Rural Representation

How can rural communities best represent themselves and their cause for the good of the regions and Australia?

A report for

By Ben Haslett

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Scholar Contact Details
Ben Haslett
Woolenook Fruits
PO Box 164,
Paringa, S.A., 5340.

Phone: 0438 317 559
Email: ben@woolenook.com.au

In submitting this report, the Scholar has agreed to Nuffield Australia publishing this material in its edited form.

NUFFIELD AUSTRALIA Contact Details
Nuffield Australia
Telephone: (02) 9463 9229
Mobile : 0431 438 684
Email: enquiries@nuffield.com.au
PO Box 1021, North Sydney, N.S.W. 2059

Executive Summary

Australia's agricultural industries are pivotal to the health of regional Australia. Farming creates jobs both directly in regional communities and indirectly as part of the value-added processes that occur to the primary product. The food and fibres produced contribute in a significant way to Australia's gross domestic product and to providing essential nutrition to millions of people.

Australia's population growth is focussed around major urban centres culminating in a relative decrease in farming's contribution to the national economy and a greater disconnection from farming practices for the majority of Australia's metropolitan populace. The status quo as described has led to challenges for rural regions in terms of sourcing the resources their communities require to operate optimally in a competitive world market. Additionally, decreased linkages to a citycentric population and industry representation fragmentation have led to what some decision makers have labelled as farming accepting the "least worst" option for their communities.

Larger member bases resulted in greater access to funds and more political power. An ability to reach a city based populace with the rural "story" resulted in more empathy which in turn placed greater pressure on governments to respond to rural needs. Farmer pathways to political positions also increased influence and when coupled to good levels of funding helped protect the interests of regional areas. Conversely, a multitude of advocacy groups led to poorer interactions with government at a national level as did the absence of large industry players from a peak body. Additionally, having to operate in a system that layers a continent's requirements over that of a country adds challenges to national direction and optimising production.

Australia needs a truly representative, well resourced, peak advocacy body that can present a clear, costed case to key decision makers in a manner that allows them to instigate the requested change without fear of unwarranted public back lash. Specifically, when generating a "case for change" the following need to be considered:

- Do you have a mandate to speak?
- What are the key relationships needed for progression?

- Does the rhetoric behind the case stand up to public scrutiny?
- Have you an ability to influence the ultimate decision maker?
- What role will the media play in the success or otherwise of your proposal?

In addition, it is important to understand the challenges centred around:

- Competition for decision-makers time and money.
- Structural barriers that may stymie progress.
- Which vested interests may be a force for or against your case.
- How best to support politicians in their effort to carry your reform.

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Foreword

I grew up on our family owned orchard and after university study in science returned to live and work on the farm where we produce citrus, almonds, wine grapes and stone fruit. We pack and market citrus and stone fruit, contract mechanical harvest almonds, keep bees for pollination and have wine made from our grapes which we market.

Our diverse business has led to opportunities for me to become involved across multiple industries in a variety of roles including industry advisory committees, research and development committees, government appointed advisory groups, regional community representative groups and commercial boards.

Over time I have noticed that no matter the industry or the regional group, the challenges seem to be the same. How to get what you need to make real, measurable progress in terms of funding, policy and community support. Whilst this often leads regional communities to become frustrated with ineffective policy, poorly directed funding or inadequate consultation, from my experience, I believe it is equally true that Government often feels frustrated when trying to engage with the rural sector. How to bridge this communication divide and what affects the decisions made by key leaders is the focus of my study.

Tom Vilsack, US Secretary of Agriculture (2014), has said in numerous speeches such as the one he gave to the American Farm Bureau in 2014 that “farming is freedom”. Freedom for 99% of the American population to follow their dreams and do what they want to do because the other 1% of the population (the farmers) have their daily food requirement covered.

Tellingly, the farming industry which is critical for the everyday life of all, is not well understood by the general populace in terms of how and why farmers do what they do and what skill sets they possess. This represents part of the challenge in terms of influencing the opinion makers and decision makers that affect rural Australia.

My investor, Horticulture Innovation Australia’s support together with Nuffield Australia, has made it possible for me to visit the United Kingdom, France, the United States of America, Mexico, Brazil, New Zealand, Spain, The Netherlands and Hong Kong during my studies. Not only did this enable me to pursue the topic reported herein but to meet and share thoughts with farmers, researchers, politicians and people from all over the world. These interactions

not only enabled mutual exchange of information on a variety of topics but have also helped shape my view on world agriculture and Australia's position in it.

Acknowledgments

Thank you, Nuffield Australia, for an opportunity without peer.

Thank you to those who had to shoulder the load in my absence.

Thank you to my parents for having vision and valuing continual education.

Thank you to my wife Sarah and children Emmy and James. I know it is always harder to be left behind than to leave.

Abbreviations

ABS: Australian Bureau of Statistics

AEC: Australian Electoral Commission

AFI: Australian Farm Institute

CAP: Common Agricultural Policy

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

DEWHA: Department for Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

NFF: National Farmers Federation

PPSA: Primary Producers of South Australia

Objectives

Rural and regional Australian communities are often heard to lament the lack of recognition, funding, infrastructure and targeted programs from Government coupled with a general misunderstanding of their vocation from a predominately city based populace. The following objectives of this study sought to illuminate some root causes of this situation and to pose potential methods and a structure which may go some way towards alleviating it.

- Do rural communities abroad feel disempowered in a manner similar to Australian regions and are there strategic lessons to be gleaned from their experiences?
- How do key decision makers who can influence the well-being of rural and regional areas think in terms of delivering first rate results and what stops them?
- What are the key factors rural and regional areas need to consider when prosecuting their case?
- What are the obstacles rural and regional areas face when trying to achieve substantive change?
- Are there structures or practices that could facilitate desirable regional outcomes?

Chapter 1: Introduction

Australia's rural regions

This introductory section seeks to illustrate the case for effective rural representation by way of briefly examining the status quo in terms of agriculture's significance, population division and current representation.

