Small Towns: The Forgotten Rural Crisis

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I.

Every so often a catch–phrase crops up which seems to say everything that needs to be said about a situation. Take the term "Rural Crisis", for instance; generated during the rallies which marked the regrouping of the Farming Lobby during the 1980's and nurtured by the media and politicians, the "Crisis" is now a familiar catch-cry in the rhetoric of a host of rural interest groups, many of whom have quite different views regarding the origins of the Crisis and what (if anything) might be done about it.

Yet on two points there is a remarkable degree of consensus: first, that a genuinely desperate situation exists in the Bush and, second, that the people bearing the brunt of hardship are the farmers themselves.

Such assumptions are worth examining in more detail. The complex of economic factors which are responsible for the downturn in the farming economy – spiralling costs, falling incomes, weak domestic demand, increased protectionism in the international market, high interest rates – are not unique to the present decade; nor are their effects entirely unpredictable; risk and failure and foreclosure are not new to the farming family, never more than the next long drought away, and there is nothing to suggest that private farmers are faring any worse, in survival terms, than other sectors of the community such as small business.

If there is a genuine "Rural Crisis", it is happening not on the farms but in the small country towns, and its causes are only indirectly related to the problems being experienced in agriculture.

For the past four decades, Australia has been experiencing a population shift of unprecedented proportions, a migration from rural areas to the cities and larger provincial centres that has made Australia the most urbanised national on earth.[1] The rare instances where DEP figures show increases[2] can be explained by factors such as location (often backed by enormous marketing resources, as in the case of the mid-North Coast of New South Wales) or by a "commuter effect" from the presence of nearby provincial cities (as in the case of such shires as Parry in Northern New South Wales, which surrounds the Municipality of Tamworth and gains a "spill-over" of residential growth in selected areas of the Shire). But in general the trend in rural areas is one of depopulation; not only are small communities failing to maintain themselves at replacement levels, they are losing a significant section of their income-producing population without attracting new residents to replace them.

A population drift on this scale cannot be explained simply in terms of hard times on the farm, for the trend has continued regardless of variations in farm profitability or income. If anything, "good seasons" have been marked by increasing mechanisation[1] and investment in "New Technology", both of which have had a negative impact on the largely unskilled and semi-skilled farm labour market. This is not to say that in some sectors of the small town economy – plant servicing, equipment merchandising, grain and livestock handling, for example – there is no direct relationship between net farm incomes and employment opportunities, but the decline in rural employment is not a simple reflection of the fortunes of the farming sector, and the crisis in the small town economy will not be miraculously cured by the provision of assistance, in whatever form and on whatever scale, to the farming sector alone.

Undoubtedly one major social change which has impacted on rural areas – and on the retail and service outlets in small towns in particular – has been the revolution in transport and communication that has been gathering momentum throughout the post-war period. The householder residing in a rural community is no longer constrained by time or distance to purchase goods at local stores. The greater degree of choice and availability of items in the larger provincial centres, and the necessity of travel to these centres for other purposes, makes the weekly or fortnightly shopping expedition a regular feature of family activity. As well, the cost of buying locally is generally increased by higher freight charges and associated costs of distance, so that the competitiveness of the small town commercial enterprise is being continually eroded. Small town shopkeepers do not have available the sophisticated distribution and marketing networks of specialised merchandising options available to the urban retailer.

Another significant social change that has contributed to the decline of employment and career opportunities in rural communities has been the increasingly centralised structure of the labour market. The need to compete and justify costs in both the public and private sectors has resulted in a reduction in the size and number of commercial and public service outlets in small towns. The "new technology" has provided the means for this process to be accelerated during the present decade. Data collation, accounting processes and even is some cases client servicing have become increasingly computerised and linked to regional offices or state networks; labour needs at "local" level have been superseded by a demand for skilled administrative personnel to maintain these specialised services. Nor is this trend confined to government departments or agencies; rationalisation and corporate re-structuring are as characteristic of the private sector as they are of the public. Over all, the result is much the same: jobs lost in the small towns, with specialised "professionals" administering and servicing large areas or regions from a provincial city base. The young and vocationally mobile section of the population has tended to respond to this changing labour market by migrating to high-opportunity areas, leaving behind a typically "skewed" population top-heavy with elderly people.

