

# RURAL TIMES 8

## The NFF

*John Hyde*

Not for the first time, the National Farmers Federation (NFF) stands at a crossroad. It must make up its mind whether to be just another Canberra lobby pressing the claims of a particular sectional interest, or whether to continue to take a national view of the economy.

Among political lobbyists the NFF is fortunate. It represents mainly the low-cost, that is economically-efficient, wool, grain, meat and sugar industries. These industries lose heavily from the total round of protective devices and would benefit from the sort of changes which are needed to make our whole economy more efficient. The NFF has, therefore, been able to serve most farmers' interests well by demanding deregulation and lower protection.

Because it has been able to lobby the government on behalf of its constituents without making the sort of demands which injure the economy as a whole, it has tended not to resort to the threats, sophistry and half truths which are typical of unions and protected industries. In short, it has not been your typical pressure-group lobby. For this very reason the NFF has been the despair of the National Party, among other things putting paid to the McEwinist protection-all-round policy which was intended to preserve the Country Party in the face of declining rural population.

It might be said that it takes a sophist to know one, but for whatever reason, intellectual honesty is not a trait which politicians associate with rural lobbies. Nevertheless, the NFF has managed to make intellectual integrity into a source of political influence. It is now under pressure from some of its constituent bodies, particularly those representing high-cost industries, to sacrifice that advantage.

The NFF's relationship with its constituent organisations has always been uneasy. The unease has been inevitable---some of the industries the NFF represents, including the large dairy industry, are protected, and even low cost industries such as wheat and sugar have received some government subsidies or benefited from regulated domestic prices. Representatives of these industries have, at times, nurtured the hope they could keep their fertiliser and fuel

subsidies etc. while other industries lost the benefits which raised farmers' costs.

What is more, all rural industries are regulated with the aid of grower representatives elected to prestigious positions on such bodies as the Meat and Livestock Corporation, Wool Corporation and Wheat Board. Although in the case of the low-cost industries the cost of regulating the market has been born by the industries themselves, the 'industry leaders' are reluctant to vote themselves out of positions of power and honour as the sugar industry is starting to learn.

To overcome these tensions the NFF has worked with affiliated industry councils. The councils, like the trade union affiliates of the ACTU, have considerable autonomy. Some of these councils are now dissatisfied. Representatives of the tobacco growers are threatening to pull out, and those of the dried fruits, sugar and dairy industries have exchanged peeved correspondence with the NFF. The issue here has been protection. The still ~~heavily~~ protected tobacco and dairy industries claim, correctly, that they have been required to accept a rate of adjustment that is much faster than that of manufacturing industry. They, therefore, want the NFF to stop campaigning against all tariffs and import quotas.

Further, the major industries are not free from sin. The wheat and sugar commodity councils have only recently demanded retention of statutory marketing arrangements which are remarkably similar to the centralised wage fixing system which the NFF opposes. Even the Wool Council, once the jewel in the NFF crown, is making itself look silly by refusing to admit that the wool reserve price scheme has at last gone the way of other buffer-stock schemes the world over.

Where does all this leave the NFF? Not quite up the creek without a paddle. The climate of electoral opinion has changed by so much now, that the commodity councils have been left representing a bygone era. Most Australians now favour micro-economic reform. What is more, most farmers know that they ultimately depend upon access to international markets and they are not silly enough to want to be throwing rocks at the EEC and North America from a glass house.

In short, the NFF's strength now is its past success. It has done more to improve the trading environment of Australia's major export industries than all of the other rural lobbies put together. Anyone who wants the NFF now to abandon the high ground should be told politely but firmly to get lost.

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ENDS

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