Overview

Despite being the world's 6th largest nation and one of the least densely populated countries (World population review, 2016), Australia is one of the most urbanised countries in the world, with nearly 70% of the population residing in major cities (Baxter et al, 2011). The World Bank (2014) reported that of the approximately 23.5 million people living in Australia, only 2.5 million of them were considered rural.

Farmers form part of the rural population and the agricultural census of 2010-11 identified some 135,000 farming businesses across Australia producing food and fibre on just over half (53%) of the nation's landmass or about 410 million hectares (ABS, 2012). Farmers delivered 93% of Australia's domestic food supply and exported enough food to help feed approximately 40 million people outside of Australia each day (ABS, 2012).

Australia's 157,000 farmers (ABS, 2012) directly employed more than 300,000 people who represented part of the 1.6 million jobs in the complete agricultural supply chain (NFF, 2012). The gross value of Australian agricultural production amounted to 53.6 billion dollars in the financial year 2014/15 (ABS, 2014-2015) and significantly in 2012, when the value-added processes in the complete supply chain were included, it represented around 12% of Australia's gross domestic product (GDP) or 155 billion dollars (NFF, 2012).

Given Australia's farmers produce food and fibre on 53% of the land mass (ABS, 2012) and 94% of them undertake natural resource management activities, they are at the forefront of delivering good environmental outcomes (NFF, 2012). This was a point not lost on former Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who in her 2012 address to the National Farmers Federation (NFF) national congress said: "I recognise you as frontline caretakers of our greatest assets – our soils, our water, and our biodiversity" (Gillard, 2012).

City country divide?

Historically, farming has been a highly visible and key contributor to the Australian economy accounting for around a quarter of the nation's output and up to 80% of exports in the first half of the 20th century (ABS, 2012). However, as has been the case in other developed nations, the growth in other sectors has resulted in a relative decline in Australia's reliance on agriculture such that it now represents around 4% farm gate and 12% value added (ABS, 2012; NFF, 2012). This coupled with the fact that over the 30 years to 2011, the number of farmers declined by 106,200 means there are less direct community linkages with food and fibre production in Australia (ABS 2012).

The decrease in these connections to farming are perhaps best illustrated by a 2011 national study by the Australian Council for Educational Research which found children were confused about where their food came from (Hillman & Buckley, 2011). Amongst other things the survey, made up of year six and year ten students, found "Three-quarters of Australian children in their final year of primary school believe cotton socks come from animals and 27 per cent are convinced yoghurt grows on trees" (Gamble, 2014).

Nevertheless, not everyone believes there is a city country divide as such. Matt Linnegar, former CEO of the National Farmers Federation and current CEO of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation said in a talk to the Farm Writers Association in 2014 that: "People talk about the city-country divide. Frankly, that is bollocks" (Foley, 2014). He went on to say: "Do you seriously think there are people here in the city saying: 'I don't like people in the country, and what they do?' They are not". However, "there is a lack of familiarity with what they do. We need to understand what drives people in urban areas to get our message across".

Representation

Typically, regional representation consists of industry bodies, elected parliamentarians and rural community members.

Industry bodies

The Australian food and fibre advocacy landscape is quite convoluted and fragmented. It currently consists of more than 50 separate farm advocacy groups (AFI, 2014). The Australian Farm Institute produced a report which gave some detail to the interwoven relationships (AFI,

2014). Principally, there are local organisations that are members of a state-based farm advocacy group which is in turn a member of the main national advocacy group, the National Farmers Federation (NFF). However, this streamlined, logical structure runs in parallel to commodity groups that are not members of a state based or national advocacy group as they have their own structure in place. Coupled to this are state-based advocacy groups that are not members of the main national advocacy group, for example, Primary Producers of South Australia (PPSA).

Parliamentarians

For election of members to federal parliament Australia is broken up into electorates. The boundaries of these electorates can be adjusted federally after each election to ensure:

- Each state and territory gains representation in the House of Representatives in proportion to their population
- There are a similar number of electors in each electoral division for a given state or territory (AEC, 2017).

The effect this representative system, based on one person one vote, has in terms of regional political representation, is that very large and at times quite disparate regions can be grouped together. Peter Austin (2015) wrote: “Size matters in the rural electorate debate” and that this is “probably the single most important issue confronting rural Australia today”. He illustrated this by reporting that “in NSW some 60 per cent of the state is now represented by just two gigantic electorates”. In one of these electorates, Barwon, the “local” member represents communities with “vastly different economic, industrial and social environments” over an area equivalent to Victoria and Tasmania combined. He suggests that it would be very hard for one member to adequately represent the range of constituents and industries over this area as compared to metropolitan electorates that often share issues with those adjacent to them.

Rural community members

Australia has seen a sustained decline in membership of farm advocacy groups. The report by the Australian Farm Institute (2014) collected survey data that said that one of the reasons was a perceived lack of value given that farmers in the digital age had a wide range of resources at their fingertips which are often free and that farmers thought for advocacy

groups to be more relevant in the future they needed to have more direct engagement with the farmer and provide a stronger voice.

Organisations at the local level often rely on volunteer labour so it is worth noting that farming as a vocation has a high degree of self-employment and long working hours. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) reported that 50% of farmers worked 49 hours a week or more compared to 17% of other workers. Despite this, people in farming families were still more than twice as likely to do volunteer work for a group or organisation (39% v 19%) (ABS. 2012).

Why regional representation matters?

Farming is an economically and culturally important part of life in Australia (DEWHA, 2010).

This paper's introductory overview gave numbers to the contribution of farming in terms of the vibrancy and prosperity of rural Australia. It follows that it is important to the health and productivity of rural Australia that the Agricultural sector has methodologies and representative bodies that enable them to "get the job done".

Chapter 2: Rural community comparisons

This section aims to make some comparisons between rural Australia and the regions visited within the context of challenges and representation.

