



## Book and Report Reviews

### *Land of Discontent: The Dynamics of Change in Rural and Regional Australia*

Edited by Bill Pritchard and Phil McManus

The *Land of Discontent* is a collection of contributed papers on rural and regional development written by a diverse field of experts. The editors did a fine job of collating the many different topics into a coherent reader on rural and economic development. Topics included discussions on agricultural and regional policy, Aboriginal issues, service delivery, bank closures and local government challenges.

Many of the articles address the issues from a political perspective and the impact of Pauline Hanson's One Nation policies. Stewart Lockie examined the rise of One Nation in the June 1998 Queensland parliament. What issues created the shift towards the radical movement and why did so many voters abandon the major parties? Lockie's chapter is especially interesting when viewed after the recent Federal election. The One Nation movement has been relegated to political irrelevance.

Rural communities have been restructured during the last three decades. Matthew Tonts discussed the plight of Australian agriculture and its effects on rural communities. When agricultural incomes and jobs decline rural communities are severely impacted. As a result, rural communities have been depopulated and Fiona Haslam McKenzie discussed how rural people fit into the new system.

Bill Pritchard presented the dichotomy of agricultural trade liberalisation and its protectionist discontents. Australia is an agricultural trading nation that depends upon free trade for its products, unfortunately the 1999 United States lamb dispute demonstrated our weak position. Despite wanting to be able to sell everywhere without quotas and tariffs, the dairy and other industries still seek government subsidies.

McManus and Albrecht ably presented the growing conflict between environmental policies and Aboriginal issues. Attitudes toward sustainability, the conflict over native title, and the political ramifications are discussed in detail.

The contentious issues of rural service delivery and bank branch closures were discussed. Rolf Gerritsen elaborated on the cumulative effects of globalisation and public management policies on rural Australia. For example, to save money, Telstra closed a sub-regional depot in Wilcannia and transferred the maintenance of the local telephone system to the larger Broken Hill facility. From a management point of view, it was a good decision, however Wilcannia lost 90 jobs from a population of 1200. From a regional development point of view, it was a disaster. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated case. If one were to multiply the Telstra initiative across Australia, the negative effects are clear. Argent and Rolley highlighted a similar scenario with bank closures.

This reviewer especially enjoyed Andrew Beer's contribution on Regional Policy and Development.

It is a concise history of regional policy in Australia. Beer highlighted the recent policy initiatives at the Commonwealth level and discussed the different approaches of the various states toward regional development. His main conclusion is that poor implementation of under funded policy initiatives are often responsible for ineffective government policy.

Maurice Daly wrote an excellent final chapter on the Challenges for Local Government in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As a local economic development practitioner, I was very intrigued by the poor long-term financial viability of many local government Councils. He did not provide many solutions, but was on target with the problems. The numbers of Councils have declined by 40% during the last fifty years, however the responsibilities have increased without a concurrent increase in resources. He cites the doughnut, non-viable and other dysfunctional councils as the problem. The problem is endemic and will only get worse because small Councils simply do not have the resources to be responsive and innovative in a changing world. The author makes a strong case for forced amalgamations because entrenched local powerbrokers will not yield to a regional approach. Since federal grants constitute a significant portion of local Councils total revenues, the present system is self-generating.

The editors concluded with an interesting scenario about a fictional rural community. The imagined rural town was situated in the Murray-Darling Basin with the main physical feature of the community being a large grain silo. The local economic development history of the community changed over time to reflect what many rural areas have endured. It concludes with the community facing a tenuous future with the local bank still open and the forces of globalisation closing in.

The book clearly and convincingly describes the problems, inequities and causes of rural discontent. However, it is short on solutions and new policy recommendations. This reviewer strongly recommends the book for all those interested in rural and regional development. The book is well written and offers valuable insight into the real problems facing rural and regional Australia.

James E. Rowe  
Economic Development Officer  
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### *The Future of Australia's Country Towns*

Edited by M F Rogers and Y M J Collins, Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities, La Trobe University, Bendigo, 2001, pp. 207.

