitions in the way farmers have engaged with the formal political process. It is argued that Australian farmers have proceeded from parliamentary/electoral through militant/sectoral forms of action, and are currently pursuing sectoral action supplemented by promotional and consultative actions. Using the New South Wales Farmers' Association (NSWFA) as an example, we show how these changes in political engagement relate to a number of trends in the economic and political environment, for example economic deregulation, electoral change, administrative change, the declining economic significance of agriculture and the increasing impact of sociopolitical movements. These trends and perceived inadequate responses by sectoral interest groups and political parties have also led to rural people experimenting with alternative political avenues such as new 'populist' movements, rural summits and social movements such as Landcare and Women in Agriculture. The significance of Landcare as an avenue for renewal of rural identity and new forms of rural governance is briefly outlined.*

## Why Do Farmers Need a Political Voice?

The need for active representation of agricultural interests to government has proved necessary in response to the impact of broad domestic, and subsequently international, commodity markets on isolated producers. These forces have placed pressure on producers to optimise efficiency in order to remain a competitive supplier of a product. This pressure has progressively intensified through advances in technology and transport, in addition to rapid trade liberalisation. Moreover, this technology has bred secondary manufacturing industries (agribusiness), again altering the relationship between producer and consumer. The need for farmers to navigate this 'off-farm' political landscape has over time resulted in the formation of local producer groups, a parliamentary party and ultimately a set of state- and commodity-based sectoral interest groups under the umbrella of a national peak organisation.

The tactics of representative organisations with a rural constituency have traditionally reflected the assumption that their interests

were inseparable from those of the nation, a feature of 'countrymindedness' (Aitken 1985:35). Hence, demands for action presented to the government was done so with anticipation of government compliance.

The structural and broader economic conditions, which enabled agricultural interests to have a significant impact on policy development in Australia, no longer exist. Importantly, conservationists have joined farmers and indigenous people as those most commonly thought of as land managers. This development has added to the complexity of any policy outcome and threatened the primacy of agricultural interests in economic, environmental and agricultural policy formulation. Further, it has altered the mode in which farmers seek to affect the political environment. A sectoral interest group complemented by consultative mechanisms, directly between farmers and government, and more locally-based participatory movements have replaced a dedicated 'farmers party' as a way for farmers to have input to policy and contribute towards its implementation.

The emergence of formal and 'peak' sectoral interest groups to represent farmers'

interests has not taken place unnoticed. Many observers in Australia (Richmond 1979; Matthews 1980; Teather 1996; Trebeck 1990; Warhurst 1994; Connors 1995) have contributed to this debate by charting the histories of a number of peak interest groups in Australia. Likewise, Martin (1995) commented on the increasing impact that more locally organised forms of action are having and their potential for political action. However, these accounts, with the exception of Teather (1996), do not give due attention to the way in which the dominance of farm interest groups as the political voice of the farming community is challenged. Further, their focus on organisational forms limits debate to matters of political organisation and function, rather than the broader issue of the types of representation farmers have available. In this article, we chart the development of sectoral (farmer) interest groups in relation to the different 'avenues for change' and the economic and political pressures on the rural sector. We then discuss the emergence of alternative political movements in relationship to these pressures and the perceived inadequacy of the dominant form of representation through sectoral/peak interest groups.

### A Political Environment?

The notion of an environment is helpful as it differentiates between the on-farm decisions which the farmer has almost complete

discretion over and those decisions made externally which the farmer must contest in order to exercise some control. This environment can be defined as that which exists outside the farm gate. Hence, it encompasses a wide range of influences, including physical factors such as the climate, economic factors such as market fluctuations, and political factors such as the regulatory and administrative framework.

Farmers can exercise little control over physical factors such as the climate. Farmers are, in market terms, commonly referred to as 'price takers' (Craig and Phillips 1983:416). That is, they are limited in their capacity to influence the forces that dictate the market price for their commodity. While they may influence supply, by pursuing a strategy of withholding produce in order to raise prices, this would have little impact in a global market place. Farmers can also be considered 'policy takers' (Offe 1981:139). That is, within a model of policy development that emphasises tripartite depoliticised consensus seeking, farmers' position in relation to production (typically representing neither capital nor labour) is disempowering. This article is concerned with farmers' influence over the political environment. That is, it examines the ways in which farmers have progressively become policy takers and how they may be able to change this role in the future.