Similarities

Centralisation

An often-heard complaint in regional Australia "that everything is managed from or goes through the capital city" was echoed strongly in Spain. Roger Iglesias (pers. comm., April 2016) from the Unio`de Pagesos (Union of the Farmer) lamented that in many cases train journeys take double the time they should because everything funnelled back through the nation's capital, Madrid. Miquel Giner (pers. comm., April 2016), a researcher based in the Spanish farming town of Lleida, said this notion rightly or wrongly helped fuel the belief of many in Catalonia (north east region of Spain) that they should separate from Spain to stop the wealth being siphoned from their region back into central Spain (Madrid). To some extent this regional parochialism resulted in the fragmentation of the farming union representative groups (Iglesias, R. 2016) such that group numbers were increasing and the ability of government to liaise directly with one peak union was becoming more difficult which is akin to the to the status quo in Australia (AFI, 2014).

Figure 1: Author, Roger Iglesias and Esther Medina, Unio de Pagesos, (Author, 2016).

Voting power

Rural regions by their very nature are less densely populated than metropolitan areas. As reported in the introduction, this leads to some potential inequity with regard to power and representation in regional Australia (Austin, 2015). The author was surprised to learn that inhabitants of a region thought of as one of the power houses of food production, the central valley in California, felt the same way. Denis Prosperi (pers. comm., March 2016), a farmer and businessman in Madera, California put it in perspective when he said: "We might produce a lot of food here (approx. 85% of the world's almonds) but just to the west of us lies Silicon Valley and Hollywood and THAT is where the power and money are".

Disconnection from the public

Empathy is the experience of understanding another person's condition from their perspective. Secretary for US Agriculture, Tom Vilsack (2014) noted: "Many Americans are far removed from where their food comes from; they may be three to four generations removed" which is why it was not surprising that James McFarlane (pers. comm., March 2016) from Clovis, California said: "When people go to the doctor they don't expect them to use 100-year old medical practices…why do they expect me to farm that way?".

While it was raised as an issue in the Netherlands (ten Have, 2016) it was noted that the disconnection from and decreased empathy for modern farming reality appeared greater in areas that had larger farms and more dispersed populations like Australia. It was less striking in France.

Figure 2: Author at US Dept. of Agriculture (Author, 2015).

Differences

Public perception

Wil Brown (pers. comm., April 2016) the Agricultural Advisor at the Australian Embassy in Paris, said: "generally the media and community are on the farmers side". Even after farmers dumped manure on the highway to stymie the importation of Spanish agricultural products, locked the agricultural minister up in a dairy as a protest over 1,000 cow dairies and burnt the tax office. "The media reports said that there were issues and that the farmers obviously needed support. This resulted in lump sum tax concessions" (Brown, 2016). Whilst this level of community support for French farmers amazed the author, Christophe Hillairet (pers. comm., April 2016) the president of the French Chamber of Agriculture in Paris said that while farmers had good community support, the general populace had a "fantasy" about what farming really is. He added that 30 years ago in France, most people came from or had a very close attachment to farming but says this is no longer the case. To add substance to this statement, Hillairet offered that there is a big difference between the French citizen and the French consumer even though they are the same person they wear different "hats" depending on the situation. For example, he says as a citizen they want many specific standards and rules about farming and food production that rule out large scale, efficient practices and as a consumer they want cheap and perfect food.

Distance

South Australian Premier, Jay Weatherill (pers. comm., 2015) told the author that when it comes to influencing people, "proximity matters". Both proximity to the general public and proximity to the "decision makers". Compare Australia's size and population spread (7,741,220 square Km, 24.5 million people, 3.1 people per square Km (Worldometers, 2016)) to a European country like France (547,571 square km, 64.7 million people, 118 people per square km (Worldometers, 2016)) and it goes some way toward explaining the different levels of community engagement with Agriculture.

Policies

Clearly governmental policies and legislation influence the environment in which farm businesses operate. European countries operate under the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the USA has the Farm Bill, both of which provide a level of support to the farmer not seen in countries like Australia or New Zealand whose level of subsidy based on the value of production amount to 3% and 1% respectively compared to 10% and 18% for the USA and Europe (Glauber, 2016). King (2016) described the European Common Agricultural Policy as more of a social policy to manage production, land use and to some extent population dispersal. Hillairet (2016) indicated that while some farmers receive up to 30% of their income from CAP payments it can adversely affect their businesses in terms of optimising production. Guus Mensink (pers. comm., April 2016), a dairy farmer from the Netherlands said that it isolated Europe from true market forces.

Figure 3: Author and Guus Mensink, Netherlands (Author, 2016).

Representative examples

Bob Stallman (pers. comm., March 2015), the president of the American Farm Bureau, said their mission was twofold:

- To improve economic opportunity for farmers and ranchers.
- To improve quality of rural life.

He indicated that they had around six million members, 2.1 million of which were farmers and that they were largely funded at the national level by a $4 per member fee which went towards their overall budget of just over $25 million US dollars. The Australian Farm institute (2014) noted that Australian farmer advocate groups may need to provide a range of services to interest people in membership which is how Stallman's (2015) organisation attracts many of its non-farmer members. They also strategically invest in companies they believe are key to agriculture so that as a shareholder they can attend company meetings to ascertain "the lay of the land". He mentioned large biotech companies as being one such sector of interest. Obviously, unity in message is critical for an organisation and Stallman (2015) indicated decisions come from the bottom up. Position papers are discussed by counties, then states and then at a national level. The American Farm Bureau have a legal agreement with the states and counties with regard to the use of their name and this is the "stick" used to keep them "all singing from the same hymn sheet" at a national level. Clearly national representation requires strong farmer voices and to that end the American Farm Bureau has a young farmer and rancher programme that provides help in terms of education and media training. The Californian Farm Bureau, a state based affiliate of the American Farm Bureau spent $1.1 million US dollars endorsing their preferred political candidates in 2014/15 (Gudel, 2015) and actively encourage their members to get elected to office by running "how to" training and information sessions. Stallman (2015) said that the American Farm Bureau brings farmers together to do things that individually they cannot. This runs the gambit of trade, insurance and even keeping the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) "honest". Stallman (2015) added that not only do the EPA have to think about being sued by the environmental movement but by the American Farm Bureau too if they make decisions that adversely affect agriculture.

