

Turrumurra Probus Club Guest Speaker - Friday 19 July 2019

Dr Neil Inall OAM – "The ups and downs of agriculture in the 20th Century"

INTRODUCTION

We live to eat and we eat to live....and we rely on farmers here and sometimes from overseas to provide us with the bulk of the food we consume. We cannot do without them. But farmers here would not have been so productive in the 20th century or in this 21st century without the contribution of scientists. What do they do? Help us to combat disease and pests, control weeds and find ways to achieve higher yields in crops. All up our food and fibre production is now worth around 58 billion dollars a year...and the National Farmer's Federation is aiming for us to produce 100 billion dollars worth by 2030.

Most Australians have rarely been hungry for long periods. Those of you who are nearly as old as me might remember that during the second world war, the Federal Government issued ration coupons for us...for meat, sugar, butter and tea. But we did not starve. Hunger though, has been and still is a reality in this wide brown land. Late last century we saw the establishment of two nation food collection and distribution organisations. Foodbank Australia and Ozharvest and they exist beside the work of the Salvos and various church groups. Yes, we live to eat and we eat to live. And we also live to wear fibres which our farmers produce.

Ladies and gentlemen, you will know, I am sure that late last century the Australian Government stopped paying price subsidies to our farmers. To-day we are one of the lowest subsidisers in the world except perhaps for New Zealand. But compared with the United States, the European Community and Japan we are low, low, low. Most of our price support schemes or subsidies were eliminated by the Hawke Government in the 1980s, except for agricultural research. More on that later. One of the crops taxpayers subsidised in the 20th century was tobacco. In the 1981/82 financial year there were subsidy payments for 1,039 tobacco farms.

Now from tobacco to chooks. When I was a child one of the things we looked forward to at Christmas and perhaps Easter was helping to pluck the feathers from old chooks for the festive season's main meal. We youngies cherished the exercise particularly chopping off the heads of the birds. We cherished it. Figures I have found recently tell me that in the 1960s we Australians ate about 7 kilos of poultry per head each year. Now days that has increased to 46.2 kilos a head. What a change!

ALFRED DEAKIN

As you well know we live in a vast country...the driest in the world, we are told.

This man is Alfred Deakin, a Victorian who was a real mover and shaker; Prime Minister three times early last century. In the late 1800s he persuaded the Victorian State Government to hold a Royal Commission into water!! Maybe the first of many!! Subsequently and before he became Prime Minister Deakin pushed the idea of a major irrigation development around Mildura in north west Victoria. To-day that area known as Sunraysia, is flourishing, especially with horticulture and viticulture.

You will know that building of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme, was started just before the 1949 Federal election and was completed in 1974. It allowed for the extension of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area and the start of a major new irrigation development called Coleambally, south of the town called Darlington Point.

RICE

The first commercial crop of rice in Australia was grown in the summer season of 1924 and 1925. To-day there are or were 1500 farms that can grow rice in the Murray and Murrumbidgee valleys. The flat lands around Griffith, Deniliquin, Hay, Wakool and Moulamein are ideal. They usually produce about 1.2 million tonnes of rice each year; but not this past summer with minimum rice and cotton plantings and probably the same this coming summer. Normally we export 80 percent of our rice crop. To-day Australia has or had the highest average yields of rice in the world.

Griffith, the heart of the MIA, is a country town has been booming with its viticulture, horticulture, cotton, poultry meat AND rice.

A major feature of the Australian landscape last century was the clearing of thousands of, millions of hectares of native trees and bushland mainly for grain growing.

LAND CLEARING

Generally speaking it was a 'gung ho' operation in all States. I wonder if you remember the AMP's clearing of what was known as the ninety-mile desert in South Australia...and Western Australia's former Premier Sir Charles Court calling for the clearing of a million hectares of land in that State. It was a vexed issue then and is still now. The outcome especially in the west, was the development of vast areas of salty soils.

I am sorry that the Berejeklian Government has softened land clearing laws in this State.

SCIENCE

Ladies and gentlemen, we have many organisations in this country focussed on research into a whole raft of problems and opportunities in the farming business. And generally speaking, farmers as well as ordinary taxpayers have been very involved over the decades.

Indeed way back in 1900 sugar growers in Queensland were the first farmers in Australia to levy themselves for research. This move led to the formation of the Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations in that State. It is still in operation. In this case the Queensland State Government funds and growers fund research into sugar growing problems. A commendable start for all the faming industries.