**Table 1: Avenues Available to Farmers for Changing the Political Environment**

Forms of Action	Relevant Examples
Electoral/Parliamentary	Voting for or working through existing parliamentary parties.
Militant	Protests and withholding produce.
Sectoral	Farmer interest groups. NSWFA and other NFF member organisations.
Promotional	Education and information programs to develop, among urban dwellers, an understanding of, and empathy for, farmers and agriculture.
Consultative	National Rangeland Strategy and Farming for the Future.
Non-Sectoral /Social Movement	Social or community-based organisations. Landcare, Rural Women's Network and local organisations such as Progress Associations

## Avenues for Change

The options for farmers to alter the political environment, and hence attempt to modify their role as 'policy taker', fall into six major categories<sup>2</sup> (see Table 1). These forms of action, while separate by definition, are often blended with one another in practice. In fact all of these avenues can be found simultaneously however, at any one time a particular avenue arises as the most *dominant* avenue of representation. It is important to recognise that these six categories are only representative of the direct options available to farmers and do not represent any kind of theoretical continuum or logical progression. A lack of cooperation, refusal to participate and other unorganised forms of resistance form a legitimate strategy of influence. Further, while these categories usually take specific organisational forms, they are types of action, not types of organisations. For instance, in the political system currently prevailing in Australia, sectoral action would normally take the form of an interest group, while parliamentary action would usually result in working through an existing party. However, militant action can be used by an interest group, social movement or political party, and similarly an interest group may work through parliamentary parties. As will be discovered, the success of these measures in delivering real policy change, and the mix of strategies employed, has changed throughout the history of organised agriculture in this country.

A brief historical analysis of farmer representation in Australia is presented below using the typology (Table 1) to define and identify variations in the 'avenues for change' used by farmers. Following this analysis, a framework will be advanced to explain the dominance of sectoral interest groups and the current challenges they are facing.

## Historical Shifts in 'Avenues for Change'

One of the most significant shifts in 'avenues for change' has been a move from electoral/parliamentary forms of action to a militant style of sectoral action. This was indicative of agriculture's resistance to the growing political challenges to its assertion that pursuing the agricultural 'well-being' is equivalent to pursuing the 'national interest'. The current era

is characterised by a further shift that is comprised of a mixture of non-militant sectoral action and consultative action. Farmer sectoral interest groups are undertaking promotional campaigns in order to respond to other, more urban based, interests whose advocates have succeeded in influencing the political agenda despite their lack of economic power.

### *Electoral/Parliamentary Action*

Farm organisations arose in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Ellis 1963) in response to intra-sectoral disputes and attempts to form national and state organisations. Further animosity emerged from class distinctions between those who owned the land and those who were farmers as a result of subdivision and closer settlement policies (Graham 1966). Their most immediate task was to oppose the turn of the century attempts by unions to stamp some authority on the rural political landscape. Consequently they became involved in party politics which culminated in the formation of the Country Party of Australia which represented rural interests in parliament (Graham 1966). The political function of farmer interest groups was initially as a support for parliamentary/electoral action.

During the first part of this century farmers, political energies were focused on establishing and sustaining the Country Party. Despite breaking away from the party in a formal sense in the 1940s, farm organisations nevertheless maintained a close relationship. Therefore, in the 1950s and 1960s electoral support for rural interests, expressed through the National Country Party (NCP), appeared the most effective way to influence the political environment (Trebeck 1990). The Liberal/Country Party coalition was ensconced as the dominant party political force, governing Australia for 12 out of the 15 years from 1966 to 1980 (Jupp 1982:48), and rural interests were catered for willingly. The national interest, in economic and cultural terms, was to some extent defined by agricultural and rural Australia.

It was a time of protection, subsidy, technical modernisation and expansion, all made possible through the support of the federal and state governments. The caretaker Prime Minister, John McEwen (1967–68), was a

farmer and a supporter of tariff protection, as was his successor, the Liberal and farmer from Victoria, John Gorton (Jupp 1982:50). Subsequent to Gorton, and the brief life of the Whitlam government, the Fraser government of 1975–1980 had ‘... retained a hard core of Country Party members who were unlikely to support cuts in any public expenditure that benefited primary industry’ (Jupp 1982:49).

In terms of political representation, there was little need for farmers to present themselves as a homogenous block. That there was a multitude of regionally and commodity-based farmer organisations around in NSW until the 1970s is testament to this. The widespread view that the nation was reliant on the rural sector for its prosperity meant that little political scrutiny was placed on the rural sector. Despite protestations from McEwen, among others, that farmers should ‘speak with one voice’, there was never any real likelihood that the farm community was at risk of being left out of the policy process should it not conform (Campbell 1966).

The Whitlam Labor government removed the direct governmental representation of rural interests. In 1974, Whitlam created the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC) to replace the Tariff Board. The IAC scrutinised the assistance the farm sector received, demanding pro-professional presentation and reasoned economic, rather than emotive ideological, argument. To supply professional economic argument, primary producer organisations needed to become ‘professional’ by employing tertiary-educated staff.

The initial resistance to the IAC subsided as early reports illustrated that the level of assistance to agriculture was below that generally perceived by the public. Often the reports agreed with many of the points made in primary producer organisations’ submissions to the commission (Trebeck 1990:135).

