

PEOPLE, PROFITS AND POLITICS

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With the General Election at the end of the month I thought it timely to look at the record of the present Government and the possible alternatives as far as the rural community and the important rural social issues are concerned.

Undoubtedly the emergence of Social Credit into the ranks of the politically significant has had an impact on the rural voter. In the past both National and Labour took for granted the overall loyalty of the rural voter. Both assumed that rural people would vote National with their left hand even if the National Party cut off their right hand. The only time country districts saw the National Party was when the party faithful came round collecting funds, and the Labour Party they saw not at all. Electorally rural people were taken for granted, and there was little to be gained in votes by giving rural people what they thought they wanted.

All that changed when the people of Rangitikei decided they were sick of being taken for granted and voted in Bruce Beetham. Suddenly Social Credit became a credible alternative for which to cast your vote. Rural people saw a tool to get their message across, a way out of their powerlessness. In provincial and rural electorates for National this must bring the threat of losing some seats, and for Labour and Social Credit the hope of winning some. Except for Rangitikei and East Coast Bays the rise of Social Credit is largely speculative. To date the felt change in the importance of the rural vote has been more important in changing the attitudes of the two main parties towards rural issues than an actual transfer of rural seats away from the National Party, which beyond Rangitikei has yet to happen. With six years in Government the National Party must stand on their records of what has happened in rural New Zealand. Their time for promises is passed.

The Department of Statistics reports from this year's census that although horticultural development in some Counties have undoubtedly brought population growth, it is not expected that the overall rural census population will have increased. However, I am not concerned with either horticultural regions or overall rural population levels, but rather with the lowest levels, the survival of marginal rural communities. In these areas the population levels are still decreasing.

DROP IN COUNTY POPULATIONS 1976-81 (Dept. of Statistics)

county	1976 Census	1981 Census	76-81 drop %
Featherston	3,303	2,861	-5.7%
Waimate West	2,074	1,944	-6.3%
Rangitikei	14,860	13,910	-6.4%
Kiwitea	1,823	1,705	-6.5%
Tuapcka	4,123	3,851	-6.6%
Piako	11,125	10,337	-7.1%
Waikohu	3,193	2,963	-7.2%
Stratford	5,084	4,641	-8.7%
Woodville	1,476	1,320	-10.6%
Wairewa	713	630	-11.6%

In looking at the statistics so far available to me I am naturally depressed by the figures for the counties from which have come the loudest voices of concern about rural depopulation e.g. Rangitikei, Stratford and Featherston. But, as well, I find concerning the drop in populations in what I would regard as peri-urban Counties e.g. Woodville, Kiwitea, and Waimate West. While probably the survival of their services is not yet really under threat, it seems sad to me that there is that fewer number of people enabled to enjoy a rural quality of life.

To some extent the dropping birth rate and the continuing exodus abroad must be affecting the numbers in rural and urban areas alike. In marginal rural communities basic numbers for the viability of playgroups, schools and other social services are absolutely vital. In the past the coming of a new family to a district may have brought 4-6 children to add to the roll. Today it is more likely that a new family will only bring 1-3 children. Thus it is more important now, than previously, that the problems of rural living be overcome and more of the people who would like to share our rural life can come, and can be helped to stay.

There have been improvements in the last six years. More rural districts have a 5 day mail service, television reception is being extended and rural telephones up-graded. The scheme for rural workers to obtain loans to buy homes certainly gives them some security in these inflationary times, and the REAP educational packages being introduced into specific rural districts must be having a beneficial impact.

To be hypercritical, none of these improvements have been done in the way rural people would have wished, should they have had the say. Many of those now with a 5 day mail service would have been quite happy to have had a 3 day service if it had meant that those who still now have only a once or twice weekly service could also have had a 3 day service. The extensions to TV2, of radio hours, and the introduction of FM should not have come before everyone has an adequate basic service of TV 1, the national programme and their local station. Home loans for rural workers should be available after 5 years, not ten, and homes in town actually do little for rural population levels.

