

Transitions between Formations and Organisations: An Historical Perspective on the Political Representation of Australian Farmers

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The political representation of Australian farmers merits more attention from an historical perspective. Drawing upon the existing wealth of organisational histories it is argued that one can identify a number of shifts in the dominant organisational form or strategy pursued by primary producers in seeking political representation over time. Each phase has its own logic and rationale rooted in a range of historical conditions. The article identifies the importance of the pattern of social interaction, economic conditions and the prevailing political process in catalysing transitions between “phases” of representation. It concludes that the current debate over representation amongst primary producers and rural communities should be interpreted as the precursor to yet another phase of representation.

Introduction

A flurry of amalgamations of farm interest groups in the late 1970s produced a peak interest-group structure in the National Farmers’ Federation (NFF). The formation of the NFF in 1979 signalled a new phase in the political representation of primary producers. It evidenced a clear departure from a *reliance* on the party political system to effectively transmit the interests of farmers to the political sphere. Further, it signalled a determination by farmers to present a united position to government in order to maximise influence. The NFF is a federation of state farm organisations (SFOs) and commodity councils (CCs). At present, the NFF family² of interest groups is the recognised voice of Australian primary producers.

The NFF has played a central role in facilitating change in Australian agricultural policy and economic policy more generally.³ Amidst advocating a shift towards a liberal agricultural trade policy paradigm and playing a role in achieving such a

¹ I would like to thank the Journal’s anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

² The NFF does not have the constitutional mandate to intervene in disputes between commodities or states. The high degree of interplay between organisational units establishes the NFF as a coherent “family” of organisations, therefore, in this paper, the term NFF family is deployed to refer to the NFF, SFOs and CCs. Clearly, the term “NFF Family” can hide what is a complex set of interrelationships and significant diversity and conflict. The federated structure provides space for NFF leaders to exercise considerable autonomy from individual farmer members by virtue of the SFOs’ willingness to deflect or absorb demands.

³ M. Keating and G. Dixon, *Making Economic Policy in Australia: 1983-1988* (Melbourne, 1989); D. Trebeck, “Farmer Organisations” in D.B. Williams, ed., *Agriculture in the Australian Economy* (Sydney, 1990); W.D. Coleman and G.D. Skogstad, “Neo-Liberalism, Policy Networks, and Policy Change: Agricultural Policy Reform in Australia and Canada”, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 30 (1995), pp. 242-263; T. Connors, *To Speak with One Voice* (Canberra, 1996).

change, the NFF family always has acknowledged that this would have deleterious economic effects on segments of its constituency via processes of structural adjustment. As one may expect, the role of farm interest groups in the reform process and their relationship with the state has not been unproblematic. Falling membership levels of its state organisations and, more importantly, heightened levels of public criticism suggest a period of member discontent with the NFF family. In the absence of any significant change to the policy position and tactics of the NFF family, significant member disaffection appears to remain. Combined with budgetary concerns, this has catalysed further a debate about the capacity of existing interest groups adequately to represent farmers' interests.

The National Party may not be the dominant mode of farmer representation, but it is still an important, if declining, element in the contemporary representation of farming interests. Like the NFF, its endorsement of trade liberalism, along with its inability to differentiate its general approach from that of the Liberals, and ongoing demographic change associated with long term trends of rural restructuring, has prevented the Nationals from effectively giving voice to growing dissatisfaction.⁴ As such it has suffered the electoral consequences and endured renewed speculation about the merits of amalgamation with the Liberal Party.⁵

This debate about farmer representation has been sharpened by the emergence of "alternative" formations to articulate a range of alternative positions to those of the NFF family, some complementary, others confrontational. These include discussions of a "third party" in politics, the rise of "rebel" commodity groups, and grass roots movements such as the Rural Womens' Alliance (RWA). As the then NSW member for Tamworth, Tony Windsor, commented on the mood in rural Australia:

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.⁶

The accuracy of this analysis was underlined by the emerging fluidity in rural electoral politics and the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party in the 1998 federal election.⁷ Whilst the "rural backlash" did not eventuate in the course of the 2001

⁴ For good overviews of the impact of these factors on the National Party see, C. Duncan, "The Nationals in the 1990s: political party or political rump?" in P. Share, ed., *Communication and Culture in Rural Areas* (Wagga Wagga, 1995); A. Green, "Bush Politics: the rise and fall of the Country/National Party" in L. Bourke and S. Lockie, eds, *Rurality Bites* (Annandale, 2001); N. Economou, "The Regions in Ferment?: The politics of rural and regional disenchantment", *Alternative Law Journal*, Vol. 26, 2 (2001), pp. 69-73.

⁵ C. Teese, "Who will stand up for small business, rural Australia?", *News Weekly* (29 June 2002), p. 12-13. See also B. Costar, "The merger idea and Australia's non-Labor parties, 1917-1990" in B. Costar and S. Prasser, eds, *Amalgamate or Perish? The Future of Non-Labor Parties in Australia*, (Toowoomba, 1990).

⁶ Radio National, "Bush Politics", *Background Briefing Transcript* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 22 September 1996).

⁷ There is some dispute about whether One Nation support was highest in rural and regional areas of Australia or amongst the traditional National Party supporters, like full-time primary producers. See discussion by M. Goot and I. Watson, "One Nation's Electoral Support: Where does it come from, what makes it different and how does it fit?", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 47, 2 (2001), pp. 159-191; R. Davis and R. Stimson, "Disillusionment and Disenchantment at the Fringe: Explaining the Geography of the One Nation Party Vote at the Queensland Elections", *People and Place*, Vol. 6, 3 (1998); B. Grant and T. Sorenson, "Marginality, Regionalism and the One Nation

federal election,⁸ evidence of uncertainty and fluidity remain in other spheres of rural politics.

Discussions of “new” parties, groups and local associations, draw heavily on the apparent success of these as past strategies. However, there is an absence of a systematic treatment of the history of political representation of Australian farmers to inform analysis of these debates. The purpose of this article is to contribute to the work of social scientists grappling with contemporary issues concerning farmer political representation. Further, the intention is to highlight the fact that the contemporary debate within farming and rural communities about political organisation has an historical context.

Politics in the Colony: “The Squatters Council”

Between 1823 and 1842 the colony was administered by the Governor in combination with a Legislative Council which met behind closed doors and whose proceedings were not reported by the press.⁹ The Legislative Council constituted both official members (appointed by London) and unofficial members (appointed from amongst the colonists by the Governor). The Legislative Council was dominated by “[...] the small number of free and wealthy colonists [...]” and had as its aim the “[...] wresting of control of the Colony’s land from the colonial office [...]”.¹⁰ McNaughtan refers to the NSW Legislative Council as the “squatters council”, reflecting the influence that squatters, as the most significant wealth producers and land-holders, had on the political process.¹¹

Post-1842, the parliament was established, comprising two houses which were majority-elected and relatively autonomous. Whilst the Legislative Council took direct power from the Governor, elections only involved a minority of the colonial population.¹² The number of rural seats in early parliaments far exceeded the electoral numbers of pastoralists.¹³ This, coupled with the parochialism of elected members for local issues, ensured that pastoralists’ interests continued largely to prevail. The Pastoralist Association, which was founded in the mid-1840s, was instrumental in squatters exercising influence on Legislative Council members. Whilst this association was instrumental in coordinating action, citizens in the colonial era voted for “[...] local men, or a colonial notable, whose talisman was his ability to get things done for his constituency”.¹⁴

The post-1850s in NSW marked a shift in political power from country to town. The extension of suffrage and other democratic reforms weakened the political hegemony

Vote: Exploring Socio-Economic Correlations”, in M. Simms and J. Warhurst, eds, *Howard’s Agenda* (St Lucia, 2000).

⁸ J. Curtin and B. Costar, “Rural and regional interests: The demise of the rural revolt” in J. Warhurst and M. Simms, eds, *2001: The Centenary Election* (St Lucia, 2000).