In fact it was only the Country Party that opposed the mechanism. It was concerned that the IAC would threaten the relationship it had with the primary producer organisations, that is, the use of agricultural policy as a way to sure up electoral support regardless of whether it was against the public interest or even the long-term interest of agriculture (Warhurst 1982:21–2). Regardless of this resistance the lasting impression of the IAC on the conduct

of farm policy was the addition of an economically rational thread and its integration into main-stream economic policy-making (Warhurst 1982:32; Martin 1989:4). It had the additional effect of placing sectoral farm interest groups at the fore of representing farmer’s interests.

#### *Militant/Sectoral Action*

The Whitlam government of the mid-1970s and the subsequent Hawke Labor government of the 1980s brought a quick end to the electoral form of political action. The National Party, having dropped ‘Country’ from its name, was weakened as a political force, and hence rural Australia lost its powerful and direct link to the parliamentary process. It had broadened its electoral base beyond the farming community in response to changing demographics in its traditional seats (see Costar and Woodward 1985). The action that followed was sectoral in nature, that is, it was inspired by the amalgamation of a number of smaller fragmented farmer interest groups. This level of formal organisation was associated with expressions of militancy, utilising rhetoric and imagery to mobilise farmers into rallying against threats to rural Australia. The newly formed National Farmers’ Federation (NFF) coordinated the defence of rural interests, an espoused role which caused some early tension with the National Party (Costar 1997:132).

The agricultural policy process changed quite significantly shortly after the formation of the NFF and the subsequent election of the Hawke Labor government in 1983 (Gerritsen 1987). Public rallies by farmers in Canberra and other state capitals during 1985 signalled the intentions of farm interest groups. This, however, laid the foundations for a less politicised form of policy development. In Hawke’s 1986 policy statement a change in approach was detectable. The statement concludes that:

In its review of economic and rural policies, the government has identified many areas where little progress can be achieved by government alone. We are looking for a full commitment from rural groups generally, and farm organisations in particular to join us in developing specific courses of action in these areas. We have suggested machinery to facilitate this process (Hawke 1986:1).

The formation of the Rural and Allied Industries Council (RAIC) was part of the new corporatist 'machinery' which the federal Labor government established in order that its reformist agenda be successfully implemented. The NFF and its affiliate organisations took up the corporate role, as articulated by Hawke. The aggressive policy position of the NFF was accompanied by active participation in, and detailed representations to, various quasi-governmental committees and commissions such as the IAC, the Australian Agricultural Council (AAC) and the Economic Planning Advisory Council (EPAC).

The NFF increasingly pursued the rationalisation of the farm sector, that is, the removal of inefficient farmers and the restructuring of the agricultural sector into a competitive export-earning sector of the economy. Instead of pursuing further government assistance it adopted an economic rationalist stance and identified '... individual inefficiency amongst farmers and wage inflexibility in the wider community as two of the main problems facing agriculture' (Lawrence 1987:201). This policy program has had the effect of developing a 'myth' that the solution to the agricultural sector lies at the feet of the individual farmer and that they must increase productivity/efficiency or leave the industry (Lawrence 1987:201).

Rural policy under the transition from the Hawke and Keating governments to the Howard government is characterised more by continuity than change (Cockfield 1997:168). Perhaps the only major difference is in the expectations of the rural constituency that a Coalition government will deliver reform more quickly than a Labor one, particularly in the area of industrial relations (Connors 1997:72). While farmers primarily pursue policy change through sectoral interest groups, and the National Party can no longer be considered a purely sectoral one, there is a clear expectation that the Coalition government will support farmer interests. Since its formation, the NFF has dealt primarily with Labor governments, so the election of the Howard-Fisher government provides an indicator as to their relationship with the National Party in government.

While the relationship between the NFF and National Party was not imbued with the tension of the early 1980s, the Howard-Fisher

government's first budget was cause for significant consternation among the farming constituency. It became clear that cabinet was seriously considering cutting the Diesel Fuel Rebate Scheme (DFRS) which prompted farm organisations to warn the Primary Industries Minister, and National Party deputy leader, John Anderson, that such a move would risk credibility with his constituency (Dick and Trainor 1996:7). In July 1996, the Federal Minister for Transport and Regional Development, the National's John Sharp, announced the closure of the Regional Development Division and the cessation of funding for country-based Regional Development Organisations (*The Land* 1996a:5). This decision, along with the closure of Australian Taxation Office and Commonwealth Employment Service regional offices, the reduction in Telstra's rural workforce and foreshadowed cuts to the ABC, brought tensions between the NFF and federal National Party to a head and prompted the NFF to commission a study into the decline of rural services (Wahlquist 1996:6; *The Land* 1996b:7). The backlash regarding cuts in services was partially ameliorated by the retention of the DFRS, whilst the sale of Telstra was made more palatable by committing a large proportion of the proceeds to the Natural Heritage Trust (Paterson and Dick 1996:3). Additionally, farm 'leaders' have bought the argument delivered by the government that rural development can be best achieved through John Anderson's economic rationalist arguments of fiscal restraint and interest rate reductions. Nevertheless, reports in the rural media indicate significant criticism of economic rationalism and a questioning of Anderson's commitment to the people of regional and rural Australia (Johnson 1998:6; *The Land* 1998:18).