Let's go back to the early decades of the 20th century.

BILLY HUGHES

Prime Minister Billy Hughes set the pattern for Federal Government encouragement of national scientific research. In 1916, He launched what he called an Advisory body on Science and Industry...a first! Initially it had no basis in legislation... a temporary body. It took until 1920, when an Act of the Federal Parliament was passed to establish a Government funded agency called the Institute of Science and Industry.

EARL PAGE

This man pushed the idea of scientific research even further. He is or was Earl Page, a Doctor from Grafton who was co-founder of the Country Party. The Earl Page and Bruce Governments floated the concept in the early 1920s of a Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. Then in 1926 they built on Billy Hughes' moves for Government funded scientific research and passed a Federal Act to establish a national scientific research body called CSIR.

Its role was to increase crop yields as well as controlling pests, diseases and weeds. All these, the Government said, were hurting exports. CSIR led to the establishment 20 years later of CSIRO.

IAN CLUNIES ROSS

One of the early leaders of the CSIR was this man...the formidable veterinarian Ian Clunies Ross who really put the spotlight on the value of science. He is credited as being the chief architect of what was regarded as Australia's scientific boom!! Clunies Ross had a reputation for keenly advocating the value of science in his many public addresses and broadcasts. I don't hear a strong public advocate for science today, do you?

RABBITS

It was in his time and before that the wild rabbit had become the scourge of the whole Australian countryside. Wild rabbits. Twenty-four rabbits had been introduced into Australia in 1859 by Thomas Austin whose property was "Barwon Park" near Geelong. Rabbits did provide a living for some fur hunters, food for some people and fun for keen hunters. But rabbits destroyed pastures needed so badly for more profitable animals--sheep and cattle. There were numerous campaigns to reduce rabbit numbers by

trapping, ripping, ploughing and fumigating their burrows. They were on the national agenda for elimination. It was a woman scientist Dame Jean McNamara who heavily lobbied Governments to release the deadly virus known as myxomatosis in the 1960s which eventually destroyed millions of rabbits...maybe billions. But before then, thousands of kilometres of rabbit roof fencing had been erected across the landscape, much of it established by hand too.

Incidentally in those days much of the landscape was also destroyed by plague locusts or grasshoppers. But I have not heard of plague locusts in recent years even though CSIRO had a Plague Locust laboratory at Trangie IN NSW.

Back in 1936, Clunies Ross, made a call for all woolgrowers to be levied for contributions to wool research and promotion. It happened despite many grumbles from growers but laid a pattern for all the farming industries in future decades. In 1946 Prime Minister Ben Chifley issued a statement entitled "A rural policy for post war Australia". Subsequently additional funds were allocated to CSIR for research into insecticides and weeds.

In 1955, when the Menzies/Fadden Government was in power a policy that all farmers should be levied for research programmes was adopted.

In 1989 the Hawke Government appointed Dr Ralph Slatyer as Australia's Chief Scientist. His task was to advise on how to achieve greater co-operation between private and public bodies to jointly focus on a wide range of research issues. As a result, Slatyer recommended the establishment of CRCs...Co-Operative Research Centres for most industries. That proposal was put into action in 1990 and the latest figures I have seen show that 215 CRCs have been set up with many having completed their initial tasks.

GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT

All this research paid for by taxpayers and farmers was fine...But what if there was no mechanism to make sure that farmers knew the results of the research and how and where they might be able to put them into practise.... into profitable use. My old employer the ABC played a major role in this process. As you know on July 1, 1932 it started using a new technology called wireless to spread information far and wide after the national wireless service was established.

JOHN DOUGLASS

In 1945 this man John Douglass, a vegetable specialist was appointed as the first Director of Rural Broadcasts. He was a formidable and zealous operator and before long each State had its own midday programme called the Country Hour with market reports, weather forecasts, river heights and farming news including the results of farm research programmes and interviews with farmers who had adopted research results. Farm broadcasts have been reduced in recent years but over 25 stations still broadcast the Country Hour five days a week.

SIR JOHN CRAWFORD

In 1940 this then Sydney based man John Crawford was appointed to head up a new operation in the NSW Department of Agriculture to be called the Division of Marketing and Agricultural Economics. I believe it was the beginning of a new era in Australian agriculture.