⁹ J. Hallam, *The Untold Story: Labor in Rural NSW* (Sydney, 1983), p. 108.

¹⁰ R.M. Hartwell, “The Pastoral Ascendancy, 1820-50”, in G. Greenwood, ed., *Australia: A Social and Political History* (Sydney, 1955), p. 55.

¹¹ I.D. McNaughtan, “Colonial Liberalism, 1851-92”, in Greenwood, *Australia*, p. 107.

¹² According to Hallam, in 1851 the states’ thirty-one electorates were split into three categories; pastoral, country and urban. The pastoralists had a number of their own occupying the country seats in addition to all the pastoral ones. Further, the number of voters per urban electorate was double that of the country and pastoral ones. It was an effective way for pastoralists to maintain their parliamentary ascendancy. See Hallam, *The Untold Story*, p. 109.

¹³ Hartwell “The Pastoral Ascendancy, 1820-50”, p. 68.

¹⁴ D. Aitkin, *Stability and Change in Australian Politics* (Canberra, 1977), p. 14.

exercised by squatters.¹⁵ However, during the same period, their general economic prosperity increased as a result of increases in prices for wool, the weight of fleeces and a reduction in the use of farm labour. The absence of significant wealth independent of agriculture ensured pastoralists' interests prevailed despite reform of electoral and legislative processes.

As the number of free settlers increased they, too, became politically active. The first Free Selectors' Association was formed at Yass, in the Southern Tablelands of NSW, in 1873. Similar associations proliferated throughout NSW. In what became an annual event, a conference was held in Sydney in 1875 for delegates of all the associations.¹⁶ The Free Selectors' Association proceeded to organise meetings to select candidates for the 1877 general election. According to Loveday and Martin, the Legislative Assembly took on a more pro-selector tone from the mid-1870s and the Free Selectors' Association had a recognisable faction within that chamber.¹⁷

By the beginning of the 1880s the factions that had previously characterised the NSW Legislative Assembly were crumbling. A worsening economic crisis catalysed social tensions that favourable economic conditions had largely obscured. As the environment within which primary producers operated increased in complexity — due to technological innovation, changes in marketing arrangements, government legislation and economic conditions — producers started to experiment with diverse forms of organisation. Graham comments:

[The small farmer's] energies were directed to several objectives: at the local level he tried to build up clubs or associations, and gradually to increase their functions; outside the district he gave his support to sectional, regional or cooperative institutions.¹⁸

The period between 1875 and 1900 was a turning point in the political organisation of primary producers. It was through local groups that primary producers came to be aware of transport, trading, banking and tariff issues. Importantly, they became aware that most primary producers were enduring similar experiences and perceived similar threats. This was instrumental in forming a collective identity which addressed “the absence of tradition and the weakness of shared values” that were “characteristic of earlier colonial times”.¹⁹

Formation of Primary Producer Organisations

It is generally conceded that primary producers formally organised into associations in response to the organisation of labour in Australia.²⁰ However, Connors draws attention to the fact that three threads explain the formation of farm organizations.²¹

The most commonly cited catalyst for the political organisation of farmers was the shearers' strikes of the 1890s. Prior to 1890, groups of primary producers were organised principally to deal with local issues and influence the selection of candidates for election, however the new challenge from labour required an organised and direct

¹⁵ Connors, “To speak with one voice”, p. 17.

¹⁶ P. Loveday and A.W. Martin, *Parliament, Factions and Parties: The first 30 years of responsible government in NSW 1856-1889* (Melbourne, 1966), p. 101.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties* (Canberra, 1966), p. 46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.13.

²⁰ Trebeck, “Farmer Organisations”; C. Brown, and J. Longworth, “Agriculture” in J. Henningham, ed., *Institutions in Australian Society* (Melbourne, 1995).

²¹ Connors, “To speak with one voice”.

response at both state and national level. The Amalgamated Shearers' Union was formed in 1886. In 1890, the Australian Labour Federation resolved to halt all the exports of wool shorn by non-union labour.²² In July 1890, the Pastoralists' Union of NSW was established, followed by the formation of the United Pastoralists' Association of Queensland in December of the same year. An inter-colonial conference, held in the same month, resolved to form the Pastoralists' Federal Council (PFC). The first meeting of the PFC was held in March 1891 in Queensland.²³ The Pastoralists' Union of NSW was formed to represent predominantly grazing interests on industrial relations matters. It was renamed the Graziers' Association in 1916.²⁴ The shearing dispute was finally resolved in 1891, when a meeting was held between the Amalgamated Shearers' Union and the PFC. The cessation of disputes around 1904 coincided with the federal Conciliation and Arbitration Act of 1904.²⁵ Despite the existence of formal procedures to deal with industrial disputes, the PFC continued to characterise unions as an ongoing threat to pastoral operations in order to maintain some organisational momentum and guard against membership loss.²⁶

Whilst the graziers were pursuing the unions, small farmers and "selectors" were organising against the graziers. Few farmers operated sheep enterprises, hence their focus was not on the union movement's immediate demands. According to Connors, farmers were upset that the colonial land laws had not freed up the large pastoral lands occupied by graziers.²⁷ By virtue of the political influence of the Pastoralists' Association, between 1820 and 1850 roughly seventy-three million acres was tenanted by less than 2,000 squatters.²⁸ A meeting of a collection of local "selectors" associations took place in Sydney in 1883 to consider a response. Various legislative reforms to the Crown Lands Act were achieved, however exemptions allowed loopholes for graziers. According to Graham,²⁹ once the implications of this Act became clear to farmers, they held conventions to contemplate a further response. At a meeting held in June 1893, the Farmers' and Settlers' Association (FSA) was formed. According to Richmond, "[...] its main objective was to secure sufficient land to enable the would-be selector to make an adequate living".³⁰ The FSA's target was the pastoralists as much as the unions.

The third element was the frustration of wheat producers at the unstable prices and the escalating domestic costs of production. Wheat farmers of the Mallee and Wimmera, and others from areas where government had instituted closer settlement schemes, protested about their inability to make a productive living on existing subdivisions. The disparity in profits between merchants and wheatgrowers escalated demands for market reform and a reduction in tariff protection for domestic industries. Demands for price stabilisation and producer control of marketing processes by the

²² Trebeck, "Farmer Organisations".

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²⁴ K. Richmond, "The Major Rural Producer Groups in New South Wales" in R. Scott, ed., *Interest Groups and Public Policy* (South Melbourne, 1980), p. 72.

²⁵ H. Gill, "Land, Labour or Capital: Industrial Relations in the Australasian Primary Sector", *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 23, 2 (1981), pp. 139-161. See p. 144.

²⁶ Connors, "To speak with one voice", p. 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.17.

²⁸ Hartwell, "The Pastoral Ascendancy, 1820-50", p. 81

²⁹ Graham, "The Formation of the Australian Country Parties", p. 56.

³⁰ Richmond, "The Major Rural Producer Groups in New South Wales", p. 72.

Farmers' organisation ultimately fragmented the position of the Pastoralists' organisation. As a consequence of diversification, some woolgrowers, who were members of the Pastoralists' Union, were also wheatgrowers. They began to demand that stabilisation measures, similar to those granted wheatgrowers through the series of five-year wheat stabilisation schemes, be extended to wool.³¹ Ultimately, these producers retreated from the free-market philosophy of pastoralists and demanded government intervention and market protection.³² In 1931, the Australian Wheatgrowers' Federation was formed. It was a body with which many state and regional farmer organisations slowly affiliated. This left two major national "families" of primary-producer organisations: the Graziers, who maintained a free-market platform, and the Farmers, who advocated protection.