Spanish Farmers have multiple unions that represent them on a local, regional and national stage. Unio de Pagesos (Union of the Farmer) is one such union based in Barcelona. Roger Iglesias (2016) described a structure that included a wide variety of agricultural products from pigs to organic farming to chickpeas to peaches. As well as representation relating to specific strategic industry matters the union also provided agronomic advice and legal services to members. There are four main unions representing the farmers nationally and these were broken down along philosophical and European CAP payment lines. One union represented large farmers who had CAP payments in excess of 150,000 euros, another, small and medium scale family farmers, a third, CAP payments of around 5,000 euro and Unio de Pagesos which represented the professional family farmer (Iglesias, pers. comm., 2016). Even though the unions seemed to have a logical structure and hierarchy there was still some problems with regard to true cross sectional national representation as only three of the four national unions are currently recognised by government and invited to attend "official meetings" (Iglesias, 2016). Like Australian representative groups, funding and membership was a constant challenge, as was the amount of volunteer time required for strategic direction (Medina, 2016).

Figure 4: Spanish "defending the farmer" T-Shirt (Author, 2016).

Wil Brown (pers. Comm., 2016) from the Australian Embassy in Paris said that French farmers' unions "agitate for outcomes". Hillairet (pers. Comm., 2016) who is chairman of the largest union (FNSEA) and President of the Chamber of Agriculture in Paris concurs but qualifies this by saying one of his roles is to provide a pressure relief valve to enable farmers to "let off steam" over an issue. The Chamber is undoubtedly influential, evidenced by the attendance of the Prime Minister, Agricultural Minister and all political candidates up for re-election at their annual congress in 2015 to state their case. Hillairet (2016) informed the author that farmers are 5% of the population, hold 80% of the land and provide 50% of the balance of trade. He said they are more important or significant as a collective than Airbus (aircraft) and that the Agriculture Minister could not really afford to upset the farmers too much. The Chamber of Agriculture have 100 people working for them on matters including economics, policy, labour and three of them work full time in the Parliament trying to understand the upcoming policy and laws and making judgements about their value and who will work with farmers and who will work against them (Hillairet, 2016). They aim to have farmers enter politics to influence decisions and one of the union's roles is to prepare suitable candidates for this. Dealing with the leadership of the European Union and matching French farmers' requirements to that of other member countries was cited as another level of challenge by Christophe Hillairet. He left the author with the impression that perhaps the biggest challenge for French farmer groups is not within the country but within the European Union by saying "Europe only "manages" farming…it has no ambition or real vision for tomorrow. It doesn't know if it wants an open market or not. I don't think the EU position can stay the same as it is" (Hillairet, 2016).

Figure 5: Christophe Hillairet, President of French Chamber of Agriculture and the author (Author, 2016).

Chapter 3: Generating the case

To progress an idea or change needed by a sector, a case for change needs to be generated and there are some key points to consider when doing so.

Mandates

There are many ways to effect change but all of them require support and for industry or country defining change, a mandate to act and speak on behalf of others. It might be via unions (Spain and France) or bureau (USA) or peak industry groups that can trace their support back directly to the farmer but Senator Anne Ruston (2015) said to the author "I can't really help industry unless they are organised and someone has a mandate to speak". A point supported by the Minister for Regional Affairs, Senator Fiona Nash (2016) who also said that Australian farmers were not currently served well in terms of national representation and that too often farm representative groups were prepared to settle for the "least worst" option. Former federal treasurer, Peter Costello (2016) told the author that they have lost their way but 25-30 years ago, farm peak representation in Canberra was good and at that time many of those involved in the farming movement were groomed for federal politics, for example, former federal Members of Parliament, Ian McLachlan and Andrew Robb.

Relationships

Rob Kerin (2016), ex liberal premier of South Australia (SA) and chairman of Primary Producers of South Australia (PPSA) highlighted the key importance of relationships when he cited a transport issue that needed to be addressed but was not because of the poor relationship between the public service and a transport industry representative. A $30 million dollar saving on a road use efficiency project was being stalled because of a bad relationship.

According to Kerin (2016) key relationships are critical for successful outcomes.

The President of the French Chamber of Agriculture said he met with the French Agriculture minister once a month but with the ministerial staff every week because it was his opinion they were the key people to build a good relationship with as they were the ones sourcing the information and providing advice to the minister (Hillairet, 2016). This line of thinking is supported by Australia's Minister for Regional Affairs, Senator Fiona Nash (2016) who said,

“don’t underestimate the power of meeting with ministerial advisors, they have more time than the minister in general to absorb the benefit of the proposal you have – plus they will be offering advice to the minister on it”.

Mark Butler (2016), Federal Shadow Minister for the Environment, Climate Change and Water, said it is wise for industry to build good working relationships with both sides of politics so that an election will not necessarily derail a good regional project. He added that it is time well spent educating your local member so that they can act as an advocate on your behalf in the parliament plus a minister will very rarely reject a meeting proposed by a local member on behalf of a constituent. He added to get maximum representative value out of your local member you needed to do three things; inspire them, educate them and connect with them personally.

A shortcut method for industry to gain political influence is for one of their members to become a political staffer according to ex US Senator Steineger (2015). A non-political pathway to influence noted in the USA was the movement of academia from universities in to and out of government roles. Professor Daniel Sumner (2016) from the University California, Davis (UCD) said that this was not uncommon and a strength of the US system. He spent time as the head Agricultural Economist in Washington DC which allowed him to bring a practical bent to government talks using his agricultural economic background. A colleague of Sumner’s at UCD, Professor Julian Alston (2016) and an Australian by birth, noted that it was a lot harder for an individual in the USA to gain access to the political system to effect change than it was in Australia.