This unfortunate book contains an edited collection of essays arising from the First National Conference on the Future of Australia's Country Towns held in Bendigo in 2000. This expression of dislike is, as we shall see, well grounded. To start with, its title is misleading. The book is much more concerned with taking stock of present conditions and processes in country towns than it is with sketching or explaining their possible future trajectories. Nor does it explore in realistic and synoptic terms how individuals, groups or communities might manage or influence the processes of change to deliver preferred outcomes.

Worse still, the book's analysis of the present is flawed. With a few notable exceptions – especially in the first part entitled *Big Pictures* – the essays are remarkably data and policy free. Many of the contributors prefer instead to talk in broad-brush terms about the iniquities of the world, the shame of globalisation, and the warm inner glow that results from cranking up social capital and business networks. Too often, argument is advanced by some combination of assertion and barely digested theory which, at best, provides only a partial explanation of what is really going on in rural Australia.

So Putnam's ideas on social capital get a frequent run, without ever sufficiently delving beneath this rather plastic and elusive concept. We are not told in detail which aspects of social capital are important for place prosperity and why, and how the configuration varies from place to place. Nor do we discover the significance of social capital as a transformative mechanism relative to the other much more important factors shaping the well-being of rural places. Nor is there credible in-depth analysis of how individuals, or communities, or governments might increase the sum total of social capital – an issue subject to major controversy between the left and right wings of the political spectrum.

Another concept to receive an airing is community sustainability, idea of dubious practical utility for regional development. Some of the writers who

reverence community are apparently unaware of the great apathy found in many places, or of the often great conflict between different social or economic groups over how places might develop. Some seem to want to cocoon places from dynamic economic and social change or return them to some golden age. I cannot imagine how community sustainability viewed in these terms could ever be a realistic policy agenda. As other contributors, particularly in the first section, clearly demonstrate there is no known way to stop or turn back the clock. To tell small town communities otherwise is a cruel hoax – certainly on the evidence presented in this book.

And so it goes on. Some, though mercifully not all, contributions feel it necessary to blame globalisation for some of the ills of regional Australia, forgetting the crucial interest of many primary producers in expanding international trade. The large corporation is likewise excoriated. And, apart from Collits' insightful analysis of the political processes shaping policies and programs, the contributors say little about the realm of economic governance. Thus, the book tends to devalue and misrepresent the role of economic processes in bringing about rural change, despite their overwhelming significance as a causal variable.

Another difficulty that I have with this book is its cavalier definition of rural Australia. Writers variously analyse remote areas, small settlements, and the larger country towns; while there is uncertainty about the inclusion of coastal areas in the definition of things rural. This heterogeneity of geographical focus makes it difficult to judge the relevance and importance of each writer's contribution to understanding the immense socio-economic variety of rural areas. And, in a few instances, it also leads to some dangerous and disingenuous observations. Thus, some writers fall into the trap of failing to qualify their blanket assertions about the economic and social disadvantage experienced in rural Australia. In truth, many rural areas are highly prosperous. Nor can we greatly trust the income figures recorded by the ABS for some localities and few analysts consider the critical importance of wealth as distinct from income in determining well-being.

My final criticism concerns originality. The book contains little that is new. Some of the international parallels may be unfamiliar to readers and useful in the sense that we can sometimes learn from prior experience. However, their relevance has to be demonstrated, which is alas not done. The US mid-west and the European Union are sufficiently different in terms of geography and governance to damage conclusions we might draw about parallel conditions and processes or appropriate public responses.

So, we are left with a disparate collection of essays of greatly differing intellectual quality and relevance. This is typical in varying degrees of edited collections of conference papers. However, the outcome is worse in Rogers and Collins' book because of seeming lack of editorial control and input. The short introductory chapter merely summarises the following papers and does not seek to develop any comprehensive model of the factors shaping the future of rural towns. Such overview is crucial to the reader's understanding of how the diverse bits fit together. Effective editorship would have also tried to remove some of the emotive and unsupported assertions that litter the text. The book also needs some concluding chapters that draw together the empirical and conceptual threads and demonstrate how the contributors have added to our knowledge of both present **and likely future** conditions in rural towns. Finally, the book's potential usefulness is compromised by lack of an index. Such omissions are not acceptable in a quality publication, whether designed for academic or informed lay audiences.