The Decline of the "Local Member" and the Rise of Party Politics

The early organisation of primary producers resulted in the development of a complex of local, regional, state, commodity and federal organisations. The issue of land tenure, in particular, introduced a class dimension to political organisation. Two groups of primary producers were discernible: the small to medium and the large. In New South Wales the small to medium tended to belong to the Farmers' and Settlers' Association (FSA) and the larger to the Graziers' Association.³³ Generally speaking, the farmers, normally on marginal land, had to endure significant hardships compared to their grazier colleagues.³⁴ The graziers' economic prosperity was coupled with political and social importance.³⁵

Despite their class differences these two organisations pursued politics in a similar manner. Politics in NSW during the 1800s was "personal-following politics". Rural members of the Assembly "gained their votes on the basis of how effective they were as pork-barrellers: bringing in a new railway line, post office or courthouse building".³⁶ The importance of the local members as the major conduit of influence was well-understood. Branches of organisations like the FSA in NSW required candidates to endorse their manifesto prior to gaining their support at the ballot box.³⁷ The FSA encouraged branches to set up "electorate organizations" to choose candidates for elections.³⁸ This local leverage allowed both farmers and graziers the luxury of maintaining some influence over parliamentarians whilst continuing to openly display the fragmented nature of primary producers as a group.

As a consequence, local, dynamic primary-producer organisations became the extra parliamentary organisation that the informal "country factions" in parliaments had lacked. Whilst these members of parliament formed voting groups, they had no formal organisational link.³⁹ However, the platform of the farm organisation, which they often endorsed prior to the election, served to bind them together as a group and provide

³¹ Connors, "To speak with one voice", p. 27.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 31; Graham, "The Formation of the Australian Country Parties", p. 65.

³³ Hallam, "The Untold Story: Labor in Rural NSW", p. 29.

³⁴ Hartwell, "The Pastoral Ascendancy, 1820-50", p. 48.

³⁵ A.G.L. Shaw, "Colonial Settlement 1788-1945", in D.B. Williams, ed., *Agriculture in the Australian Economy* (Sydney, 1990), p. 8.

³⁶ Hallam, "The Untold Story: Labor in Rural NSW", p. 14.

³⁷ Graham, "The Formation of the Australian Country Parties", p. 52.

³⁸ U. Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party* (Melbourne, 1963), p. 25.

³⁹ These groupings were often identified under broad banners. For example in NSW the groups supporting farmers' interests were called the "Protectionists".

some degree of consistency in their policy position. This signalled a move from a politics of “influence” to that of “organization”.⁴⁰

Federation changed the nature of parliamentary party politics and dissolved the informal “country” voting blocks which primary producers had used to great advantage. The “party system” forced, at the very least, cooperation between the farmers and graziers. Graham acknowledges: “As the old two-party system, based on Free Trade/Protectionist division, gave way to the new dualism of Liberal versus Labor, most social groups, and the farmers especially, came under pressure to choose sides.”⁴¹

The organisation of labour through the “Labor Party”, post-federation, put a different complexion on parliamentary politics. In the NSW parliament, anti-Labor factions formed (generally under the banner of Liberals) to oppose the Labor Party. However, within these factions the manufacturers, produce traders and merchants had more influence than primary producers.

It was clear that, post-Federation, the power of local politicians acting autonomously was in decline. The new party system required farmers to establish a suitable organisation able to extend influence. The apparent lack of influence in the existing anti-Labor parties left the only real option as a “Primary Producers Party”.

As country factions were being formed less frequently and were proving less effective, the rank and file in the farmers’ organizations felt that the only answer was to form separate parliamentary country parties and to back them with adequate electoral machinery.⁴²

Farmers needed a parliamentary voice that had some organisational and ideological permanency. It had to appeal to the broad spectrum of primary producers; from Labor-sympathising share-farmers and managers through to the Liberal-supporting absentee landowners who controlled vast tracts of pastoral lands.

Primary Producers in Parliament: The Country Party

The resolve of primary producers to form a Country Party was galvanised by a number of major trends. Firstly, there was a general feeling, amongst both graziers and farmers, that “[...] the united Liberal Parties, which they had at first welcomed as a means of defeating the Labor Party, had closed them out from important areas of influence”.⁴³ Labor emerged as an extension of the union movement whilst the Liberals⁴⁴ had increasingly become an agent for urban business interests. Secondly, under the colonial government the local member was relatively accountable and the primary-producer organisations could influence who was elected through local parliamentary pre-selection and endorsement procedures.⁴⁵ However, the new party system dissolved the neat confluence between local members and branches of the relevant producer organizations.⁴⁶ Thirdly, the discontent of wheat-growers who, having expanded in the

⁴⁰ Loveday and Martin, “Parliament, Factions and Parties”, p. 154.

⁴¹ Graham, “The Formation of the Australian Country Parties”, p. 59.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴⁴ The Liberal Party of Australia in its current form did not emerge until the 1940s. In this article the term Liberals or the Liberal Party is used as a short-hand way of referring to the modern Liberal Party and its predecessors. See G. Starr, *The Liberal Party of Australia: A Documentary History* (Richmond, 1980).

⁴⁵ M. Clark, *A Short History of Australia* (New York, 1963). See pp. 200-1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

first decade of the century and borrowed heavily, were not receiving the prices necessary to pay back their debt. Finally, the increasing use of marketing pools for selling commodities played an important role in hastening the Country Party's formation.⁴⁷ Primary-producer organisations were generally opposed to marketing pools because they were perceived as being poorly administered and lacked accountability to producers. The opposition was reversed once producers gained places on pool boards, and cooperatives were granted special status as grain handlers for the marketing boards.⁴⁸ The development of a parliamentary Country Party was a national phenomenon.⁴⁹

Despite the resolve for an encompassing primary-producer party, the tensions between graziers and farmers, inherited from their separate organisations, remained in the parliamentary organization.⁵⁰ The internal divisions amongst primary producers were further complicated by the link between the Labor Party and smaller farmers. Whilst most farmers were involved solely in primary production, a significant number were shearers or farm labourers who had small selections which they were working in their spare time.⁵¹ So whilst most primary producers pinned their hopes on the Country Party, others, primarily small selectors and part-time farm labourers, sought recourse through the Labor Party. The developments in NSW are illustrative of the outcomes achieved across the nation.

Country Party and Producer Organisations Split in NSW

The decline in the relationship between the Country Party and the two producer-organisations was gradual in nature. Even from the very beginning the Country Party had been transferring power from these organisations to the party machine. In 1923 the Country Party's constitution was changed to allow the Central Electoral Council to alter policy without the two producer organisations' approval. The producer organisations' allocation of seats on the Central Electoral Council had remained frozen at five apiece since formation whilst the Country Party increased its allocation. The Country Party's allocation was five in 1927, eight in 1933 and more than fifteen in 1939.⁵²

The United Country Party's lack of electoral success (losing both the 1941 and 1943 elections in NSW) and the expectation that Labor governments would maintain a hold on the political reins, led to high levels of discontent amongst the farm organisations. The members of the FSA were the most strident critics of Country Party performance. Wheat farmers were angry at the lack of price support for their crop and the withdrawal in 1939 of the assistance they were getting. FSA officials conceded that the organisation had lost effective control of the Country Party.⁵³ A concern was expressed that the Association's link with a "discredited opposition" interfered with its industrial aims. The trend towards support for Labor by wheat-growers and smaller farmers meant that the FSA was caught in a position where its political affiliation often

⁴⁷ Graham, "The Formation of the Australian Country Parties", p. 96.

⁴⁸ Greenwood, *Australia*, p. 320.

⁴⁹ See Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, for a full description.

⁵⁰ Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, p. 201.

⁵¹ Hallam, "The Untold Story: Labor in Rural NSW", p. 18.

⁵² D. Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales* (Canberra, 1972), p. 46.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.38.

contradicted the allegiances of its membership base.⁵⁴ Whilst the FSA maintained that political, indeed parliamentary, action was still necessary, it recognised that being linked to a party could prejudice its case when the other party was in government. This set of circumstances prompted a majority vote in 1944 for the FSA to end its affiliation.