Five years later on the 21st of August 1945 (with the war in the Pacific just over) Crawford was appointed as the first chief of another new agricultural economics operation based in Canberra. It was known as the Bureau of Agricultural Economics or the BAE. It was very influential for decades, despite the sneering and scoffing of farmers and their organisations about economists. Later Sir John became Secretary of the Department of Trade and Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University. A giant in the Canberra bureaucracy. You will know too that in 1987 the Australian Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology proposed a new body to bear Crawford's name. Its objective was and still is undertaking farm research in developing Asian countries and providing scholarships and training for young people in those countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen, one of the real downs of Australian agriculture in the 20th century, I believe, was the granting of blocks of land, generally very small blocks to men returning from both the world wars and

also under closer settlement schemes. Many of the grants were taken by people who had minimum experience or knowledge of the rigors of farm technologies or management techniques.

DOUG McKAY

The situation was highlighted in 1967 by this man Doug McKay in his role as Director of the BAE. At the 14th annual conference of the Australian Agricultural Economics Society in Armidale in February 1967 Mackay laid bare the sad and disastrous farm income problem in Australia. He told that conference that there were 80,000 farmers and their families who had annual income of 20 thousand dollars or less.

Let me give you one example of the small farm problem: In 1980 there were 350 horticultural blocks in an area known as Coomealla, near Wentworth in the south-west of this State. But by 2015 there were only 75 left.

In the late 1960s, partly as a result of McKay's findings, the Federal Government established what became known as the Rural Reconstruction Scheme. They were programmes through which small landholders has access to funds to help increase the size of their properties, others that helped them consolidate their debts and slowly repay them and another that helped struggling farmers leave the industry.

In the mid-eighties, the then Minister for Primary Industry, John Kerin, established a farm financial counselling service for those in financial trouble. It still operates in all States. In New South Wales the first counsellor was a lady called Fran Rowe from Tottenham in the Central West and she did a mighty job trying to help those people who were in financial strife.

FARM MACHINERY

You might well say that I have ignored (so far) the stunning advances in farm Machinery through the 20th century. To mind three machines stand out...first the tractor that arrived here in the late forties/early fifties made by Harry Ferguson: The Fergie. At the south western NSW town of Wentworth at the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers there is a monument of a Ferguson tractor for the role it played in preventing floodwaters entering the town in 1956. Then amazing harvesting machines for a whole range of crops from sugar to oats. The other piece of mighty valuable equipment was and is the mechanical post hole digger. Just think of the thousands of kilometres of farm fencing all over Australia. Once upon a time post holes were all dug by men with shovels, crowbars and pics. Many ended up with cranky backs._

Ladies and gentlemen, you will remember the phrase "Australia rides on the sheep's back". Well we certainly did during that the Korean War in the early 1950s when fortunes were made by growers. But then prices slowly started to slide. Then a major promotion effort was made globally to promote the fibre and growers began a long campaign for the Federal Government to set a reserve price for wool. What do I mean by reserve?

BILL GUNN

The campaign for the Government to set a reserve price was led by this man Sir William Gunn, a grower from Goondiwindi in southern Queensland. He was Chairman of the International Wool Secretariat and the Australian Wool Board. A dominant figure. He lobbied and so did the grower groups for a reserve price to be managed by the Federal Government. After all returns for wool had dropped from a thousand million dollars in the 1963/64 selling season to only 300 million dollars in the 1970/71 selling season.

DOUG ANTHONY

At that time John Douglas Anthony was Deputy Prime Minister as well as Leader of the Country Party and he agreed to establish a reserve price. How did it work? The system worked well for a decade but growers still were not satisfied. They wanted more money. Well the Government changed in 1983 and the new Federal Minister responsible for the wool reserve price scheme was John Kerin. He was bullied by the growers to let them set the reserve price and eventually Kerin gave in. Probably the silliest thing he ever did because growers kept pushing the reserve price up and up until it reached 893 cents a kilo near the end of the 1980s. The NSW Farm lobby wanted a thousand dollars a kilo. Subsequently major buyers like China, Russia and China all sharply reduced their purchases...as much as 44 percent and a stockpile of wool grew and grew until it reached 3 million bales in storage at the end of June 1990. Then the national

Government allocated funds to reduce sheep numbers which had reached 180 million head. We paid growers \$5 a head to shoot sheep and to dump them into pits.

To-day we have a resurgence in sheep and wool prices.... will we expand numbers to dizzy heights of 180 million head again?