### **Dominant Political Strategies: Sectoral, Promotional and Consultative Action**

The most dominant avenue of political influence is the sectoral approach through farmer interest groups within a corporatist state/interest group relationship. Farm organisations have adopted less militant approaches, and have focused on closer corporatist relationships with the state. The current arrangements are different from much

of the Hawke era (1983–91) with the NFF less critical of government in a public way, and negotiations and policy making are carried out with reduced ‘grassroots’ participation. When disagreements do occur, farmer interest groups are more likely to respond through strongly worded press releases rather than public rallies in Canberra, which was a signature of the campaigns during the early Hawke era.

In addressing the dilemma facing farmers who wished to change their circumstances, a columnist for *The Land* newspaper, and NSWFA councillor, summed up the rationale for the current depoliticised conduct of farm organisations:

These are not short battles to be won by twenty bus loads of farmers waving placards outside Parliament House. It is a long unrelenting war in which we’ll go backwards if we let up for a moment...Our problem is that no matter how angry we may become, we have no leverage, no way to twist arms. Go out on strike? We’re self-employed. Withhold our product? Our competitors would love it...there remains nothing more effective than appointing able and forceful leaders, giving them the resources they need, and getting behind them (Eldershaw 1985:9).

It is sectoral action that is the most dominant avenue for political change, and participation in the farmer interest groups the most dominant manifestation of this form of action.

### **The Evolution of Farmer Interest Groups**

Representative farm organisations in Australia are currently ordered as follows. The NFF is the ‘peak’ body. Under this are state organisations and commodity councils. There are affiliate members, of both the NFF and state organisations, which have limited roles in their umbrella bodies (Trebeck 1990).

The NFF was formed in 1979 as an organisation with which the government could consult in order to formulate acceptable policy. The NSWFA is a state organisation that was formed in 1986 after a vote to change its name from the NSW Livestock and Grain Producers’ Association (LGPA). The LGPA was formed from the merger between the United Farmers

and Woolgrowers’ Association of NSW (UFWA) and the Graziers’ Association of New South Wales. As such, the NSWFA is a good example of a sectoral interest group.

All these organisations (apart from the commodity councils) can be best understood by describing changes in a number of characteristics. They are alike in structure, goals/charters/mission statements, relationship with the state and relationship with the membership. The charters and structures have remained largely intact (at least in intent), whilst their internal and external relationships have altered significantly.

#### *Structure*

These organisations all have a similar structure, comprising a number of decision-making tiers. Typically they have branch, district, regional and state tiers, each making decisions in a manner congruent with the ideals of a representative democracy. Such a democratic process maintains the legitimacy of the outcomes emerging from internal procedures. However, the purpose of some of these tiers, in a policy sense, is questionable.

These democratic processes develop a form of procedural power, which helps to discipline the membership. Once a member’s motion is raised at one tier, it is the responsibility of the next tier of the organisation to act on it. The potential for a member to act legitimately on behalf of the association is extinguished upon the procedural mechanism of the organisation being triggered. If a NSWFA branch member cannot gain district council support then the member has no legitimate right to act on the organisation’s behalf on that issue. This is clearly not a phenomenon limited to farm organisations, but rather a function of a representative democracy in a voluntary organisation.

#### *Goals/Charter*

The goals of these organisations are typically general and phrased in a way that leaves meaning open to free interpretation. This generalisability enables its meaning to be adapted to suit the historical moment. It also allows a broad cross-section of members to relate to them, while fundamental divisions in members’ views on a policy by policy basis remain consistently blurred.

The NSWFA has an elaborate 'Statement of Corporate Philosophy' (NSWFA 1993) which follows:

#### *NSW Farmers' Corporate Objectives*

- To unite farmers into a single, adequately funded and effective organisational structure to enable representation to be made to governments, departments, tribunals, inquiries and other policy making bodies at federal, state and local levels.
- To promote the development and competitiveness of Australian farming. To increase the net outcome and capital growth of the organisation's membership.
- To protect the right of ownership and use of primary production capital assets.
- To maintain and improve the social and environmental well-being of the membership.

#### *NSW Farmers' Corporate Values*

The association believes that the effective pursuit of its objectives will be dependent on:

- Unity of organisation and action by both state and federal agricultural organisations.
- Service to the membership and community.
- Freedom of expression and debate.
- Self-motivation and initiative.
- Responsible, constructive and democratic policy development and implementation.

