PEOPLE, PLANNING AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly sixty years ago a committee reported to the Government on the deterioration of Crown Lands. It commented on management techniques for difficult hill country, the capital and maintenance costs involved in development and problems related to access. It suggested "The improving of communication in these backblocks would assist in making the social side of the life more attractive, and induce more married men with families to take land; at present the lack of roads and the difficulty in obtaining adequate educational facilities, make residence on this class of land hard for the womanfolk."¹

There have been many changes since then. Nevertheless many of the factors isolated by the report are still considered as critical to the future of the hill country. Economic factors include those related to domestic policies — movements in the exchange rate, levels of interest rates, policies for economic growth and concerns for equity, reflected, for example, in income distribution policies and provision of social services. In addition international demand, overseas protection policies, and New Zealand's marketing efforts will have implications for hill country development.

The social factors are more complex. While they include the availability of health and education services, they are also affected by the perceptions of the people in the hill country about the development of their communities as well as individual aspirations relating to employment and life style.

FARMERS AND OTHER PEOPLE

Many of the national economic policies affecting the hill country are directed primarily at the farmer. Within the wider context of prospects for New Zealand over the next decade, opportunities for agriculture look good. In particular, we can be optimistic about prospects for the hill country. The potential for a 50 percent or more increase in production from the hill country on the basis of present techniques and knowledge has not been disproved. This conference is making its particular contribution to the exchange of knowledge about technology and management in grassland farming.

But it is not enough to point to the potential for increased production in agriculture and assume it will happen. It is not enough to indicate that if agricultural output increases by 4 percent a year the New Zealand economy will receive the necessary boost it needs to escape from its present stagnation and to maintain growth through the 1980s.

There are a number of factors outside the technical possibilities and the financial aspects of hill country farming which will be important influences on the future of the hill country. People's motivations are complex; the people of the hill country are not homogeneous; the hill country as a whole is not populated just by grassland farmers and their families.

This diversity is reflected in varied aims and concerns and views of the future — and ultimately in the actions of the people of the hill country. The farmer for example, has his worries about the value of the New Zealand dollar; the price/ cost squeeze; the extent to which agricultural export earners are operating in relation to a "protected" economy; and industrial relations in the freezing industry. On the other hand he may be established, less concerned about returns on investment and enjoying a life style he has chosen. His wife might echo these concerns and add others about the movement of young people to the cities, access to schools, hospitals and the difficulties experienced by the women who drive the school buses along metalled roads. If she is not actively engaged on the farm she may be looking ahead to opportunities for herself when the children go to school.

The farm worker wonders if he will ever have his own house, let alone a farm, as land prices spiral, farms are amalgamated and some district schemes limit the purchase of small "stepping stone" units. The farm worker's wife may aspire (with the farmer's wife) for a job of her own. The Maori elder might be searching for a way to bring back the mokopuna from the city to the land. And there are others — contractors, catchment board employees and so on.

HILL COUNTRY SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FARM OUTPUT

New Zealand has always put great store on the contribution of the rural sector to the country, both for economic reasons, with agriculture still contributing over 70 percent of export earnings and social ones. Paul Kaplan sees the values of rural New Zealand as fundamental to the country as a whole." Thus governments of differing political persuasions have supported agriculture through a variety of means, including incentives for land and stock, guaranteed prices, marketing and trade negotiations abroad.

The traditional emphasis has been on encouraging output. More recently, there has developed a concern for the total rural community. A series of seminars, publications and consultations in many parts of New Zealand has resulted in a substantial literature³ focusing on the rural social condition, rural depopulation (and its link with land aggregation), alternative employment opportunities and the provision of services.

The contribution the hill country makes to the New Zealand economy and society has been spelt out by the National Research Advisory Council in its document, *Hill Country Research*⁴. The Council makes a strong case for considering the development of hill country farming as essential in the national interest. Thus continued support to the hill country farmer can be seen as justifiable in this context.

At the same time organisations like Federated Farmers and The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries are recognising that policies for agriculture must

broaden out to include aspects of rural social development. The farmer does not operate in a vacuum. The New Zealand Planning Council is currently working with the Centre for Agricultural Policy Studies at Massey, on a project which will identify strategic issues in the rural sector and suggest an integrated strategy for this sector as a whole. Such a strategy needs to be based on comprehensive objectives for development, rather than concentrating mainly on the economics of farming. Objectives for employment, population distribution and equity need to be assessed in relation to those for efficiency and improvements in the balance of payments. The planning process provides the framework for this assessment and for the identification of conflicts e.g. between individual and national interest — and trade-offs.

OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

I want to postulate two alternative futures for the hill country.