The graziers, too, had misgivings about the strength of their association with the Country Party. Some were angry at a lack of progress regarding the formation of new states (particularly in the north of NSW), whilst others were concerned at what they perceived as the intrusion of city interests in the Country Party. Just as the smaller farmers' support for Labor placed the FSA in a difficult position, the support of the wealthier graziers for the Liberal Party placed the GA in a similar position. Ultimately, the removal of the FSA's alliance with the Country Party left the Graziers' Association with no choice but to follow suit. As Aitkin points out, "[...] it would be politically unwise for the Country Party to have the open support of the Graziers' Association only".⁵⁵ In 1945, a vote of fifty-four to forty-nine at the Graziers' Association Annual Conference ended the affiliation between the association and the Country Party in NSW.

The significance of the withdrawal of the FSA and the Graziers' Association in terms of the loss of wealth and organisation is contested.⁵⁶ However, the FSA maintained significant levels of cross-participation with the Country Party at its grassroots and the Graziers' Association still provided significant levels of funding. The Country Party continued to pursue the sectional interests of farmers despite the absence of a formal link. The sectional appeal was merely accommodated within efforts to become broader through the inclusion of town and business interests. Both organisations considered the Country Party the logical parliamentary voice for rural interests and, hence, encouraged members to join.

The FSA and GA in NSW were the last farm organisations to separate from the Country Party in Australia. This ended a process which had started before and continued during the Second World War, and was largely driven in all states by a recognition that the Party had to broaden its electoral base.⁵⁷ Perhaps coincidentally, the 1940s also bore witness to an early attempt at unifying Australian farm organisations federally. Firstly the Primary Producers Council, later to be renamed the National Farmers' Union, sought to bring together the national commodity organisations. Secondly, the Australian Primary Producers' Union sought to have farmers join it directly as individual members. In 1969 the Australian Primary Producers Union (APPU) amalgamated with the National Farmers' Union (NFU) to form the Australian Farmers' Federation (AFF).⁵⁸

Despite attempts to reorganise and unify primary producer organisations, primary producers continued to be represented primarily through the activities of the Country Party. Federally, the Party initially sought to maintain independence from the two other

⁵⁴ N. Marshall, "Rural Interest Groups" in B. Costar & D. Woodward, eds, *Country to National* (Sydney, 1985), p. 27.

⁵⁵ Aitkin, "The Country Party in New South Wales", p. 39.

⁵⁶ Connors, "To speak with one voice", p. 47.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁸ K. Campbell, *Australian Agriculture: Reconciling Change and Tradition* (Melbourne, 1980), p. 198; Connors, "To speak with one voice", p. 113.

parties, rejecting overtures from the Nationalists to form a coalition in 1921.⁵⁹ When it finally commenced its now familiar federal coalition with the other non-labour party of the day, commencing with the Bruce-Page National-Country government of 1923, it was able to secure considerable concessions and exercise considerable strength.⁶⁰ This contributes to explaining why there was not more pressure earlier for a unified primary producer organisation.

The Country Party Loses Relevance

During the 1960s farm organisations maintained a similar relationship to that struck with the Country Party at their formal separation. The Country Party was considered the voice of primary producers in the forum still considered to be the locus of political power — parliament. This mostly served farmer interests well, as a Federal Coalition Government, with a compliant Country Party member as Minister responsible for agriculture, held office from 1949 until 1972. McEwen's now celebrated comment establishes this understanding:

My attitude is that neither the Australian Country Party nor its parliamentary members should decide what is the correct policy for a primary industry. It has always been the policy of my party that those who produce, own and sell a product are the best judges of the way in which their property should be treated. It is the function of my party to see that the will of those who produce and own the product is carried into legislative and administrative effect.⁶¹

In retrospect, McEwen's comment appears to constitute a reassurance to primary-producer organisations that their influence was to be preserved in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. For soon after McEwen's statement, the Country Party reformulated its political strategy. The emergent document from the party's 1966 revision of its policy contained just one page devoted to primary production. Its content reflected McEwen's emerging position that the economic well-being of the nation depended on assisting exporters, including the manufacturing sector. Accordingly, the party was reoriented to seek the support of all "producers", not just *primary* producers.⁶² According to Aitkin, the "Country" in Country Party now referred to the Australian nation as a whole, rather than regional or rural Australia as originally implied.⁶³

Evidence can be found in the statement of the Country Party leader in 1971, Doug Anthony, who outlined the "new chapter in its life" with particular reference to farmers' representation:

⁵⁹ Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p.76.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.96. See also K. West, "From Movement to Party: the NCP and the Australian Democrats" in H. Mayer and H. Nelson, eds, *Australian Politics: A Fifth Reader* (Melbourne, 1980), p. 341.

⁶¹ Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 23 November 1965, p. 3055.

⁶² The reorientation of the Federal Country Party was also transposed onto the NSW context. The state party was contemplating contesting urban and regional city seats (such as Newcastle) to further stabilise the electoral foundation of the party.

⁶³ Aitkin, "The Country Party in New South Wales", pp. 70-71.

When the Country Party says, as it does, that it wants to speak and does speak for country people, it doesn't mean that it speaks just for the farmer. The Country Party believes that there is an invisible common interest linking all country people — farmer, businessman, storekeeper, employer, employee, professional. We see a fundamental interdependence between the rural producer and the people he serves in the towns and who serve him.⁶⁴

It is perhaps also true that the primary-producer organisations needed the Country Party less and less. The Country Party's role in representing primary producers' interests was becoming as much "symbolic" as it was "functional".⁶⁵ The provision of assistance to agriculture was by now the policy of all major parties. Further, the transfer of many government functions to the bureaucracy, such as determining assistance levels, meant that the importance of parliament in fine-tuning policy was declining.

The end of the Country Party as a distinctive "farming" parliamentary presence, evidenced by its attempts to appeal to a broader constituency, left farmers, in a quantitative sense, back where they were in the late 1800s. They had no formal party structure and a weak, fragmented voluntary association structure. It was, of course, qualitatively different. In the 1800s Labor was under-organised, parliament was a collection of parochial members who, at best, formed weak groupings normally based on geographical boundaries, agriculture was economically important, rural seats made a majority of those contested in all state and federal parliaments, and markets were primarily domestic or, in the case of wheat and wool, commodities were shipped, under government agreement, directly to Britain. This environment no longer prevailed.

That the Country Party's core constituency, primary producers, was declining in numbers forced it to rethink its strategy.⁶⁶ As had occurred in the 1940s, farmers again had their views diluted as the party reoriented itself to a broader constituency to ensure its survival.⁶⁷ However, an alternative was hard to find. Local members were swept up in "party politics" whilst farm organisations were poorly funded, employed untrained staff and were largely devoted to industrial matters.⁶⁸ However, it was to the farm organisations that primary producers turned.⁶⁹

The election federally of Gough Whitlam, and subsequently of Malcolm Fraser,⁷⁰ focussed farmers' attention on the need for a coordinated, professional and credible political representative. Whitlam replaced the Tariff Board with the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC) in 1974 which commenced the erosion of price

⁶⁴ D. Anthony, "The Role of the Country Party", in H. Mayer, ed., *Australian Politics: A Second Reader* (Melbourne, 1971).

⁶⁵ D. Aitkin, "Country Party — fortunes and options", *Current Affairs Bulletin*, Vol. 42, 8 (1968), pp. 114-126. See p. 118.

⁶⁶ In addition to a decline in primary producers, rural electorates in the NSW Legislative Assembly were abolished as follows; one in 1949, four in 1949, one in 1961 and one in 1966. See Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales*, p. 69.

⁶⁷ For a thorough examination of the forces at play see Costar and Woodward, *Country to National*. This included a name change in 1974 to the National Country Party and finally to the National Party of Australia in 1982.

⁶⁸ See K. Richmond, "The Major Rural Producer Groups in New South Wales" in Roger Scott, ed., *Interest Groups and Public Policy* (South Melbourne, 1980).