Of particular note is the way in which these objectives focus on the maintenance of unity within, and identity of, the association. One could argue this merely reflects the organisation's desire to rid itself of the historical divisions that have occurred in NSW. However, the wording would take on new significance were challenges to emerge either from within the organisation or from alternative organisations.

The final point in the NSW Farmers' Corporate Values is of note, particularly references to the words 'responsible' and 'constructive'. In the current policy context this implies that policy will be pursued as long as it produces a more competitive agricultural sector, and protects members' 'right to farm' (as witnessed in the Mabo and SEPP-46 disputes). In reviewing the NSWFA's actions on these issues one could argue that criteria relating to improving the environmental and social well-being of members is afforded

secondary importance.

#### *Internal Relations*

The relationship between membership and the executive/secretariat has undergone immense change over the past 10 to 15 years. The transition can best be described as a move from dialogical to monological relations (Offe 1985a:205; Halpin and Martin 1999). Emphasis in the past was on facilitating the development of better conditions among membership through a process of open discussion. The disputes that emerged were dealt with publicly, the association functioned as a manager of 'conversations' around these issues. Now it provides members with a point of view, informed by their researchers and pre-packaged.<sup>3</sup> The NSWFA is now in effect a sales force for agricultural and economic policy which it has developed in conjunction with the state. It must focus on disciplining the membership so as they will not endanger the 'private' policy development under way with the state, or increasingly, between interest groups and government agencies, commissions or tribunals. This disciplining role was particularly evident during the mid-1980s when the LGPA executive director urged members to wind back their militant behaviour in favour of more subtle means such as direct lobbying of politicians (Dick 1986a).

This transition has had serious implications for the possibility of equality in representation for all members. The lack of critical internal dialogue limits the potential for an awareness and appreciation of the heterogeneity of membership to emerge. The monological nature of communication reinforces the secretariat's perceptions regarding both the needs and constitution of the organisation's membership.

Farm organisations have been constantly criticised for not providing enough information to membership. However, merely providing more information does not necessarily constitute dialogical relations. Information disseminated in a monological manner will do little to draw attention to divergences in material conditions and interests within the association's membership while ensuring that no critical mass of discontent within the organisation can develop.

Farm organisations have been steadily

losing membership over the past decade. In 1973 UFWA and the Graziers' Association had a collective membership of 28,000 (Richmond 1980). In 1996 the NSWFA had a membership of between 13,000 and 14,000. To counter this they have changed the basis on which they seek to attract new members. It would be anticipated that a commitment to the furthering of sectoral causes, the education of an ignorant Canberra bureaucracy and the reinstatement of agriculture as the dominant economic activity in Australia would have been among the rhetoric used by recruitment officers to attract potential members to these organisations. Quite the opposite is the case. New insurance deals, cheaper mobile phone rates and magazine subscriptions are the inducements to join farmer representative organisations. Between 1985 and 1996, there is evidence of a decline in emphasis on lobbying activities as an attraction to prospective members and a greater use of 'membership marketing' as a way to finance group activity.

It is not clear how effective such inducements are at either obtaining members or keeping these members once inducements change. However, anecdotal evidence from the NSWFA suggests it increases net membership, (membership numbers had increased to 15,000 by the end of 1997), but does not aid the retention of existing members. Further, these members, having joined on economic grounds, may not respond to the agrarian rhetoric used by the organisation to both motivate action to back up their policy positions and to discipline them.

### *External Relations*

The interest groups themselves have changed their strategies in a number of notable ways. The most significant change has been their move to couch demands in terms of technical imperatives as opposed to normative ones, that is, the legitimisation of activities in terms of 'interests of the whole' as opposed to 'particularist advocacy' and a 'hidden and dispersed' use of power as opposed to 'open and concentrated' use of power (Offe 1985a). This accompanies the emphasis on unity and homogeneity within membership, and the commencement of a 'corporatist' policy process.

The relationship between these organis-

ations and the state has changed markedly as has been referred to earlier. The *modus operandi* of the past was to politicise issues, through protests and public debate, the aim being to force the government, through public opinion, to support the farmers' proposed changes. It was quite common for farm organisations to endorse conservative political parties, and upon occasions they considered starting their own (Ellis 1963).

The current approach is to form corporate relations within a sector in order to facilitate acceptable and executable policy for each sector. Discussion and allegiances between interest groups are conducted on an issue by issue basis. This is a tremendous change from when ideology would have ruled out partnerships such as those between farmers and environmentalists. In fact dealing with a Labor government would have been considered an act of political heresy.