Clearly relationship building for the good of the farming sector should not be solely focussed in the political arena. Annechien ten Have (pers. comm., April 2016), a farmer from the Netherlands, has spent considerable time building an online profile that relates to her activities as a farmer which includes livestock. She said it was a case of putting goodwill and trustworthiness in the social bank. In discussions with Annechien she cited a case where there had been an animal rights group that had come onto her farm without permission and filmed what out of context did not paint the industry in the best light. However, given her long history of public education and communication she had established herself as a point of trust so when

she commented in a pro-active way the issue was diffused and stopped what could have been a highly negative impact on both her and the pig industry.

Figure 6: Annechien ten Have (r) educating the public in the Netherlands (Author, 2016).

Similarly, Denis Prosperi (pers. comm., March 2016), an American farmer, has had a long and protracted campaign to try and preserve the water rights of farmers in his district and one of the ways he tries to maintain their public profile, keep key collaborators informed and build a link to the community is via a newsletter "Families protecting the valley" which can be viewed online at http://familiesprotectingthevalley.com/

The Case

- Know your audience. This means location, demographic and prejudices. For example, to affect great change in Australia, inhabitants of Sydney and Melbourne need to be convinced (Nash, 2016); if a message was being delivered to early twenty-somethings in the USA it would be important to be aware this age group is more socially liberal than previous generations (Steineger, 2015), and if farm productivity was the topic to deliver in France then understanding the words "farm productivity" conjure up images of excess production, food waste and cheap prices in the general public's mind (Brown, 2016) would be important.

- Have a clear message. “Don’t assume people understand your issue or its importance” (Butler, 2016). Costello (2016) said before you can convince anyone else, you need to know **exactly** what you want – “be very precise”. He recalled that as treasurer he would have four or five people a day walk into his office asking for money and “if that is all they had, I would ignore it”.
- Have a unified message. Weatherill (2016) asks “can you persuade your neighbours, town, rural organisations and local MP that it is a good idea?”. Ideally for success “the majority of people involved need to support it” (Nash, 2016).
- Generate a proposal that is as detailed as possible. Include economic modelling if feasible and ideally have ideas where the money could come from and why (Costello, 2016).
- Show you have considered the broad range of effects. Detail strategies to deal with the inevitable fallout that occurs with change (Nash, 2016).
- Educate the key politicians you need to progress your reform (Butler, 2016).

Professor Daniel Sumner (2016) provides a salient lesson for those building a case and looking for public support. “Make sure your case stands up to real world inspection”. During the recent Californian drought and accompanying water shortage, farmers were appealing to the general public on the basis that no water meant a reduction in tomatoes, grapes, almonds, wine, leafy green vegetables… which would drive prices for food up. The reality was that this did not occur at all. No price rises and no decrease in production of the foods listed. So, the public had a tough time identifying with their message. What actually happened was that the water moved from cotton and other lower value crops to the higher value food stuffs and production continued. The farmers would have done better to appeal to the American public on the basis of how well they had protected their food supply by being very innovative about where they got the water from and that this had a cost for them and affected their ongoing viability.

Sumner (2016) said they should have made their media releases based on the ripple effect. Namely a big farmer who loses $500 000 hurts, it affects his business but he generally still has somewhere to sleep and money to buy food to eat. However, if that big farmer loses $500 000 he will need to put off employees. These people are generally at the bottom of the chain and often have nowhere to go. They lose their job, house and ability to feed and clothe themselves and their families. This is often the real overlooked tragedy in the crises that affect farmers.

Decision makers

During the life of a "case for change" many people will have made a decision about its viability or suitability. Ultimately if it has passed through the usual community filters it will end up being presented to a politician to progress. What affects the way decision makers think in terms of a case before them?:

- Is there a mandate for change?
- Where is the money going to come from?
- Who are the winners and losers?
- What will the fallout be and is the position defensible?
- How much pressure is being applied by other politicians and lobby groups? (Butler, 2016; Costello, 2016; Nash, 2016; Weatherill, 2016).

Lobby groups are a significant contributor to the political debate. In Washington DC, USA, there are approximately 30,000 registered lobbyists (Steineger, 2015).

For any significant decision to "get across the line" in Australia it has to pass across the Treasurer's desk (Butler, 2016; Costello, 2016). Costello (2016) explained that the Treasurer is a powerful position in Australia, because they control the income (taxes) AND the spending (budget). When questioned about how to get the treasurer to approve major spending change Costello said the best course of action was get them to visit and see the proposal for themselves. Acknowledging that this was not necessarily the easiest thing to achieve, he suggested in the second instance the proponent of a project, having met the criteria in the "case" section of this paper should communicate the case with the treasurer via other members of parliament, briefed back bench committees, their local member or the media. When questioned on what filter he used to make decisions Costello said "I used to ask myself two questions. What will protect the tax payer and what will stop anarchy in the streets?" He added on some issues the community can be quite divided and in that case, he would revert to his own first principles. A case where this applied was the foreign land ownership debate in Australia. In his view, there are two groups. The "yes" group were often those that wanted to sell land and the "no" group were in the market to buy. So, to make a decision he would ask:

1. Is foreign investment good or bad for Australia?

2. If good, under what circumstances wouldn't it be acceptable? For example, national security grounds. Then he would build the legislation around that.

Media

The media are a powerful communication tool and can affect people's opinions and their propensity to act. Rory McEwan (pers. comm., 2008) former independent member for Mount Gambier and a former Minister in the South Australian Rann Government impressed this upon the author when he said, "it catches my attention if it is in the media for a day, I am starting to see it as a problem if it is there for a week but I will definitely need to act if it makes the two week mark". Peter Costello (pers. comm., August 2016) supported McEwen's view by saying "No politician is immune to pressure especially if it appears on the front page". Furthermore, he mentioned two other examples of media pressure; the speed with which live trade was banned and how quickly Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull reacted to a Four Corners television show talking about children in custody. An enquiry was called the day after airing even though he would not have had time to consider the facts in detail.