All praise I have heard or read of REAP has been by those in the education system, and not from the rural consumer. It appears that local management committees are dominated by vested educational interest groups, and the actual make-up of the REAP package seems to have been already ordained by some unknown authority and require ministerial approval to change.

On the farming scene there are the LDEL and livestock incentive schemes and the supplementary minimum prices. As my income results largely from farming returns I benefit, but on the wider rural scene I do not like the trickle down theory of putting money into rural communities through assistance to farmers. Indeed, in the rural social environment such assistance to farmers has a definite detrimental effect. Non-farming people see those who have getting more and those who have not, getting less. Farm workers who own nothing more than a very secondhand car see already wealthy farmers getting loans of \$80-100,000. Financial segregation may be easy to ignore, in the cities where business owners live in Khandallah or Karori and those without capital in Porirua or Newtown, but in the remote rural community we live side by side, our children attend the same primary school and we play badminton and 500 in the same small social group.

There have been improvements in the last six years, but weighed against these must be the fact that the cost of transport and travel has tripled and this has filtered through every aspect of rural life. Many problems of rural living still remain. Those affected by these problems are not numerous (less than 45,000 in total) and those affected by the individual problems of rural living are much, much fewer, But to the individuals thus affected the problems are large and serious.

1. *"It is the radio reception I am not happy with. It was meant to be on the Coast (Ruatoria) by 1975, and it is now 1981. We desperately need 22G (Gisborne) reception up here as it is more beneficial to this area than Tauranga. In case of local news Jan Hughes reads our the local issues once a week on Tauranga Radio on Fridays. In cases of floods, like the one at Christmas, and fire, we have no radio coverage at all. Have you any further suggestions for what I can do about it?"*

2. *"Our road is back pushing for a rural delivery for the mail. There are eight families as opposed to one less the last time we tried. Now our mail is sorted at the P. O. and brought by whoever passes by. In the past it worked quite well, but the postmistress left her husband recently and went to town. He now sorts the mail and last week broke his glasses, and we got letters addressed to seven other people in one day's mail. Some of the oldies are frantic in case something valuable goes astray. One family have anything important sent to a town address. My fear is that the P. O. will close which would never do as we have so few services now." (from a letter).*

3. In my own district ten farm owners and three farm managers have secondary children at boarding school, but none of the other farm employees have secondary children i.e. those who have been here left before their children reached secondary school, as, I expect, will be the case with most of those farm employees with children at the local primary school (ten families).

COST OF SECONDARY SCHOOLING FROM THE BACKBLOCKS

<i>Boarding Costs</i>	(at 2nd term 1981 fees)	\$1,584	For 2 children	\$3,153
	less boarding allowance	<u>700</u>		<u>1,400</u>
		<u>\$ 884</u>		<u>\$1,753</u>

(N.B. Wairarapa College state hostel fees,

There is a \$5 discount per term for 2 children & \$10 for three. The increase in the boarding allowance to \$750 p.a. announced in the Budget will be more than wiped out by increases in costs.)

Travel Costs

A substantial car is essential to stand up to the wear and tear of back country roads. The cost 50-60c per km to run

Home to school □ 192 km round trip x 50c □ \$96 (x 60c = \$115.20).

Home to bus (sometimes suitable) □ 96 km x 50c = \$48 (x 60c = 57.60)

Essential trips'

	@50c per km	@60c
Beginning & end of 3 terms (6 trips of 192 kms)	\$576	\$69 1.20
One mid-term trip to collect child (3 x 192 kms)	\$288	\$315.60
One mid-term trip to bus stop to connect with bus & train to return (3 x 96kms)	<u>\$144</u>	<u>\$172.80</u>
Cost of essential travel	\$1,008	\$1,209.60
Less Government travel allowance (approx.)	<u>\$ 1 2 0</u>	<u>\$120.00</u>
Net travelling cost	\$888	\$1,089.60
Net boarding cost (one child)	<u>\$884</u>	<u>\$884.00</u>
Net Cost	\$1,772	\$1,973.60

(N.B. Bus & train fares are not included.