These organisations are rarely party political despite evidence that the NSWFA and its predecessors have actively lobbied for the downfall of particular governments (Dick 1985:5). For instance, the NSWFA decrees in its 'Articles of Association' (NSWFA 1990):

The Association shall be non-party political and the name of the Association shall not be used in any way which may be construed as party political provided that nothing shall be done to infringe the ordinary civil rights of members or officials acting in a private capacity.

However, informal links do exist, the strongest of which is with the National Party.<sup>4</sup>

The often-observed rise of promotional groups has impacted on rural sector policy negotiations. Their post-materialist messages of environmental protection challenge rural interests in terms of their capacity to be genuine stewards of the land. Rural interest groups have had to adopt the principles of this promotional form of policy crafting in order to maintain some wide electoral and social support, in part to counter the 'green lobby' but also to renew a claim to relevance in the wider economy and community. The NSW Livestock and Grain Producers Association initiated campaigns in 1985 (*The Land* 1985:17) and 1986. In 1986 the campaign had as its theme 'Now's the time to show your hand' (*National*

*Farmer* 1986:13) and was augmented by farmers handing out pamphlets in metropolitan shopping centres outlining rural issues (*The Land* 1986:14). The NSW FA in 1994 (*The Land* 1994:16) launched a new logo and slogan, 'NSW Farmers Association for Growth', and the NFF in 1993 launched its 'New Horizons' policy outline (*The Land* 1993:7).

### **Pressures on Farmer Interest Groups**

The basic function of farmer interest groups is to exert influence over policy. However, a number of changes have reduced their ability to influence policy development or the thrust of government initiatives. These changes can be categorised as the increased pace of structural adjustment/deregulation, electoral and bureaucratic/administrative changes, changes in membership and ideology, changes in economic significance, and finally changes influenced by sociopolitical-political movements.

#### *Increased Pace of Structural Adjustment/ Deregulation*

The state is deregulating sectors of the economy and in so doing relieving itself of much responsibility for the development and implementation of rural policy. The removal of most subsidies and government assistance to rural industries, the winding down of extension services and the move to 50 percent self-funding of industry research under the 'research corporations' scheme are all indications of the removal of the state from agriculture (Gerritsen and Abbott 1990:8).

Deregulation is increasing Australian farmers' exposure to the world market, resulting in a decline in farm numbers, while the productivity and production levels of those who remain have increased markedly. The family farm is still the basic unit of production however, the vast percentage of production is produced by a small percentage of farmers. In fact, '... 70 percent of the total broadacre agricultural output is produced by the largest 30 percent of farms' (Martin 1996).

#### *Electoral Change*

The number of farmers has declined by nearly 50 percent in the last two and a half decades. Therefore as a block they represent less votes

and exercise less power via the electoral system. Significant shifts in population and internal migration patterns have changed the composition of many regional electorates, consequently altering the underlying ideological and economic structure. This situation is best reflected in the National Party's difficulties in maintaining electorates considered agriculturally based and traditionally safe. The National Party has lost support in a number of NSW rural-coastal electorates largely due to an influx of city retirees (Duncan and Epps 1992:438-9), while in the Howard government it has the weakest position than in any previous coalition government (Mackerras 1997).

The Country Party has continually responded to demographic change by repositioning itself in order to gather support with the inhabitants of rural towns and hence relinquished its status as a purely sectoral party. Partly as a consequence of this repositioning, farm organisations that were once overt supporters of the Country Party are no longer affiliated.

#### *Bureaucratic/Administrative Change*

A transfer of power has occurred from the parliamentary aspects of state operations to quasi-governmental structures. New agencies and commissions set up by the state have become a focus for lobbying. Further, these organisations themselves often compete with other interest groups, as they provide advice to the government (often the precursor to discussion on policy development) (Martin 1989). The Industries Commission, the Competition Commission and Industrial Relations Commission are examples of such organisations. These administrative frameworks place decisions out of the government's obvious control, hence leaving rational argument, as opposed to any form of political influence, as the only way to contest outcomes.

Indeed, the former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, in his address to the 33rd Annual Conference of the NFF, congratulated the peak interest group for its approach to policy. He revealed that from a government point of view, there was '... not much more they could ask for ...' from an interest group. The NFF was praised for '... being able to look beyond

sectoral interest ... [and having a] ... comprehensive approach to policy'.

The polarisation of general economic policy development into inter-class mediation has excluded rural interests. Indeed they have been omitted from the definition of Australia's 'national interest'.<sup>5</sup> It would appear that the rural lobby has the national interest defined for it by these tripartite negotiations, and hence is left to craft policy that is within the predetermined overarching 'national interest'. The challenge for these organisations remains to produce policy that is not merely acceptable to the polity ('constructive' and 'responsible' as the NSWFA refer to it), but also congruent with its members' interests.

#### *Changes in Membership and Ideology*

The demise of 'countrymindedness' has been linked with the apparent impending demise of the 'country party'. In some senses, this ideology has also sustained farmers' sectoral interest group politics and hence provided some continuity in the transition from electoral/parliamentary action to sectoral action.

