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Speech to Rural March

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Lee

SPEECH TO RURAL MARCH.

It was a remarkable sight to see several thousand people from the rural areas of South Australia marching through the streets of Adelaide to meet here in Elder Park. You are exercising what I believe is one of the fundamental rights of democracy - the ability to demonstrate publicly and peacefully your grievances. Unlike other demonstrations in recent years, you are not protesting on a question of morality or human conscience, but rather because a serious economic crisis is affecting the rural industry.

And the reason for this crisis is this. The past decade has seen a dramatic change in Australian agriculture. The change has been one in which the problems of production have been overcome, even though the individual members of the rural industries have been seriously hurt. Given normal seasons, farmers today can produce efficiently. And the problem now is marketing. Agriculture has not been able to develop its marketing skills to match the increased efficiency of production.

But marketing is not just a matter of producing a commodity, and then trying to sell it. That was the old belief.

Today modern marketing in most industries involves the use of experts to predict potential markets, and especially export markets, for several years ahead. Once a forecast is made, after an exhaustive analysis, then levels of production are set. For the rural community, this would mean that farmers are advised as to what individual production capacity should be.

This is not in fact what happens at the moment. We do not have projections and predictions about market potentials so that farmers can plan production targets several years in advance, doing this with reasonable assurance that their commodity will be marketed. In addition, there has been no incentive given to the rural industries to produce more and varied processed commodities from basic farm commodities. No lead has been given to see that science and technology is not directed so much at increasing the efficiency of production, as at

an increase in market outlets.

Now the only organisation in Australia that has this ability to set production goals and develop marketing potential is the Federal Government. And it is my belief that the Federal Government must be strongly condemned for its complete inaction in this area.

For instance, how typical it is that today we see no Federal Government representative. It would appear they are either too unsure of their position to face you farmers, or in some curious act of self-punishment they are trying to lose the Senate election. Which they will!

The Federal Government, by its complete abdication of responsibility and its complete absence of any sort of comprehensive plan for Australian agriculture, is ensuring that by the end of the coming decade many thousands of the farmers here today won't be farmers. Instead, if you are lucky, you will be farm labourers for stock firms, banks, real estate companies - people that have either foreclosed or bought you out.

It is clear that the time has come in Australia to stop the ruin of Australian agriculture. And the only way to do this is by the ballot box. We need, we must have, a change of heart and a new approach to solving the nation's rural economic problems. I can assure you that people like Dr. Rex Patterson won't be afraid to plan agriculture in Australia - to set policy, to develop new marketing techniques.

I suppose some farmers may totally abhor this idea of national planning in agriculture, but the fact is that if they want to survive as independent farmers rather than farm labourers, there is no alternative to the notion of planning.

The days of sentimentality are over. The days when we could look at the farmer as a self-sufficient independent pioneer, are gone for good. I may and you may be sad at this, but it is a fact of life in this modern world.

In Australia today we must get rid of this artificial separation of city from country and vice versa. The urban people need the farmers and the farmers need the urban people

Each is as important as the other. Each has an important role to play in our nation.

I believe that for over 20 years Australian agricultural policy, or the lack of it, has been in the hands of a group of people who have deliberately fostered an artificial separateness of urban and rural people. They did this to ensure their own political survival. And at this we must admit they have been particularly adept. But now 20 years of bad planning - mismanagement and short sightedness has finally produced a crisis of major and far-reaching effect. And solutions to the crisis are not easy to find. Those that are found will not be easily implemented.

At the State level we are quite limited in what we can do. The ills of agriculture are not State-bound but Australia-wide. Only the Federal Government has the ability and the resources - financial and technical - to tackle the problems involved.

In South Australia, however, and in line with our rural policy at the election, we are going to attempt to tackle those problems over which we have some control.

We will give special remissions in Succession Duties on primary producing land inherited by the family.

We have already revised land tax assessments and will alter land tax value rates on primary producing property.

We have already begun moves to set up a Wheat Quota Committee of Enquiry.

We have lifted the 2½ cent surcharge on Pt. Giles.

And investigations are already under way now into the problems of the citrus industry.

But essentially these measures are only a patching up operation. Only the Commonwealth can successfully attempt to solve the major problems of Australian agriculture.

I therefore urge you all to demand that the Commonwealth Government act to formulate an overall national

agricultural policy. It must be made aware that the days of drift, indecision and abdication of responsibility in agriculture are over.

Therefore, I call upon the Federal Government to convene a National Farming Conference made up of representatives from every rural industry in Australia today - attended by agricultural economists, State Agriculture Department representatives, representatives from the manufacturers, representatives of the buyers and processors, and scientific research organisations such as the C.S.I.R.O. and B.A.E.

Such a national conference could set the broad outlines of agriculture policy in Australia for the coming decades, and could give the Federal Government the responsibility for implementing necessary policies and objectives despite sectional pressures.

The challenge of the seventies for Australian agriculture is whether it becomes guided by national planning. For your sake and for Australia's sake, I hope it does.
