

The Lost Battle of Queensland Farming

Michael Thomson

The Eureka Stockade is such a fascinating event in Australian history that it has since been reinterpreted by countless groups to suit their various political arguments.

Among the many reinterpretations of the story, one could make an argument that the Eureka Stockade was all about government controls over natural resources and property rights. In the miners' case, it was the cost of licences to mine gold. In the recent case of Queensland farmers, it was the irrational limitation being placed on land clearing by their State Government. Unfortunately, the outcomes of the two debates were completely different.

From a public relations' perspective, the original Eureka was an amazing success given that the group of violent rebels aimed their guns at the establishment. Yet they have been hailed as heroes and remembered fondly by history. Public opinion was divided about their tactic of armed protest, but it took the strong gesture of that uprising to shift the paradigm of the debate over mining licences. It quickly changed things for the better.

Just as public opinion was initially split over the miners' revolt, research by the nation's leading pollster, Crosby Textor, last year found that there were anomalies in public support for Queensland farmers. There is great sympathy for rural landholders among the broader public—city people today like country people—and they think farmers are friendly and honest. So why do city people have such concerns about the way farmers are managing the environment? Why is it that the farmers and landholders are on the back foot in terms of driving reforms to native vegetation legislation? Is it because environmental groups have better managed the media on issues such as land

clearing and consequently enjoy greater influence with government?

In my view, the answer lies in the failure by rural, agricultural, business and political groups to coordinate an integrated campaign to change public perceptions. Even at the ugly height of last year's land-clearing debate in Queensland, there was no grand public stand by these groups, there was no Eureka moment to change the broader community's perceptions and to shift the political paradigm.

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case there were major scientific flaws with the arguments.

In the case of salinity, environmentalists used images of massive salinity damage in Victoria and Western Australia to generate fear and to create the perception that the same devastating outcome would befall Queensland if land clearing continued. But Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures revealed that just 0.07 per cent of Queensland was affected by salinity, only three per cent of farms were affected, and more than 20 per cent of farmers had changed their practices to prevent its spread. Only 0.01 per cent of the State's agricultural land had been rendered useless by salinity.

This left those people aware of such facts wondering why so little land had thus far been affected in Queensland, usually in small, isolated expressions, compared with the massive saltpans in WA. One group of scientists believe that it is due to Queensland's summer rainfall pattern as opposed to southern Australia's predominantly winter rainfall. This means that when the rain does fall, it is during plants' peak growing period, thus absorbing all the moisture and preventing the water table from rising. The Green movement also argued that the clearing rate was out of control. Here again, the ABS figures painted a different picture. The actual number of trees in Queensland was increasing, rather than decreasing, while this 'out-of-control' clearing was taking place. It reported that 26 per cent of trees cleared in 2000–01 took place on land that had no trees on it in 1991, and that more than 85 per cent of Queensland is still in a remnant state.

The same occurred in the debate about biodiversity. Environment Australia estimated that 16,000 species could be prevented from becoming threatened or endangered if broad-scale clearing was banned. ▶ To reach that figure, a multiplier

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and the Queensland Nationals fought the battle on the back foot, using back-room lobbying to rebut a campaign being driven and fought by the Green movement on the televisions and in the letterboxes of suburban South East Queensland. Farm groups naively believed that the truth alone—or in this case, the scientific, economic and social evidence of the implications of banning clearing—would set them free. But public perceptions of the environmental impact of tree clearing were far more powerful than the facts being used to counter them.

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of 600 was used, making its accuracy dubious. But the claims concerning salinity, tree cover and biodiversity all failed to take into account the impact of not clearing the country.

Forever and a day before white man arrived in Australia, the indigenous peoples managed the environment with fire. When white man arrived, the early explorers described rural Queensland as an open savannah plain. But, since then, trees have exploded across the Queensland landscape unchecked by fire and, with time, those woodlands have become thicker and thicker until now it's hard even to walk through the scrub in some areas, let alone graze it. Vegetation thickening has encouraged the spread of some timber species, while choking out others, including grasses and bird species. So when the environmental movement and the governments argued on behalf of protecting biodiversity, they were arguing for a flawed plan of returning the country to a so-called pristine wilderness, that is, one which would be unmanaged, and actually vastly different from that which the early settlers found 200 years ago.

This phenomenon of vegetation thickening has been proved by 40 years of research by internationally renowned woodlands scientist, Dr Bill Burrows. Dr Burrows and a team of Primary Industries and Natural Resources scientists and economists were asked to prepare a paper for submission to the Productivity Commission. What that team found was distinctly unpalatable to the Queensland Government, which then decided to withdraw its participation in the PC inquiry, and took Dr Burrows' research into Cabinet to prevent its public release. Rural Press obtained and published details of the report, which found that if woodland thickening were to continue unchecked due to the clearing ban, not only would there be severe environmental implications, but it would cost the Queensland economy more than \$900 million in lost grazing lands and the subsequent lost production. Compare this to the \$150m in compensation offered by the

State Government.

The third element of the environmental argument was that of greenhouse. Arguing that landholders should not clear their country in order to compensate for the massive emissions of a

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fossil-fuel driven consumer society in the cities does not seem a sensible solution, as it fails to address the source of the CO₂ emissions. But for the Federal Government to achieve its greenhouse targets 'according to Kyoto', it would be cheaper and electorally safer to lock up the Queensland bush than force industry and the great masses of urban voters to cut back on fossil fuel consumption. Documents obtained by Rural Press revealed that the Commonwealth deliberately ignored the impact of vegetation thickening in its greenhouse accounting to ensure its emission reduction targets were lower—a deception which saved the energy sector \$4 billion a year by not having to reduce their emissions by a further 20 per cent.

On all three counts—salinity, biodiversity and greenhouse—the arguments are baseless.

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where elections are decided, opinion is formed by impressions and perceptions and not detailed analysis of all the available facts. Political parties, like the Green movement, realize that changing the opinion of the masses is not done by detailed argument, but by simple, recurring messages: pictures of pristine rainforests or koalas alongside violent images of dozers clearing scrub, and simple slogans of how clearing the land was killing the environment. The Green campaigns targeted the great masses of uninformed urban voters who knew least about the issue and were least affected by the outcomes, and yet who decided the recent election.

It was in this area that rural Australia failed not only itself, but also the environment. Its handling of the issue was reactive, defending itself from the accusations of the Greens, rather than conducting its own campaigns to influence the urban masses with its side of the argument.

Until agri-political groups either embrace the same media tactics that the environmentalists have used to achieve their success, or devise their own strategy that will let them dictate the terms of engagement instead of the Greens, nothing will change. Farmers have to make use of the powerful facts at their disposal as the basis for a broad, multi-layered, integrated campaign to change public perceptions. They need to emotionally, intellectually and financially tap into the community support for farmers that is out there.

Farm groups need Eureka-like moments that will shift the publicity paradigm in their favour.

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