Chapter 4: Barriers to progress

Competition

There are several types of competition that may affect the outcome of a proposal. Mark Butler (2016) explained there is a limited amount of ministerial and cabinet time for matters to be discussed and championed. A proposal must compete for this time. To make it to the table the case must be important either economically, socially or structurally.

Division within an industry allows a reform to be scuttled by a "divide and conquer" strategy but for this to occur it is likely that the case proposed was deficient in some way. Sumner (2016) reported that it was most unusual for the agricultural industry in the USA to allow itself to be split at a national level because they had robust discussions about the validity or otherwise of a course of action at local or state level first.

Obviously, competition between different sectors or groups for resources also occurs. The money "bucket" size does not usually increase much so in a federal budget there will always be winners and losers. Therefore, it is very important in the "case" to explain the benefits of the proposal but also to arm the politicians that are needed to carry the case forward with facts, figures and tools to handle the inevitable fallout from the "losers". Butler (2016) lamented that the losers always complain louder than the winners cheer. This highlights the importance of an industry giving credit where credit is due when a favourable outcome occurs for the passage of a rural proposal.

Structural barriers

When constructing a case, it is important to consider the structural barriers that may inhibit the uptake of a plan. "Australia is not a dictatorship which is a good thing - there are federal, state and local governments, industry groups and interested community members and they will all want their say" (Costello, 2016). Butler (2016) raised the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as at times, a particularly challenging place to pass changes through.

The Murray Darling Basin Plan enacted in 2012 was really 100 years in the making and highlights the difficulties getting reform when individual states have quite different agendas.

Vested interests

Reforms can be adversely affected in the face of large lobbying and media pressure applied to politicians. The reality in Australia is, if you have $40-50 million in advertising dollars you can have a major influence over whether a proposed reform is successful or not (Nash, 2016). The failure of "work choices" and the "mining tax" are prime recent examples of this that show neither side of politics is immune to this pressure.

Prosperi (2016) says it pays to understand the success of other vested interest groups that may have a different ideological viewpoint to farming. He offers that the strength of radical green and animal protection groups in terms of campaigning is that they have an unwavering, uncompromising, ideological mantra that is unifying and easy for the layman to understand. Farmers however, tend to be more pragmatic and practical, have their business on the line and are likely to compromise which means in a public standoff their position can be harder to define simply and therefore, in a "black" versus "white" debate, trickier for the regular citizen to understand.

A Federal Minister (pers. comm., Anon, February 2016) said that the farm lobby is not coordinated enough, accepts lesser outcomes than it should and at critical times should be parking tractors on the lawn of parliament house to give them the media coverage they are lacking to enable their message to "cut through".

Politicians

Paul Flanagan (pers. comm., April 2016), Executive Director Strategic Communication, Department of Premier and Cabinet, S.A., says one of the biggest inhibitors within government is the differing communication standards between departments, politicians and the public. He indicated the challenge for the politician is to translate "government speak" into words that are meaningful to community. He continued that it is equally important for industry to translate their own "industry speak" into a format that is clear, concise and prescriptive enough to be acted on by a Minister.

The author was told on numerous occasions that “Politicians are people too” and that they “don’t like being unpopular”. This is understandable given there is a clearly defined career path for unpopular politicians come election time. Given the aforementioned, a proposal is much more likely to find favour if industry can furnish the politicians with a well-researched, defendable case that looks good in the press.

Conclusions

The health and wellbeing of rural Australia is integrally linked to the prosperity of Australia's agricultural industries. In turn the vibrancy of agriculture is affected by the resources it can garner for optimising its production and the nature of the civil and regulatory frameworks from which it operates. This spans topics as diverse as free trade, roads, telecommunications, social licence and government policies and regulation. These matters are often outside the day to day control of the individual farmer and for a range of reasons can be overlooked until a critical or crisis point is reached. This is the case for farming advocacy or representative bodies.

This report has identified that Australia's agricultural industries face a range of representative challenges not the least of which is the lack of a truly unified voice at national level which weakens agriculture's ability to negotiate a strong pathway forward and has spurred some politicians to suggest agriculture generally accepts the "least worst" option.

Feedback from a range of countries, farmers, politicians and representative bodies has given rise to a list of key points that should be considered by rural regions and their representatives when they are negotiating a case for change. These include:

- Do you have a mandate to speak?
- What are the key relationships needed for progression?
- Does the rhetoric behind the case stand up to public scrutiny?
- Have you an ability to influence the ultimate decision maker?
- What role will the media play in the success or otherwise of your proposal?

In addition, it is important to understand the challenges centred around:

- Competition for decision makers time and money.
- Structural barriers that may stymie progress.
- Which vested interests may be a force for or against your case?
- How best to support politicians in their effort to carry your reform.

There remains work to be done to successfully manufacture a sustainable model of federal representation that truly has a mandate to speak on behalf of the farmers of Australia. This body must be able to package and “sell” the story of rural Australia in a manner that is clear, credible and defensible such that those tasked with implementation can do so. Additionally, value for farmers and member organisations must be inherent which necessitates public and political visibility and measurable progress.

Recommendations

The author's recommendations are fourfold. Tell the story, target education, take ownership and share the load.

Tell the story

Often Australian farmers really only mobilise and tell their story publicly in a crisis such as a drought, flood or outside threat to their businesses like a ban on live exports. The inherent danger in this as an industry strategy is that there is no reservoir of community goodwill for the agricultural industry to tap into when the next threat to business strikes. Our agricultural spokespeople need to be a visible and trusted information source such that industry interactions with the community and media are not limited to defending a position or explaining a calamity.