JOHN KERIN

My PhD thesis is entitled "The legend of John Kerin: the Labour man of rural policy based on science". Kerin was Federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry from 1983 to 1991. As a result 17 farm research and development corporations were locked into legislation by Kerin in November 1989 for a whole range of farm products from grains to horticulture crops, wool and various meats. Growers were and still are levied with matching funds from the Commonwealth Government to run the research bodies. The system has been examined again and again by various watchdogs who have concluded that the system is globally unique and the envy of other nations. Regrettably the body known as the Energy R&D Corporation was dumped by the Howard Government and another, Land and Water Australia was dumped by the Rudd Government.

John Kerin believed that it was essential for farmers to achieve a 2 percent improvement in productivity each year to combat declining terms of trade. And applying the results of research on farms was a major step in lifting productivity.

My favourite story about Kerin is that when in opposition he went to Renmark in South Australia to speak to a farmer's meeting. Just after the event he was interviewed by a young female reporter from the local paper. John asked her if she would like a photo and her response was "What of?"

SHEARING MACHINES

Let us remember that despite all the changes in farm machinery and equipment we are still harvesting wool to-day the same way as we did in the 20th century despite spending millions trying to find easier ways to harvest wool. The only change we made last century was to widen the comb of the shearing handpiece.

Now to the Australian landscape and its health. On November the 25th 1986, two Victorian women, of very different political beliefs, launched the first Landcare group in Victoria. The women were the then Premier, Joan Kirner and Heather Mitchell, President of the Victorian Farmer's Federation. Yes, two women leading the way. That was at Winjalloc in the Wimmera Region of Victoria.

RICK FARLEY

This man helped to further change our thinking about the need to treat the land...the soil, cautiously/carefully. His name was Rick Farley who was Executive Director of the National Farmer's Federation in the late 1980s. Along with the Boss of the Australian Conservation Foundation Phillip Toyne they highlighted the need for more funds to prevent and repair landscape decline. It was a major concern for both men. In July, 1989 they convinced Bob Hawke, who was then Prime Minister, to provide \$320 million for the Decade of Landcare programme. It helped in the establishment of hundreds of community landcare groups. Regrettably neither Farley or Toyne lived long enough to see the long-term impact of their voices or actions.

I must tell you that years back I was invited to speak to a Landcare dinner at Louth, on the Darling River, downstream of Bourke. It was the group's annual dinner and drinking started about 6 o'clock. And I was put on to speak at a quarter to midnight.

COTTON

One of the big success stories of Australian agriculture in the 20th century was cotton and it still is...when there is enough water.! But it was a failure on the Murrumbidgee River in the 1960s. However, it was fostered later by two Californians Paul Kahl and Frank Hadley on the Namoi River at Wee Waa in north western NSW. Initially growers had to spray their cotton fields up to 15 times with chemicals to counteract insect pests and diseases. But thanks again to the CSIRO for the development of genetically modified cotton which meant a 90 percent reduction in chemical sprays. GM cotton is now grown in southern Queensland, northern NSW and through much of the western Riverina. To-day cotton is quite a competitor to rice as it uses less water. What's more our cotton growers have the highest average yields in the world.

There are or should I say there were 1200 farms in Australia growing cotton most irrigated but some dryland producing 4-5 million bales a year.

FINALLY

Finally, I want to mention the health of the millions of cattle and sheep scattered across this wide brown dry land. As far as we know they are healthy. That's mainly because of a programme started in July 1970 to eliminate Tuberculosis and Brucellosis across Australia. Can you imagine the task of rounding up herds through the vast inland areas of Australia and testing them all. The scheme was completed 22 years later and as far as we know Australia is free of TB and brucellosis as well as mad cow disease, black disease, foot and mouth disease, black disease, no blue tongue or rabies or African Swine Fever. This situation has been aided by the opening of the CSIRO's maximum security National Animal Health Laboratory at Geelong back in 1985 at a cost 150 million dollars.

Ladies and gentlemen, can we continue to keep this huge country with its coastline of 25 and a half thousand kilometres free of the world's worst exotic animal diseases?

ENDER

Yes ladies and gentlemen - we live to eat and we eat to live. We cannot ever do without farmers even in our super variable climate; we cannot ever do without scientists either to help fill our bellies with safe, high quality foodstuffs and to dress us in beautiful fibres.

We will need the commitment of both groups to produce increasing quantities of food and fibre for the growing human population numbers this century and in the centuries to come.

Finally let us remember that last century water came out of a tap. If someone had suggested putting it into plastic bottles and charging for it, they would have become a laughing stock!!!