⁶⁹ J.M. Barbalet, "Tri-Partism in Australia: The Role of the Australian Country Party", *Politics*, Vol. 10, 1 (1975), pp. 1-14. See p. 5.

⁷⁰ For detailed discussion of the Whitlam and Fraser governments see A.S. Watson, "Rural Policies", in A. Patience & B. Head, eds, *From Whitlam to Fraser* (Melbourne, 1979).

protection for rural industries. The IAC scrutinised the assistance primary producers received, demanding professional presentation and reasoned economic, rather than emotive ideological, argument. To supply professional economic argument, primary-producer organisations needed to become “professional”. Many started to employ tertiary-educated staff. Whitlam was also responsible for the Green Paper into rural policy and the establishment of the National Rural Advisory Committee (NRAC). Whilst the members of NRAC were appointed by the minister, most were prominent members of existing primary-producer organisations. The Committee became a forum for these groups to garner popular support with members which limited its capacity to articulate “fresh” ideas from the grassroots.⁷¹

Whilst less severe than Whitlam, Fraser continued on with the IAC and reduced producer representation on marketing boards. He did however, reintroduce the petrol price equalisation scheme and an income tax averaging scheme, both of which garnered some rural support.⁷² Despite this assistance, the Fraser government signalled once and for all that the “protection all round” policies of the McEwen era were over. The Fraser government was also significant for its large Liberal majority, which was a turning point in the strength of the National Party in coalition. Rural unrest came to be increasingly represented by farm organisations which in turn tended to go straight to the Grazier Prime Minister Fraser rather than the National Country Party — a pattern to be further reinforced as the farm organisations became more unified.⁷³

The end of McEwenism also confirmed the end of the symbiotic relationship between the Country Party and primary-producer organisations. Significantly, the IAC thwarted the Country Party’s use of agricultural policy as a way to shore up electoral support; regardless of its impact on the public interest or even the long-term interest of agriculture.⁷⁴ The IAC “[...] changed the rules of the policy formulation game”⁷⁵ and, along with the cessation of National Party patronage, reduced the importance of parliament and the minister as primary targets for political influence by farmers.⁷⁶ The need to increasingly couch farmers’ views in terms of the national interest was arguably a factor in the development of the unified structure.

Amalgamation of Farmer Organisations: “Merger Madness”?

The pressure for robust and effective organisations led to an exhaustive process of mergers. Given that organisations would often duplicate work, despite many of them maintaining offices in close geographical proximity to one another, amalgamation was advocated as one way to cut costs and ensure organisational effectiveness. Financial pressure was reinforced by political pressure. McEwen had insisted that farmers speak with one voice in policy representations. Disunity and inconsistency amongst farm

⁷¹ J.W. Longworth, “Green Paper + IAC + NRAC ≠ Rural Policy”, *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 47, 3 (1975), pp. 7-16, see p. 15.

⁷² W.J. Martin, “Lessons from Australian rural policy reform”, *Working Paper No.89/7 National Centre for Development Studies* (Canberra, 1989), see p. 6.

⁷³ West, “From Movement to Party: the NCP and the Australian Democrats”, p.342.

⁷⁴ J. Warhurst, “The Industries Assistance Commission and the Making of Primary Industry Policy”, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 41, 1 (1982), pp. 15-32.

⁷⁵ Martin, “Lessons from Australian rural policy reform”, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Longworth, “Green Paper”, pp. 7-16.

groups, it was argued, would leave government with no other choice but to act on their departmental advice or the advice of other more professional and cohesive sectors.⁷⁷

With the financial and political cost of parallel organisations increasingly apparent, primary-producer organisations commenced the task of amalgamation in the late 1960s — a project largely completed by the end of the subsequent decade. The process started at the State level, where organisations like the Wheat and Woolgrowers' Association⁷⁸ and the FSA merged to form the United Farmers and Woolgrowers' Association (UFWA) in 1962.⁷⁹ This merger left the UFWA and the Graziers' Association as the two major primary-producer organisations in NSW. Further amalgamation took until 1978, when the Livestock and Grain Producers' Association (LGPA) was established. The title of the new organisation illustrates the level of compromise necessary to bring together the two organisations; neither farmer nor grazier mentioned. It is clear that amalgamation had not, in itself, resolved diverging interests, ideologies or identities. Rather, financial necessity from an organisational perspective and political pressure from an external perspective had set aside rather than resolved the heterogeneous interests of the farming constituency.

The pattern of amalgamation was replicated in most states, with the exception of Western Australia and Queensland where regional differences in agricultural production systems made it more difficult.⁸⁰ At federal level the amalgamation process proceeded in a similar manner and in parallel to that in NSW. A working group was established in 1977 between the Australian Woolgrowers' and Graziers' Council (AWGC), the Australian Wool and Meat Producers' Federation (AWMPF) and the Australian National Cattleman's Council (ANCC). Following preliminary reports in 1978, the group was widened to include the Australian Farmers' Federation (AFF),⁸¹ the Australian Wheatgrowers' Federation (AWF) and the Cattleman's Union of Australia (CUA).

The formation of the NFF, a federation of commodity councils and state organisations, was originally set down for 1 January 1979. However, its commencement was delayed by infighting regarding the level of voting entitlements on commodity councils. State organisations such as the NSWLGPA threatened to withdraw financial support for the new organisation if it was not sorted out promptly.⁸² This delayed commencement till 20 July 1979. As with amalgamation in the states, the climate surrounding the formation of the NFF was highly charged, largely owing to tension between whether the new organisation would be dominated by farmers or

⁷⁷ See the strong debate over the pros and cons of unity in K. Campbell, "Australian Farm Organisations: The Unity Issue", *Politics*, Vol. 6, 2 (1971), pp. 148-160; K. Campbell, "Rejoinder", *Politics*, Vol. 7, 1 (1972), pp. 91-92; P. Corbett, "Farm Organisation Unity: Two Comments on Campbell", *Politics*, Vol. 7, 1 (1972), pp. 88-90; G. Harman, and R. Smith, "To Speak With One Voice: Australian Farm Organisations and the Quest for Unity", *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 39, 4 (1967), pp. 66-82; G. Harman, "Farm Organisation Unity: Two Comments on Campbell", *Politics*, Vol. 7, 1 (1972), pp. 87-88.

⁷⁸ This was a breakaway group of NSW wheat farmers who split from the FSA in 1934.

⁷⁹ G. Harman, *Graziers in Politics: The Pressure Group Behaviour of the Graziers' Association of New South Wales* (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1968), p. 142.

⁸⁰ Trebeck, "Farmer Organisations".

⁸¹ In 1969 the Australian Primary Producers Union (APPU) amalgamated with the National Farmers' Union (NFU) to form the Australian Farmers' Federation (AFF). See Connors, "To speak with one voice", p. 113.

⁸² "LGPA threatens NFF pull-out", *The Land*, 5 July 1979, p. 3.

graziers. The original concern was that the first NFF executive, dominated by those from farmer organisations, would lead to a farmer-dominated organisation. However, the secretariat was dominated by grazier organisation staff, perhaps testament to its long-standing policy of employing professional staff.⁸³ This is not an insignificant event. For while the grazier versus farming distinctions came to mean less and less in NFF politics, the lasting effect of the Grazier domination of the Secretariat was the NFF's ongoing and consistently strong advocacy of a trade liberal policy agenda.⁸⁴

The formation of the NFF family in 1979, as the peak "encompassing group" for farmers⁸⁵ in Australia, is the exception rather than the rule for "employer associations" in this country. That the NFF family defies broader organisational trends in business representation suggests that farmers are not a typical case.

Professional Farm Interest Groups

By the end of the 1970s there was an emerging acceptance amongst farmers of the need to adopt more conciliatory tones with governments of both persuasions rather than merely aligning themselves with the Country/National Party. A letter to *The Land* entitled "Forget the Parties" expresses the sentiment of this period in rural politics.