FUTURE 1: THE FARMERS' WORLD

This future sees a continuation of the trend to fewer, larger pastoral farms with fewer (probably wealthier) farming families living further away from each other. Farm labour is reduced to a minimum; contractors are brought in for shearing and fencing from the towns. The children are at boarding school or university (some at Lincoln or Massey, others are studying economics and political science). The farmer's wife, depending on her age, may be active on the farm, alternatively she may be becoming increasingly addicted to sherry and T.V. soap operas in her comfortable home. Or she is involved in WDFF, rural activist groups such as TREC, politics (though not in Federated Farmers — that will still be primarily a male preserve). Or she may have left her husband and gone to live in town.

Social life will revolve around farmers' days, meeting similar families occasionally in their homes, weekends in Christchurch or Wanganui. If the farmer has a manager he can rely on he might be able to get away from the farm, to Wellington, or even for the odd overseas trip. The hill country hierarchy is even more entrenched with land owners holding seats on local county councils, in Federated Farmers regional and national bodies and in Parliament in Wellington.

There will be variations of course; forestry development and subdivision in some areas. Not all farmers will have sons (or daughters) to take over the family farm. Others may find the lure of capital gain outweighs the attractions of rural life, especially if the costs continue to escalate.

FUTURE 2: RURAL REBIRTH

This future is based on much more diversified land uses, and includes both extensive and intensive pastoral farming, forestry, tree cropping, goat and deer farming. There are more jobs for men, **women and** children; these in turn generate a demand for services so the schools, garages, shops and rural

carriers are given a new lease of life. Farm holidays and tourist safaris attract tourists from New Zealand and abroad, craft work not only provides interest for the rural populations but also an economic base. Some agricultural contractors find it worth while to relocate to the hill country villages. Reverted land is balloted out to young farmers by the Government; an improvement in rural services, together with backing from the Rural Bank means that these backblock farms are less hazardous as economic units than they were sixty years ago.

Planning is more flexible; the concept of the “economic unit” is used carefully and councils are more prepared to allow rural subdivisions for small agricultural units and for residential use for retired farmers. The school is the social centre; linked in with the community education service and a focus for local arts activities. There is some talk even of bringing back aspects of the Auckland Waste Lands Act of 1858 under which school teachers were able to select land and get a Crown grant after teaching for five years.⁵

WHO DECIDES?

These two scenarios are both simplistic and extreme. Nevertheless they provide one basis for examining policy choices. Another is the extent to which the interests of the farming sector are perceived by the Government as being the same as the national interest. If these two concepts coincide then it can be expected that policies aimed at encouraging agricultural development will continue, together with support for marketing. However, other questions of national interest will also guide the decision-makers. Resistance to subsidies and incentives is increasing with the tax take. Governments must make choices between a variety of competing interests in allocating expenditure. Farmers themselves are worried about the distorting effects of intervention in their industry. Moreover, while it may be seen as in the national interest that farm production should increase individual farmers may wish to make other choices such as spending more time with their families and enjoying a particular lifestyle without constantly seeking to escalate production.

There are other forms of central government assistance for the hill country — maintenance of “uneconomic” health and education services for social reasons, flexibility in lending for rural housing, assistance to new farmers and so on.

I would suggest, however, that the future of the hill country will not be determined primarily by central government. The people of the hill country are the key. They can choose which future they want. They have the means to achieve that future — through their own individual actions, through local and national organisations such as Federated Farmers, (the recent **AGROW** exercise is an example of such lobbying), the Women’s Division, the Farm Workers Association and by direct discussions with MP’s and the Minister of Agriculture. District planning can become more flexible — it is not an answer to say the Town and Country Planning Act is restrictive or that planners don’t understand rural needs. The people on the County Councils can decide the policies they want to see adopted at a district level. Moreover, people can be

involved at a regional level in the regional planning process which sets priorities and provides a forum for resolving conflicts between different interests.

Individually the people in rural communities can determine the direction they want for their area. Like the farmers in Paerau they can decide to keep a school open by employing a farm worker with a family. Like the Tinui community they can subsidise the store. They can support a range of employment generating activities, press for improved communications links, homes for older people and amenities and take a positive approach to building rural communities as the people of Cheviot and Hawarden have.

The opportunities are there. It's up to the people of the hill country to see they are taken.

REFERENCES

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- ³ Bedford, Richard (ed), ***Rural Population Change: a Bibliography***, Studies in Rural Change, No. 5, Department of Geography, University of Canterbury, 1980; Land Use Advisory Council Seminars, Proceedings and Background papers, 1980-81.
- ⁴ National Research Advisory Council, ***Hill Country Research***, Wellington, The Council, January, 1978.
- ⁵ see Jourdain, W. R., ***History of Land Legislation and Settlement in New Zealand***, Wellington, Government Printer, 1925.