There is power in leading a discussion and setting the public agenda in a proactive manner. This however, is reliant on having a vision and an aim for what agriculture could look like in Australia. There is a place here for a peak agricultural body to help set a common agenda but this is not just a job for one group. Farmers at an individual level would do well to remember why they love what they do and tell people. That at its core, "agriculture is a noble profession" (Butisingh, 2007). What could be more important than feeding and clothing people?

It is the author's view, that Nuffield scholars have a responsibility to help shape future public discussion around agriculture and as often as possible be the trusted source of information for key decision makers and the community alike.

Targeted education

The ability of a compelling message to "do good" is reliant on the power or influence those that it was delivered to possess. Ideally agriculture will target the opinion influencers and decision makers by working with:

- Key ministerial advisors.
- Selected politicians on both sides of politics.
- Influential educators.
- Specific media.

The aim of this is threefold:

- Educate individuals who have an ability to act in a way that influences outcomes for agriculture and rural communities.
- Inform those that might be asked to pass public judgement on the merits of rural based proposals.
- Provide a credible contact point for further questions relating to agriculture.

The aforementioned is the "what" and the "who" of the message but it is important to consider the "how" of the message also. Specifically, even if the message content is great it falls on deaf ears if you deliver it in Japanese to an English-speaking Australian. It would be advantageous if agricultural advocates worked hard to remove "industry speak" from their message and tailor it in terms of the language and the outcomes that are pertinent to the audience. Nowhere is this more important than when telling the farming "story" to the city based general public. The author doesn't much care about the high cost of housing in Sydney because it does not (at first glance) directly affect him. Why is it then that agriculture would expect its challenges to be anything more than a passing headline to a city-based person? The only reason is relevance. Ideally the agricultural message will be explained clearly in terms of income, jobs, environmental management and how it touches most people at least three times a day when they sit down for a meal.

Take ownership and sharing the load

John Coleman (2012) wrote in the Harvard Business Review, "Are you stalled in a project at work, waiting on someone else to take initiative to get things moving? Are you in a broken professional relationship — with a manager, co-worker, or employee — hoping the other person assumes blame and fixes the issue…are you looking for a silver bullet from an unexpected source?" Agriculture can be a demanding and time consuming pursuit. Unfortunately, this may mean many do not feel like they have the time or energy to lift their heads and take ownership of the bigger challenges confronting their sector. Sadly, no matter how hard one works on the farm and the business it is difficult for success to follow if the industry needs structural reform.

Good rural representation is not the job of one body or person nor is solving all the issues. The agricultural industries, whether they are grain, livestock, fruit and nuts, vines, etc., tackle many of the same problems. Perhaps siting the regional or state representation for these groups in strategically located "regional hubs" will help form a mandated focal point for government interaction, a time and infrastructure saver and a point of fertile cross industry problem solving under the guise of a united agricultural and rural sector. Consider the following (figure 7) "proposed regional hub":

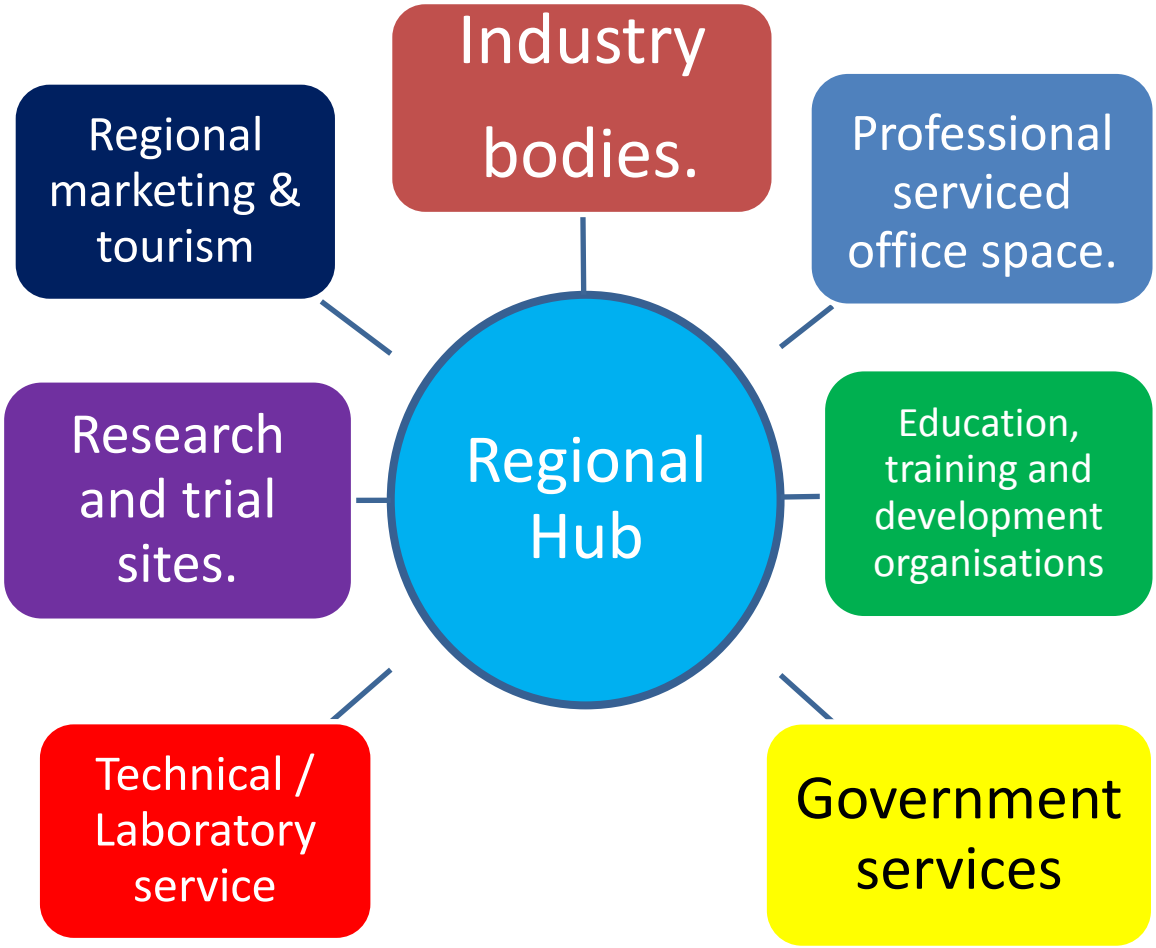

Figure 7: Proposed regional hub (Author, 2016).