It is patently clear that the only course open to electors in rural Australia is to forget the parties, as all they have achieved in the past two decades is the further destruction of rural Australia.⁸⁶

Farm organisations, such as the NSWLGPA,⁸⁷ put this resolution into effect by banning donations to any political party, ending the practice of distributing National Party electoral material through its branches, and passing motions declaring the organisation non-political. In the context of farmers' disillusionment with parliamentary means of influencing policy, it was significant that the NFF had its initial conflict with the coalition government, led by Fraser, and of further significance that its most heated exchanges were with the National Party's leader Doug Anthony.

The early to mid 1980s was marked by farm militancy. Whilst the amalgamation resolved many financial issues from an organisational perspective, it had not addressed the frustration expressed by many farmers who were unable to find space for the airing of their points of view. Larger farmers were frustrated by their inability to change traditional farm policy.⁸⁸ Some small farmers, disillusioned with the direction of the NFF family — specifically its support of tax measures which favoured the use of farms as tax shelters⁸⁹ — formed their own organisations, both state and federal.⁹⁰

⁸³ Connors, "To speak with one voice", pp. 132-158.

⁸⁴ L.R. Malcolm, "Rural Industry Policies" in B. Head and A. Patience, eds, *From Fraser to Hawke: Australian public policy in the 1980s* (Melbourne, 1989), see pp. 140, 150.

⁸⁵ From this point on the term "farmers" will be used in preference to "primary producers". The establishment of the National Farmers' Federation illustrated that the farmer versus grazier distinction had less contemporary significance. The end of this distinction does not mean that others are not emerging. The preoccupation of the Federation with "high-brow" trade issues that impact mostly on broadacre export industries places it in conflict with members who are producers for a domestic market or part time farmers.

⁸⁶ J. Vallance, "Forget the Parties", *The Land*, 20 October 1977, p. 6.

⁸⁷ In 1987, the LGPA changed its name to the NSW Farmers'.

⁸⁸ For instance, in 1985 a group of grain producers in western NSW formed Graingrowers of Australia Ltd to oppose the policies of the NSWLGPA.

⁸⁹ R. Gerritsen, "Why the 'Uncertainty'? Labor's Failure to Manage the 'Rural Crisis'", *Politics*, Vol. 22, 1 (1987), p. 52.

Rather than address the militancy internally, it focused farmers' energies on the policies of the newly elected Hawke Labor Government,⁹¹ which culminated in the 1985 Canberra farm rally. The strong crowd of farmers marching on Federal Parliament, estimated at 50,000, established the credibility of the NFF family with its constituency.⁹² It also signalled a reaffirmation by the NFF leadership, then under Ian McLachlan, that it would proceed with a strong neo-liberal agenda. This was well demonstrated by the NFF's attack on union power and the pursuance of industrial relations issues more broadly. The NFF focused on activities in the meat industry in what became the Mudginberri dispute.⁹³ A "fighting fund" was established on the day of the rally, which, after subsequent donations from the farming community, supported by the broader business community, created a significant fund from which its campaigns could be financed.⁹⁴ The rally was also significant in that it further eroded the relationship between the NFF and the National Party. The leader of the federal National Party, Ian Sinclair, was denied permission to speak to the rally. This action effectively, as well as literally, removed the Nationals from the role of agenda-setting for rural Australia.⁹⁵

Due to its capacity for militancy the NFF had become an organisation that the Hawke Labor government could not ignore.⁹⁶ However, its developing capacity to mount well-researched and reasoned economic arguments gave its policy position a certain level of respectability.⁹⁷ Most significant of all was the NFF's willingness to exchange some agricultural assistance measures in return for reductions in other areas of the economy.⁹⁸ Instead of pursuing further government assistance,⁹⁹ the NFF adopted an economic rationalist stance and pursued cost-reduction measures, identifying "[...] individual inefficiency amongst farmers and wage inflexibility in the wider community as two of the main problems facing agriculture".¹⁰⁰ This highlighted that the NFF had increasingly more in common with the Liberal than National Party,

⁹⁰These include the Canowindra Reform Group and the Women's Rural Action Group. In combination with other groups these two formed the Union of Australian Farmers which challenged the NFF.

⁹¹ See Malcolm, "Rural Industry Policies".

⁹²Gerritsen, "Making Policy Under 'Uncertainty': The Labour Government's Reaction to the 'Rural Crisis'", *Discussion Paper no.3, Graduate Program in Public Policy* (Australian National University, Canberra, 1987), p. 29, for one, asserts that the farm militancy of the mid 1980s was a tactic by the NFF to divert rank-and-file attention away from internal organisational tensions.

⁹³ Connors, "To speak with one voice", pp. 234-6.

⁹⁴Recent events in relation to the NFF involvement in a stevedoring company illustrates the NFF's willingness to "front" attacks by business on the union movement.

⁹⁵ Connors, "To speak with one voice".

⁹⁶ As Coaldrake (p.17) explains, the NFF formally opposed the Hawke government at the 1987 election with limited success. This prompted the Hawke government to take a keener interest in rural affairs in subsequent terms of government, which set the scene for a more productive relationship. P. Coaldrake, "The Nationals: Where to from here?", *Current Affairs Bulletin*, Vol. 64, 7 (1987), pp. 12-17.

⁹⁷ Malcolm, "Rural Industry Policies", p. 149.

⁹⁸ Martin, "Lessons from Australian rural policy reform", p. 118.

⁹⁹ R. Gerritsen, "Labor's Final Rural 'Crisis'?: Australian Rural Policy in 1990 and 1991", *Review of Marketing and Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 60, 2 (1992), p. 107, rightly identifies that the NFF's philosophy of economic rationalism is intermittently broken by a return to a form of agrarian socialism. The example cited in his article is the call for handouts by the NFF for drought assistance.

¹⁰⁰ G. Lawrence, *Capitalism and the Countryside* (Sydney, 1987), p. 201.

further raising tensions.¹⁰¹ However at the same time the Nationals were also drifting closer towards the economic rationalist position of the Liberals.¹⁰²

The NFF's economic policy positions became the basis for its active participation on, and detailed representations to, various quasi-governmental committees and commissions such as the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC), the Australian Agricultural Council (AAC) and the Economic Planning Advisory Council (EPAC). Further initiatives such as the Agrifood Council and the more recent "Supermarket to Asia" strategy created formal links between business, farmers, bureaucrats and politicians. The NFF family has had to adopt a strategy of lobbying on a policy-by-policy, issue-by-issue basis. This approach is reflected in the NFF's participation in temporary coalitions with other peak groups around specific policy issues. This strategy also reflected a realisation by the NFF that the bush was a declining force in politics and needed allies to exact maximum influence.¹⁰³ The NFF's prominence in economic issues seriously undermined the National Party's claims as the dominant vehicle for farmer representation.¹⁰⁴

Rural policy under the transition from the Hawke and Keating governments to the Howard Government is characterised more by continuity than change.¹⁰⁵ Given the largely non party-political approach of farm organisations since the mid 1980s, there has also been more continuity than change in the approach of the NFF family of organisations. However, as Matthews and Warhurst maintain, for producer groups "party politics does matter".¹⁰⁶ The expectations for positive and rapid change are far greater amongst the farming constituency when a National Party member is Minister for Primary Industry (or the equivalent position) than a Labor member.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, this raises the likelihood of tension where results are not perceived as accruing to rural Australia. Significantly, with elites from both coalition parties seemingly immovable from an insistence on a broadly "economic rationalist" position,¹⁰⁸ the Nationals are in no position adequately to vent rural and farming frustrations. Whilst the Nationals did relatively well in the 1996 election when Howard swept to power, taking eighteen seats, they have subsequently continued to suffer poor electoral results and their incapacity to vent rural angst has given space to the rise of One Nation.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰¹ Economou, "The Regions in Ferment?", p. 71.