Other social opportunities within the small town - culture and entertainment, community services (as opposed to welfare and medical services) – tend to shrink as the crisis deepens and depopulation continues. In some cases the community is simply unable to sustain the economic base for the survival of a particular service or facility; in other cases services might be killed off by improved access to city services or competition fr0m other sources. The community cannot offer sufficient incentive to attract new businesses, entrepreneurs or professionals. Only medical

and welfare services are likely to prosper in this environment, a response to the prevalence of the aged and disadvantaged groups within the population; but the professionals employed in these agencies are seldom residents of the small communities they service.

The signs of decline are familiar to most rural people: the Cinema or Drive-in closes down; the Railway retrenches or relocates positions as part of a Rationalisation Program; a local transport operation closes; the town's resident doctor retires and is not replaced. The town lags further and further behind larger centres in its provision of the services by which the quality of life is measured both by the outside world and the residents themselves.

The decline of community morale parallels the decline in these services, and the physical appearance of the town begins to reflect faltering confidence and failing pride. A walk down the main street, with its vacant lots and derelict buildings, becomes a dismal affair. Strangers encounter a mood of surly depression, almost to the point of rudeness. The mention of the name of the town assumes a connotation of neglect throughout the district, and there comes a point at which the foreboding of the town's residents about the future of their community becomes almost self-fulfilling…

II.

In seeking to resolve the crisis into which small rural communities are being plunged by depopulation and the economic gravity of provincial and metropolitan centres, there are a few facts that have to be faced.

One is that over 85 percent of Australians live in such centres[1]. It is therefore likely that political decision-making (and therefore funds and services) will tend to continue to concentrate resources in urban electorates, particularly those marginal seats experiencing rapid residential growth.

The only way in which small towns can divert this process is by making their situation a political issue. The Crisis has to become a matter of public concern. Planners and political decision-makers have to be made aware that small communities are disadvantaged. Politicians, at all three levels of government must be convinced that support for such communities is in the interest of a broad section of the Australian society and culture.

In the area of employment, and particularly youth employment, there is no doubt that certain social costs are attached to both country and city in the process of labour migration. Property markets languish in the "Outback", while in the suburbs the Urban Sprawl places increasing pressure on services and resources.

One answer might be to lobby for the establishment of an Incentive Scheme weighted in favour of business initiatives in isolated communities of, say, 100,000 residents or less where evidence of depopulation exists. Such a scheme could conceivably provide subsidies for the employment

of local labour on a reducing basis, with funds available to both existing enterprises and new ventures.

A change of policy which might be helpful would involve a Directive to all government departments or agencies, encouraging "consideration of existing residency" to be taken into account as a positive factor in their training, recruitment and promotion procedures. Emphasis might be given, for example to attracting and training teachers to fill positions in the districts within which they already reside; no amount of rationalising by Education Department will change the fact that present policies in this regard are extremely cumbersome and expensive both in personnel turnover and direct management costs.

Another area where policy could be reconsidered is in the structuring of regional functions. At present the dominant model or "blueprint" for delivery of services to rural areas is a "Circuit Model"; a single individual or team, usually based in a provincial city, providing service to a cluster of smaller centres within the Region or District. Yet some services – the Home Care Service would be an example - have managed to operate quite efficiently by employing administrative personnel on a part-time basis in each small community. Obviously the merits of this alternative will vary depending on the kind of service being delivered; but all too often "Circuit Models" are imposed in country areas more form uncreative planning than from a demonstration of real effectiveness. They involve high overheads (travel and communication costs especially) and without local input and knowledge, may have only limited penetration.

Any such changes of policy are meaningless without the achievement of an accord between federal, state and local government acknowledging the existence of a crises situation in small town economies and recognising the need for positive action to redress that situation. It is towards this specific objective that the efforts of interest groups representing small communities can be directed, and against which success can be measured.

There are a number of existing lobby groups which might serve to advocate for such changes at state and federal level – service organisations, chambers of commerce, retail associations, industry-specific or small business groups; and strategy relying on the muscle of existing groups needs to be a sophisticated one, because it is likely to have to deal at some level with partisan opposition from within the organisation itself.