Nor are trips to Sports Days or parent/ teacher interviews or additional weekends home).

To sum up the past six years of National Government I would say that we in the rural community have been treading water, standing still. There have been some losses and some gains, but certainly no sign of vast improvement.

Well, what alternatives do we have? As those of you who study party' manifestos closely will know they contain lots of nice phrases and good words, but are usually fearfully careful of what they commit their parties to. "*Labour will remove the dead hand of Wellington from regional decision making.*"

Once I saw the dead hand of Wellington being responsible for many of our rural social problems. As I have come to know more about district and

regional planning it would seem that in many cases it is the reluctant hand of local and regional government, which is not prepared to accept responsibility for making its own decisions, and prefer to hide behind national guidelines, precedents and restrictive conservatism.

I favour the change from investment to plant to job promotion in the Labour Party's regional development plan, and the widening of representation. I would like to see the terms of reference widened to enable grants to be made for social needs such as the provision of services and assistance with the cost of children's education when this has an obvious bearing on regional development.

"Initiate discussions with farmers and other interested groups on the concept of a production incentive tax. "

"Ensure a review of the bursary and school transport systems to ensure all children from rural areas have free access to education."

"financial support for parents from rural areas who are devoting time to assist children with correspondence courses".

"flexible rules for the administration of rural hospitals".

"rebate on TV licences for those in isolated on rural communities who do not receive television from both television channels".

"Initiate discussions", "ensure a review", "flexible rules" — fairly easy promises a fulfill without doing anything substantial. Now "financial support" and "rebate" sound more worthwhile, but what measure of financial support and how much rebate? I do not know.

And Social Credit? What does it offer beyond the increased importance of the rural vote?

"Social Credit will direct its farming policy towards security of tenure, promoting further development and settlement, assisting with the control of erosion, and ensuring the necessary incentives for further production by stabilising costs, reducing taxation, ensuring finance at reasonable rates of interest, and providing adequate services for the rural community. "

Out of these four priorities I notice that the "adequate services for the rural community" comes last, I also notice that throughout their agricultural policy the farmer is referred to as "he".

"Social Credit believes in the principle of private individual ownership of N. Z. farmland, and that the most efficient farmer is the owner-occupier. "

"A five year compulsory residence clause will apply to the purchase of all economic farm units":

In terms of farming I am not against absentee owners, especially those with a business background willing and able to invest surplus capital into development. But in terms of commitment to the rural community it is a fact of life that your home is where your heart is, and neither the absentee owner nor the resident non-owner have the same commitment to the welfare of the rural community as does the resident owner.

"Depreciation: a new house built by a farmer for his own use will qualify for initial and special depreciation where the existing house is then occupied by a farm employee. Value for depreciation will be limited to the cost of providing

alternative employee accommodation.

This may be worthwhile although I suspect than any farmer who knows how to use the system is already getting depreciation by employing themselves.

"To encourage farm workers, the same taxation deductions as allowed to farmers will apply. . . that is, maintenance of their own gear and animals, car depreciation, and telephone rental, if not paid by the owner. "

While, as a generalisation, this sounds alright, maintenance of gear and animals would already appear deductible. I can't see that farm employees' telephone rental should be deductible any more than the telephone rental of any other employee. Similarly for car depreciation. The running and repair costs are the vital question for the rural dweller and any assistance in this field should be graded on remoteness, not in which industry you are employed.

These are the main items which caught my eye in the Labour and Social Credit policies.

My assessment, overall, is that it matters little for whom you vote at the end of the month in terms of what they will do for the rural community. All have to be committed to agriculture. But for the wider rural community I do not see much improvement. The promises will probably keep us afloat, just treading water. That is fine for those of us who can already survive in rural New Zealand; who can already swim. But if you are not a farmer, if you are just someone who would like to share a rural quality of life, be prepared to face problems of survival, learn to swim, or don't get into the water.