¹⁰² D. Woodward and B. Costar, "The National Party Campaign" in I. McAllister and J. Warhurst, eds, *Australia Votes: The 1987 Federal Election* (Melbourne, 1988), pp. 83-108, see p. 103.

¹⁰³ Connors, "To speak with one voice", p. 249.

¹⁰⁴ Economou, "The Regions in Ferment", p. 71.

¹⁰⁵ G. Cockfield, "Rural Policy: More of the Same?", in S. Prasser & G. Starr, eds, *Policy and Change: The Howard Mandate* (Sydney, 1997), see p. 168.

¹⁰⁶ T. Matthews and J. Warhurst, "Australia: Interest Groups in the Shadow of Strong Political Parties", in C. Thomas, ed., *First World Interest Groups: A Comparative Perspective* (Connecticut, 1993), p. 95.

¹⁰⁷ T. Connors, "The farm vote", in C. Bean, S. Bennett, M. Simms and J. Warhurst, eds, *The Politics of Retribution: The 1996 Australian federal election* (Sydney, 1997). These expectations are based on an ignorance of the cabinet system which largely rules out unilateral decision making by the minister in a manner which would advantage one sector over another.

¹⁰⁸ B. Costar, "Coalition Government: An Unequal Partnership", in B. Costar and N. Economou, eds, *The Kennett Revolution: Victorian politics in the 1990s* (Sydney, 1999).

¹⁰⁹ Economou, "The Regions in Ferment", p. 71.

As indicated in the introductory section to this article, the NFF family's implicit acceptance of the inevitability of large-scale farm adjustment has also failed to endear itself to many portions of its constituency. In combination with ongoing internal budgetary problems, it has sparked renewed debate about the NFF's suitability as the political voice of farmers. This theme will be revisited in the conclusion.

Discussion: Periodisation of Farmers' Political Representation

It is possible to review the history of the political representation of farmers in Australia and identify a number of periods within which a particular type of political formation dominated others.¹¹⁰ Tensions exist in each period between the dominant formation and others, in addition to tension between organisations of like strategy. The term "dominant organisation" refers to the entity that is the focus for articulating and aggregating farmers' interests. A change in organisation can be said to have occurred when the entity acting as the dominant articulator and aggregator has been replaced.

As is indicated in Table 1, the history of farmer political representation can be charted with respect to the type of formation, its organisation and the rationale for its ascendancy. This is not meant to imply that farmers collectively *choose* a formation or form of political representation, a vehicle and a target that will maximise their influence. This is difficult to substantiate empirically as one can not point to a single event or discussion in which such matters were decided. It is most probable, as is reflected in the history outlined in the previous section, that political "entrepreneurs" develop innovative strategies and then seek to persuade the constituency of its merits. Farmers then can be said to choose one formation over another by virtue of their support, which gives the formation legitimacy and may lead to establishing its dominance.

¹¹⁰Formation is distinct from organisation. For example, parties, interest groups or movements are formations as they have different political logics or rationales on which they operate. However, the Liberal, Labor and Country parties are competing organisations within what can be called an electoral political formation.

Table 1: Periodisation of Farmers' Political Formations and Associated Organisations

Time Period	Dominant type of Formation	Dominant type of Organisation	Transitional Rationale
Early 1800s-1850s	Grass Roots Associative	Local Associations	Parliaments not accessible by majority of primary producers Issues more amenable to local activity.
1850s – 1920s	Electoral	Local members of Parliament	Extension of suffrage made the local member a valuable political advocate.
Late 1920s-1945	Party Political	Country Party	Party politics made the Country Party a necessary extension of the grassroots-driven associations.
1945-1960s	Party Political & Sectional	Partisan support of Country Party through Primary Producer Interest Groups	Lack of success at gaining majority government convinced farmers that they needed to partially distance themselves from the Country Party and lobby government.
1970s- Early 1980s	Militant Sectional	Farm Interest Groups and militant activist groups	Declining farm numbers forced the Country party to pursue different demographics. Farmers forced to take their specific concerns through their own associations. Lack of professional representation and poor material conditions amongst the grassroots led to militant activity.
Mid 1980s-present.	Professional Sectional	Professional Peak Interest group system. Largely Bi-partisan.	The militancy needed to be restrained to retain credibility with government. New extra-parliamentary forums and financial limitations (external/ organisational considerations) forced professional amalgamated and rationalised farm organisation.

Any periodisation is by definition a “line of best fit” through the available historical data which, in turn, implies that events which are “outliers” are downplayed. It should not be interpreted as overly rigid. As such, the periodisation offered here should not be interpreted as a claim that farmers and political entrepreneurs *have not* and *will not* experiment and deploy different modes than those listed as dominant within any given period. Clearly, there must be forces that shape transitions between formations and organisations, which may build momentum in periods prior to their dominance. Keeping these comments in mind, one should expect to be able to identify a variety of forms of representation within a phase *dominated* by another. For instance, while the

paper argues that militant sectoral activity in the 1970s and early 1980s was replaced by a more professional approach in the mid 1980s, one can point to specific examples where there is evidence of the NFF family inciting direct action, in particular, the Mudgenberri and Waterfront disputes. However, these two actions were part of an overall depoliticised bargaining strategy, whereas past events were part of an overall political strategy that saw primary producers pursuing militancy as an acceptable *modus operandi*. As I have argued elsewhere, contemporary militant activity is most often part of an elite orchestrated strategy.¹¹¹

The history presented in this paper establishes that the transition between formations is catalysed by a range of external and internal factors. *External* factors are felt by the organisation itself and provide it with a set of imperatives it needs to satisfy to maintain its effectiveness and survival. These factors typically reflect the opportunity structures set by the political system. For instance, the establishment of the party system catalysed primary producers to change their strategy of influence from independent local members to a dedicated Country Party. The second set of factors emerges from within the organisation. These *internal* factors reflect the lived conditions and experiences of the constituency the group represents. These factors are driven by the economic, social or cultural experience of farmers. The periodisation is offered as a framework for organising these in a more systematic manner. Consistent with the emphasis this periodisation places on change over time, one must expect that the NFF's dominance is also under challenge. As touched on in the introduction, there is evidence that other forms of strategy and organisation are developing momentum or are being experimented with by farmers. The question of where to now and the current state of fluidity is addressed in the conclusion.

Conclusion: Some pointers to the next transition?

The history of the political representation of farmers is a story of transition from one formation to another; from local grassroots groups, to local independent members of parliament, to parties, and to interest groups. The movement from one formation to another reflected the needs of primary producers to extend influence beyond their locality onto the state and then federal political scene. Up until the 1960s primary producers exercised considerable influence through the parliamentary system, first through a dedicated party and then through associations. When primary producers could no longer maintain a dedicated political party, their emphasis swung back to interest-group politics. This shift in turn catalysed a major set of reforms to the gaggle of primary-producer groups then involved in representational activities.

Within this broader transition, the refinement of the farmer interest-group structure has involved a transformation from organisational fragmentation to amalgamation. Whilst in most cases groups worked together (especially under the joint farmer and graziers' committee which oversaw the running of the Country Party), organisations resisted relinquishing their discrete identities and autonomy. Crucially, up until the NFF's formation, producers organised around divisions that correlated with land ownership, wealth and social status. The amalgamations of the late 1970s were, therefore, hard won.

¹¹¹ D. Halpin, "Action Frames and Incentive Management in Farmer Interest Groups: Changing the Logic of Collective Action" in G. Crowder, H. Manning, D. Mathieson, A. Parkin and L. Seabrooke, eds, *Public Proceedings of the Australian Political Studies Association 1997 Conference* (Flinders University of South Australia, 1997).