The other options available to the commercial or development lobby in small towns is to form a specific-purpose organisation that can tackle the problem at local level and work towards the development of a grass-roots network that includes district and regional areas. Such a body ought to include a cross-section of retailers, agency representatives and local opinion leaders, an incorporate both management and political representatives of Local Government. Whatever the strictures under which shire councils operate, and whatever the barriers that might exist within the council structure, there can be no doubt that local government has available to it the management skills, planning expertise, resource flexibility and political network needed to bring about effective re-development in rural communities.

Such an organisation might begin by consolidating its objectives into a charter for consideration by potential support groups and political parties; rallying influential support and developing a lobbying strategy; and seeking the support of Local Government in a realistic appraisal of the social and economic needs of the community. Approached with foresight and costed realistically, a Town Plan has the latent purpose of concentrating the energy of the organisation on something practical and attainable, while affording an excellent opportunity for involving the entire community in the process of its redevelopment. [It is worth emphasising the need for a realistic appraisal of cost estimates and funding availability, and the need to plan within a realistic time frame. Five to ten years, with annual stages or "targets", could be considered a reasonable framework for such planning. Responsibly approached, and with some support from Local Government, this process provides the touch-stone for the community's renewed sense of purpose and confidence in its future.

The physical improvement of the town and political advocacy are only part of any re-development scenario. A third and no less important task is entrepreneurial: to attract residents to the town and effectively promote its economic welfare. It is in this area that some fundamental re-thinking may be required. Most importantly, the real (as opposed to the presumed) economic and demographic status of the community must be assessed. What types of industry or enterprise would be best suited to the resources (cheap land or rates, labour supply, transport, market locations, etc) that are locally available? What is the tourist potential of the district and the town, and how might it be developed? Is there commuter potential and, if so, what services or facilities might be needed to realise it? What are the best ways to target appropriate residential and industrial markets? Are there ways to attract residents back to shopping locally?

Framing accurate answers to these questions in the contemporary social climate requires considerable expertise and access to specialised resources, meaningful source data and appropriate technology. The Development Organisation may, particularly if it has links to Local Government, access to such expertise and resources; otherwise it may be able to arrange this research through an appropriate department of a regional University, or seek assistance from state or federal Environmental Planning agencies. At present, little priority is given to the needs of small rural communities by any of these bodies when rural planning is considered[1]; a reflection more of the failure of the towns to generate a political and public awareness of their situation than from any deliberate policy of exclusion by governments. There is certainly room within the existing policies and guidelines of these departments to accommodate research of this kind, either through the use of their own personnel or the distribution of grants to provide for consultancies. The organisation must maintain an integrated approach to planning; to be constantly aware of the relationship existing between town improvement, political advocacy and entrepreneurial activity.

The kinds of actions so far proposed deal mainly with medium and long-term goals. There are also a number of more immediate actions that might be taken. The distribution of resources within the local Council might be prompted to use its powers under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act to require residents with unsightly frontages or properties to improve their premises. Local clubs and committees might be encouraged to plan their annual festivities of

fund-raising events in creative and innovative ways, and promote these events (with the assistance of the Development Organisation) not only in the local media but at district and regional level. Residents could be encouraged to participate in formulating the Town Plan. Small-scale community beautification and maintenance projects might be integrated into the planning of local clubs, schools and businesses. Local artists and craftspeople might be encouraged to become more actively involved in promoting the town's culture and identity.

Small steps, perhaps, but the beginnings at least of a "social investment"; the notion that something can be achieved co-operatively within the community beyond destructive criticism and self-interest. For one thing is certain: the crisis confronting the small communities of rural Australia is not some temporary social accident to be resolved with the next good season. Without positive and considered action by these communities, the future can hold nothing more than further decline and eventual dereliction. The next two decades will be critical in reversing this process. Given the steps through which the process of re-development must proceed – the delays, the setbacks, the ponderous working bureaucracies, and the slow evolution of community attitudes – any further delay in confronting the real Rural Crisis would be ill advised.

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