However, ideological differences (whether profound or subtle in nature) have been detected in a preliminary study undertaken with NSWFA members (Halpin and Martin 1995). These differences seem to be between those who accept farming as a business (including corporate farming) and those who resist the notion that farming should be conducted on a purely economic basis (and have moral objections to corporate farming). It appears that these differences may be due, in some part, to the work of extension agencies and the NSWFA, in promoting on-farm 'rational' solutions to cost-price squeeze and market pressures.

Some sections of membership are unconvinced by 'farm as a business'-inspired policy. In order to foster unity, these organisations must simultaneously appear to address both the values of countrymindedness and purely production/economic interests. This may mean that policy is framed in terms of defending the rural way of life (emerging from spatial issues) while the policy is inspired by microeconomic concerns (sectoral). One could argue that the reference by farm organisations to the 'family farm' is an attempt to dovetail spatial interests of farm life with more economic concerns. The appeal of community

based *avenues* for change may be explained by their seeming ability to deal better with both spatial and sectoral interests.

#### *Economic Changes*

The production of the rural sector is less important as a percentage of total exports than it was in the 1950s. According to Fisher (1992), the rural sectors average export share from 1950-51 to 1954-55 was 77 percent while in 1990-91 it was 22 percent. As a result there is a lessened need for the government to meet its demands. The mining and service sectors have emerged as the growth areas for export earning. Further, politicians are continually focusing on information and hospitality/tourism industries as the great growth sectors in the Australian economy.

#### *Increasing Impact of Sociopolitical Movements*

The advent of non-sectoral groups and their involvement in policy development is just one signal that issues are no longer conceptualised as purely production in nature. Environment, animal ethics and land rights are examples of the contemporary issues confronting government. They all involve multiple parties, issues that are not purely production and represent problems which need broad community involvement and commitment to be satisfactorily resolved.

Broadly based social movements provide a new power in interest group politics.<sup>6</sup> Such groups manifest themselves, in Australia, as environmentalists, indigenous peoples and feminist movements. These movements achieve a huge influence over policy from a relatively powerless position within the economy. Perhaps the true power of these social movements emerges from their broad power base, and their success in educating the electorate as to their agendas.

#### **The Emergence of Alternative Political Action**

The political imperative of a farmer sectoral interest group is to convince the state that it speaks on behalf of its membership. To achieve this, it must be able to secure the agreement of its membership once policy is negotiated with the state. Those portions of membership whose

interests are not aligned with the 'public statement' of the associations' policy must be suppressed, which if repeated over time may lead to disillusionment. This level of disillusionment can develop to a point where other 'avenues' present themselves as more appropriate for the articulation of farmers concerns. Offe asserts that:

... those who use non-conventional practices of political action do not do so because they lack experience with (or are unaware of) available conventional forms of political participation; on the contrary, these non-conventional actors are relatively experienced in, and often frustrated with conventional practices and their limitations (Offe 1985b:855).

Resistance to sectoral action through farm interest groups was evident during the mid-1980s, at a time when militancy was being replaced by institutionalised sectoral politics. This form of action, rather than relying on grassroots participation, required a more sustained effort on behalf of a small group of farm leaders. The best known of the small regionally based 'action groups' in NSW was the Canowindra Rural Reform Committee which ultimately spawned the Union of Australian Farmers (UAF). Their members were advocating radical and militant forms of action in order to oppose government's withdrawal of rural services and the high interest rates, tariff levels and fuel taxes. They were also challenging the NFF's status as the representative of farmers. The organisation received some support from the LGPA but only as a result of a threat by its leaders to call an extraordinary meeting of the LGPA and elect new office bearers (Dick 1986a:3; Graham 1986:9). This action is significant in that it suggests the smaller more marginal farmers were cognisant of the limitations of sectoral interest groups in the representation of their interests.

While interest group organisations still remain dominant as the legitimate voice of farmers, volatile membership numbers and heightening internal and external criticism is indicative of significant disquiet about the quality of farmer representation in Australia. In the context of broader rural representation, there is significant concern that established

parties and farmer interest groups are out of touch with rural issues. For example, the NSW Independent MP for Tamworth, Tony Windsor, stated:

I think [rural] people are wondering where the hell they can go. They might be moving away from the National Party in some seats, but that doesn't mean it's a vote of confidence in the Liberal Party or the Labor Party. I think they're searching, and you can see it up this way where people are talking about new states and new parties, new this, new that. It's an expression of frustration. They're searching ('Bush Politics', Background Briefing, Radio National 22 September, 1996).