The National Farmers' Federation family of organisations is now ensconced as the dominant avenue for the political representation of farmers' interests. According to Connors: "Today, a farm organisation's reputation is judged more on the quality of its research and presentation than the noise it can make in the media or its influence with the National Party."¹¹² It appears the NFF came to concur with these remarks and has conducted itself accordingly — with, of course, the notable exception of the Mudgenberri and the more recent Waterfront disputes.¹¹³ This "insider" strategy has paid off in the opinions of federal parliamentarians and journalists. A recent ANOP survey concluded that: "The NFF was considered clearly the most effective organisation in raising issues in Canberra and particularly successful with the media and Senators".¹¹⁴ Reflecting on the results, the then NFF President Ian Donges remarked: "We welcome the ANOP's independent assessment of industry organisations, which cements the NFF as one of the most successful and effective lobby groups."

Yet, the NFF's dominance is not without challenge. Its reputation ultimately rests on its capacity to demonstrate that it carries the support of those it represents. As alluded to in the introduction, there are signs that this support is increasingly being eroded by internal change — social, cultural and economic change in rural and farming communities that make an authentic "farmers'" position difficult to generate. Social change and the impact of "new politics" increasingly renders transparent the NFF's preoccupation with economic reform and the absence of a *sustained* public political response to the withdrawal of rural services and social distress and lack of action in sponsoring the search for processes to revive rural communities as a whole. This looks all the more inadequate alongside the fervent, sustained and public protests (and the resources allocated) supported by the NFF family to oppose state regulation associated with selected environmental, land management and race issues. These "new" issues may occupy an increasing amount of the NFF family's time, but they are issues that present significant difficulties in creating a coherent farmer position.

Falling membership levels of SFOs catalysed a series of consultancies reviewing organisational direction amongst the NFF family.¹¹⁵ Most recently, a new wave of reviews is under way, prompted by financial pressures on most state organisations and questions about the ongoing value of the commodity council and federated structure.¹¹⁶ The proposal is for a unitary organisation, called Australian Farmers, to replace the

¹¹² Connors, "To speak with one voice", p. 61

¹¹³ P. Williams, "Battle Plan for the Docks", *Australian Financial Review*, 12 December 1997, p. 25; B. Martin, "On the Waterfront Line", *The Bulletin*, 17 March 1998, pp. 16-19. However this institutionalised strategic militancy is in stark contrast with the more spontaneous grass roots militancy evident in the 1970s and early 1980s.

¹¹⁴ NFF 2001, NR 55/2001.

¹¹⁵ Michels Warren Pty. Ltd., *What Are We Here For?: A Plan to Address Falling Membership Numbers of the NSW Farmers' Association* (report commissioned by the NSWFA, Sydney, 1993). NFF, *Issues Paper: NFF Review*, (NFF, ACT, 1994). NFF, NFF Strategic Plan, (NFF, ACT, 1996). SAFF, *Strategic Plan 1997-2002*, (SAFF, Adelaide, 1997).

¹¹⁶ C. Morse, "NFF investigates restructure proposal", *The Land*, 29 November 2001, p. 5. The South Australian Farmers' Federation has its notice of withdrawal of membership continually submitted with the NFF. The WA Farmers' Federation is only an Associate Member for financial reasons. The NSWFA, the largest state organisation, and the organisation that provides the largest proportion of NFF and Commodity Council funding, is under a funding cloud (see P. Austin, "NSWFA loses assets", *The Land*, 8 March 2002).

current federated structure.¹¹⁷ The proposal has not garnered the support of the member organisations of the NFF and debate continues on how best to rationalise the structure. Meantime the largest and richest SFO, the NSW Farmers' Association, has shown signs that it may be ready to go it alone, despite its protestations that its recent foray into Federal lobbying was to support rather than circumvent the NFF structure.¹¹⁸

The proliferation of issues that cross sectional boundaries and reveal the fragmentation of the farming constituency threatens to stretch the capacity of the organisation to remain effective. In the late 1990s the NFF modified its trade liberal focus somewhat, canvassing rural social issues more broadly, including rural health, education and telecommunications into its policy portfolio. Most recently, in the context of the internal debate about ways to address the emerging evidence of deep and ongoing financial limitations in the NFF and its SFOs, a paring down of the NFF's policy scope and functions seems inevitable. Early signs are of a return to a narrower economic agenda federally. Available evidence suggests that financial limitations mean that areas, such as the trade portfolio, which can attract additional funding by a minority of larger members or by corporate "sponsors" will continue whilst other policy areas operate on a largely monitoring only basis. This is in contrast to the state organisations that seem to be drawn increasingly into natural resource management and property rights issues in a bid to curtail organisational decline.

The possible unravelling of the NFF has not renewed interest in the National Party amongst Australia's farmers. Indeed, the decline of the National Party seems to be gathering momentum. The 2001 federal election results showed further decline of its electoral stocks.¹¹⁹ The threat facing the National Party is well acknowledged by the Party itself. The Leader, John Anderson, has stated he will resign if performance at the next election is not better.¹²⁰ One spokesman for the party reportedly commented with reference to the next election: "If we lose seats we're dead. If we don't pick up seats we are dead. If we slide further we'll have to amalgamate [with the Liberals]."¹²¹

What is most interesting is that in the contemporary debate over representation, rural and farming communities seem to be experimenting with a return to various aspects of their history of representation. At least some farmers are turning to "country" independents. Three independents, Bob Katter, Tony Windsor and Peter Andren won what were formerly National Party seats in the 2001 federal election. Some seem to have renewed confidence in local members shaking off party allegiances and acting for local concerns: the Federal National Party MP De-Anne Kelly is a case in point. Others see the need for a "new" Country Party, arguing that the Nationals are really one and the same with the Liberal Party. Often elements of the protectionist platform of the early Country Party are touted as major planks of the policy of such new parties. Still other sections of the farming constituency see value in the return to more regionally focussed grass roots voluntary associations. This reflects the trend to prefer

¹¹⁷ C. Morse, "State farm organisations meet on NFF revamp proposal", *The Land*, 6 December 2001, p. 3.

¹¹⁸ C. Morse, "NSWFA denies attack on NFF", *The Land*, 28 February 2002, p. 6.

¹¹⁹ For an examination of the National Party at the 1998 election see Green, "Bush politics", and the 2001 election see Curtin and Costar, "Rural and regional interests".

¹²⁰ T. Walker, "Anderson puts his job on the National Party line", *The Financial Review*, 4 July 2002, pp. 1, 53.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

endogenous approaches to rural community development to the “interference” of government.

One can only speculate about how these collective debates will resolve themselves. However, one can make the observation that some of the strategies under discussion echo those of an era past. If one accepts that the rationale for these past strategies was in some critical way contingent on the social, economic and political climate of the times, then it would seem a simple re-establishment of old strategies is unlikely to yield past results.¹²² Most critically, government, having divested itself of many of its levers of economic management, is in less of a position to address precisely those claims that farm activists seek action upon: amelioration of the effects of trade liberal agricultural policy.¹²³ Similarly, the mode of production is, for the most part, so diverse within farming society that agreement on “one size fits all” approaches to regional development would appear hard to formulate. This economic and structural diversity is also evident at social levels, with quite marked differences in the conception of *desirable* agricultural development and management. As one can imagine, this leads to a high level of diversity in the demands made by rural civil society and as such tends to dilute the political energy and sap the will of even the most obliging of governments and representatives. In resolving the present discussion over representative strategies and organisations, it would seem that it will be necessary to problematise the very notion of a cohesive farming constituency and an overarching farming interest as the basis of subsequent collective action. Above all, these trends suggest fluidity in the political representation of Australian farmers. In turn this indicates that the current period of farmer representation — which is dominated organisationally by the NFF and in terms of formation by a professionalised interest group system — is undergoing a more fundamental shift.

¹²² For example, the renewed support for rural independents is likely, in the contemporary political system, to create three-cornered contests in future elections where formerly National Party seats will possibly shift to the Liberal Party. See Curtin and Costar, “Rural and regional interests”, p. 251.

¹²³ Although, as Byrne has noted, there is a sensible case for an alternative to unfettered rural neoliberalism. P. Byrne, “The facts behind the rural revolt”, *News Weekly*, 5 May 2001, p. 3.