In short, this book contributes little to informed debate about the future of rural towns that is not available and better presented elsewhere. This is sad, because we urgently need an authoritative account of events, processes and prognoses in regional Australia.

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## A Response

Dear Editor

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your journal's forthcoming review of *The Future of Australia's Country Towns*. We are sorry to have caused Assoc Prof Sorensen such pain, but remain unrepentant at having published the book.

*Australia's Country Towns* introduces a mixed audience to the diversity of opinion on and analysis of Australia's non-metropolitan communities. Conference and book aimed to raise awareness of the complex issues facing rural Australia, and stimulate thought on possible, practical futures. The perspectives and purposes of contributors were necessarily and desirably diverse.

Many of Assoc Prof Sorensen's concerns were addressed. On the supposed uniformity of rural Australia and its problems: 'Hugo's (Chapter 3) work demystifies the notion of an homogeneous rural Australia in serious decline. He defines the demographic realities of rural communities, demonstrating their diversity...' (Intro. p.10). On the bugbear of globalization: 'From a different perspective, O'Toole (Ch. 10) challenges the notion that globalization is the root cause of rural problems...' (Intro. p.11). Case study chapters are 'data and policy free' only in the sense that they concentrate on the results of policy and the human reality behind data.

Assoc Prof Sorensen rightly concludes that an authoritative account of events, processes and prognoses in regional Australia is needed. *Australia's Country Towns'* contributors, editors and audience will welcome it.

Yours sincerely

Dr Maureen Rogers and Dr Yolanda Collins  
Editors - *Future of Australia's Country Towns*

## A Future for Regional Australia

By Ian Gray and Geoffrey Lawrence  
Cambridge University Press, 2001

This book asserts the claims of Sociology in analysing the impact of globalisation on regional Australia and suggesting changes in policy thinking which embrace the participation of rural people in the determination of their own destiny. The writers attack the present failure to think 'beyond the limits imposed by current economic theory and the

institutions of Governance' p.2. The presentation is very much that of a textbook aimed at undergraduate students pursuing a major in sociology. The interested practitioner without this background is likely to find the text a little dense and repetitive as a consequence. However, a brief glossary is provided and, in any case, the context generally clarifies the meaning of the sociological terms employed. The book is structured in three parts.

Chapters 1 to 3 analyse the process of globalisation and make the case for a new framework of insight based on sociological concepts. Chapters 4 to 7 analyse the impact of changes including fundamental changes in social relationships and the 'reflexivity' of rural and regional people. This concept of 'reflexivity', that is people's ability to reflect upon their situation and alter behaviour in their own and their community's interest, is central to the later policy proposals. Chapters 8 to 10 analyse the possibilities for action including major radical policy change.

To my mind, the first part of the book is the least satisfactory. We are treated to a Marxist analysis of global capitalism with the full baggage of surplus value, the falling rate of profit and dialectical 'contradictions' including the possibility of increasing taxes on wage workers propelling Australia further into a 'realisation crisis', p.25. My irritation with this is that the intellectual base of the argument is not acknowledged. The reference to Marx is in passing on page 48 and there is no reference to the use of a Marxist economic model. However, assertions from this underlying implicit model are used to analyse globalisation without the reader being aware of what the model is. Surely the orthodox view that globalisation through free trade increases the size of the cake at least deserves to be contrasted? Even in the orthodox economic framework it is possible to explore serious issues to do with the distribution of benefits, growing inequality and the marginality of family farms. Many orthodox economists would accept the view that their framework ignores social power relations, cultural attitudes and the influence of history.

The authors state their intention not to ignore the contributions of 'economic essentialism' and rational action theory where appropriate, p.51.