The rural story is not just about agriculture. The model (Figure 7) seeks to integrate the key sectors in many of the rural regions given their requirements, be it communications, roads, hospitals are not too dissimilar to agriculture's. The seven spokes described in this theoretical model should not be limiting.

They are:

Industry

- Site all local agricultural industry at the same facility. The differences in requirement are smaller than the similarities of need.
- Advantage of “morning tea” discussion across industry to easily determine which areas of collaboration there are without having to instigate a large round of formal meetings. This would give rise to the ability to speak with a mandate on a specific topic and then “do your own thing” until the next joint topic arose. Combined industries flexibility and an ability to run single topic focus campaigns similar to the effective anti-agriculture group run programs when needed would result. The power of this approach is that for a single-issue campaign such as communications, agriculture could easily couple with tourism, town based industry, local government, etc. to present a strong unified voice on the topic whereas a campaign around the backpacker tax may draw a different consortium of effort.
- Industry already keep offices. There would be a huge saving in terms of infrastructure; think one or two meeting rooms instead of ten, one photocopier, one front office secretary for directing enquiries…

Professional serviced office space

- Often the weakness of group collaboration is “who is in charge of what”. Politics, vested interests and time can be problems. To counter this, the regional hub would have a professional centre manager funded by all facility inhabitants. This would give impartiality to centre infrastructure decisions and enable the business of running a successful regional hub to be someone’s core focus.
- The hub would provide a professional accounting and secretarial service. Multiple benefits would accrue from this. They may include:
    - Robust cross industry data to use to support the regional story.
    - Access to professional services for smaller partners that previously may have been un-economical.
    - Government trust in data being generated which may help in grant application.
    - Potential increase in outside investment to industries based on professional information being delivered and marketed.

Education training and development organisations

- Australian agriculture does not compete on cheap inputs and labour. High standard, skilled entrants to the industries are required and cited by many as a challenge in their sector. Housing local training organisations and making the hub available for higher level school visits would be one way of forging stronger bonds with potential future industry workers **and** to help the training organisations remain focussed on the points that have maximum impact on agriculture and not get side tracked into delivering non-productive training.

Government services

- Government service siting at the hub would give rise to better targeted programs due to easy cross industry feedback plus increase industry uptake given the knowledge of program existence.

Technical / Laboratory services

- Technology driven farming requires accurate, timely information. A sensible addition to a hub would be expertise in commonly used testing requirements.

Research and trial sites

- University and research centre guest offices / laboratories / field areas to allow for targeted work in situ. Brings researchers closer to those that require the work done to try and close the gap between what can be done and what industry knows to be available. Added benefit of interaction between school groups / on-site training providers and university researchers.

Regional marketing and tourism

- Regional marketing and tourism "sell the story" of an area. Part of the challenge for agriculture is selling the story and part of an attraction to a region is the agricultural story hence the synergies available if these two areas worked more closely together.

The author's travels helped crystalize thoughts on the applicability of a "regional hub" based model for advocacy purposes. It would attend to many of the points raised by politicians, advocacy groups and farmers regarding regional **and** agricultural representation including:

- Ground up information flow.

- Cross industry, region specific, collaborative associations to give a powerful mandate on critical topics.
- Focal point for state government contact and long term relationship building.
- Value for industries to be involved given that they are likely to save money and do not lose any of their individual autonomy.
- Value for farmers as services, government programs and research would potentially be better targeted and more accessible.
- Regional hubs could easily feed in to a national advocacy body.

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Plain English Compendium Summary

Nuffield Australia Project No.:	1504
Scholar:	Ben Haslett
Organisation:	Woolenook Fruits Wilhelm Rd, Murtho, S.A., 5340, Australia PO Box 164, Paringa, S.A., 5340, Australia
Phone:	0438 317 559
Email:	ben@woolenook.com.au

Objectives

- Do rural communities abroad feel disempowered in a manner similar to Australian regions and are there strategic lessons to be gleaned from their experiences?
- How do key decision makers who can influence the well-being of rural and regional areas think in terms of delivering first rate results and what stops them?
- What are the key factors rural and regional areas need to consider when prosecuting their case?
- What are the obstacles rural and regional areas face when trying to achieve substantive change?
- Are there structures or practices that could facilitate desirable regional outcomes?

Background

Australia's population growth is focussed around major urban centres culminating in disconnection from farming practices for the majority of Australia's metropolitan populace including key decision makers.
This has led to challenges for rural regions in terms of sourcing the resources their communities require to operate optimally in a competitive world market. Additionally, fragmentation or weakening of farm representative groups and not having one undisputed peak body has given rise to some elected officials commenting that advocacy bodies are accepting the "least worst" option for agricultural industries and rural communities.

Research

Travel in the years 2015/2016 to the UK, France, USA, Mexico, Brazil, Spain, The Netherlands, New Zealand and Hong Kong coupled with domestic Australian travel enabled collection of information from famers, industry representatives, bureaucrats and politicians.

Outcomes

A series of key points were generated to help inform bodies or individuals when they are compiling a case for change. These include discussions on mandates, relationships, decision makers, media, competition, barriers, vested interests and politicians.

Implications

Australian agriculture needs a truly representative, well resourced, peak advocacy body that has the power and authority to comment on agricultural issues and can present a clear and compelling case to key decision makers in a manner that allows them to instigate the requested change without fear of unwarranted public back lash.

Publications

Orally presented in September 2016 to the Nuffield Australia National Conference in Adelaide, South Australia.