Aspects of this searching and frustration are clearly evident in the rural and national media. The recent 'line in the sand' drawn by farmer interest groups regarding native title on pastoral leases is symptomatic of a frustration with the political process and their perceived lack of influence. More significantly, it reflects a reaction to rapid change in the political, economic and cultural environment of rural people and increased pressures for what might be called the 'de-traditionalisation' of rural life.

The general dissatisfaction with the economic focus of farmer interest groups and the National Party and the development of new political issues that are perceived to challenge traditional rural life have resulted in a differentiation of political action as rural people explore different avenues for political influence and social change. These avenue' vary widely, from the development of new populist parties, rural summits, the appearance of local extremist groups, to the growing influence of social movements such as Women in Agriculture and Landcare.

It is these latter movements that signify a potential 'new politics' in rural Australia. Recent research on Landcare (Martin and Halpin 1998) indicates that Landcare has some attributes of what has been termed 'new social movements' (see Offe 1985b). While Landcare development has been heavily influenced by government support and funding, it has also attracted considerable support from a wide range of different interests, such as environmentalists, state officials and academics. Landcare appears to be inclusive of

this diversity of interests while at the same time maintaining a degree of cohesiveness. This is achieved through the general commitment to core values of autonomy and participatory grassroots action, which, while similar to the communitarian, particularist and localist concerns of rural ideology (Beus and Dunlap 1994), is also accompanied by strong, modernist themes, such as improving quality of rural environments within the context of a 'modernised' and productive agriculture. Landcare has also a strong theme of learning for change and so is concerned with renewing rural life (in particular domains). The political mode of action here is not so much creating direct demands on the formal political system but reclaiming a form of local governance that is firmly anchored to rural peoples' experiences and identities (Martin and Halpin 1998).

## Conclusion

The trends outlined in this paper illustrate the immense forces that are marginalising the importance of rural industry in Australia. These forces have slowly diminished the political efficacy of farmer interest groups, just as they did to electoral action and the Country Party, and hence place under question the logic of sectoral action as the most appropriate avenue for political change. In the past 20 years there have been significant indications that less institutionalised forms of representation may emerge and challenge the current structures.

Farmers have limited alternatives to influence their political environment. The choice of alternatives at any particular time has related to a number of important socioeconomic and political factors. In the past, farmers have been able to rely on direct electoral influence through the Country Party, and as influence through this avenue declined through changing demographics and reduced sectoral influence in the economy, farmers relied more on militant action. This militancy paved the way for the current predominant avenue of influence through sectoral interest groups in corporatist relations with the state.

With the more recent development of broad social concern with the quality of rural environments and native title, farm 'leaders' and their organisations have also engaged in

promotional action aimed at developing empathy and support for their position. Consultative action has also been used to negotiate reforms particularly in the environment domain. Overlapping with these developments has been the development of alternative forms of social engagement and political influence through a diverse range of institutional forms.

The development of alternative political behaviour in rural Australia is instructive in terms of how we might conceptualise rural politics and social change. Developments in rural women's groups, community participation in catchment planning, the NSW rural summits, strategic planning for rural towns, to name a few, to a certain extent signify a lack of confidence in the formal political process (interest groups and the party system) to sustain and develop rural life. It could be argued that these developments denote a trend towards a renewal of rural governance that is intimately related to cultural and social renewal, and firmly situated within reach of local rural people. These trends also point to the need for political science to be as much aware of the 'political' dimensions of social change as the dynamics of interest group politics in the formal political sphere.

One may well expect that an increased participation in social movements, as foreshadowed by the initial success of Landcare, will facilitate a more effective avenue for change for those excluded from the representation offered by sectoral interest groups. Whether this will emerge *out of* or *despite* formal organisations such as the NFF or NSWFA is yet to be seen.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Annual Meeting of the Australian Political Studies Association, October 1996. We wish to acknowledge the valuable comments of the two referees.
2. This list is derived, in part, from Matthews and Warhurst (1993:88–92), and Matthews (1980:447–73). These authors categorise organisations based on the characteristics of their members. Given that farmers are producers, their interest groups are producer groups. The list proposed in this paper describes the range of action available to farmers and the types of organisations which most often facilitate or act as a vehicle for such action.

3. The 'farm as a business' philosophy is an example of pre-packaged policy.
4. The daughter of a recent Vice President ran as the National Party candidate for the NSW Lower House seat of Southern Highlands, while the long serving Policy Director of the association has taken up the position of adviser to the Deputy Prime Minister, and National Party leader.
5. They have been marginalised in terms of an economic definition but are still prominent in the mythology and cultural material from which the definition of what it means to be Australian is derived.
6. This challenges the position that interest groups and social movements are two distinctly different propositions whose relationship is not worthy of exploration. To be successful, interest group activities also need to anchor themselves in civil society. It is the shift in commitment, within a constituency, from one form of action to another that leads to an organisation losing dominance as a group's political representative. It is at this level that all sorts of political organisations are alike and can consequently be compared.

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