Rural and Remote Environments and Health

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I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the country where we meet and by paying respect to their Elders and to their living culture.

I’d also like to congratulate the organisers of this conference. It has been, I think, a tremendous success. We were driving across from Bathurst yesterday and it dominated ABC Radio, and the link to the website, the use of technology, is enormous. So congratulations to everyone involved.

I want to take a broader view, I guess, of the concept of health and examine the question “What is a healthy community?” and what I want to argue is that a healthy community is one that grows in a sustainable and even way — in other words, in an equitable way. I also want to argue that, if you think of it in those terms, the core issue becomes how we manage change. And I put it to you that there are three key forces at work on rural and remote communities: landscape, employment and population.

First, the landscape helps to shape our communities. The salt water people obviously are different to the desert people. Water catchments define regions of common interest because water is the most precious commodity in the driest continent on earth except Antarctica. Two-thirds of our country is arid or semi-arid. The most hospitable country, where there’s relative secure rainfall, is in the south-east corner and the south-west corner and along the east coast. That always will be where most people would like to live.

Second, there’s been a major shift in employment over the last hundred years away from primary industries and manufacturing towards service industries. Primary and manufacturing industries’ share of employment has fallen over the century from about one-third to about six per cent today. Services now account for well over 85 per cent of total employment so that too has shaped our communities. Service industries need population to be concentrated and employment has been falling in rural areas.

Third, as a result of those landscape and employment pressures, population has shifted over the century to larger centres and towards the coast where it’s most attractive to live. At the time that our nation came together with Federation, almost half the population lived in communities of less than 3000 people. Forty per cent lived in rural areas. But, by 1996, only 18 per cent lived in these small communities and only 15 per cent lived in rural areas. More than 80 per cent lived within 50 kilometres of the coast.

The capital cities always have accounted for a huge slice of population but regional cities also have grown substantially. Interestingly, Indigenous people are becoming a much bigger part of remote communities. But, as Donald Horne has pointed out, Australia’s national identity now is more about the beach than the bush. The social structure of rural and regional Australia therefore has been undergoing profound change. Population has shifted and concentrated, reflecting employment opportunities, and infrastructure has followed.
In my view, it’s the middle-sized family farm enterprises which are under the most pressure. They’re either being amalgamated for economies of scale or carved up as hobby farms around regional cities. In January, The Australian newspaper carried a feature article, “Bitter Harvest Burns Sugar”, which dealt with the problems encountered by the small South Johnstone sugar mill in north Queensland as it attempted to adjust to world markets. It had gone into receivership owing $25 million. Just two weeks later in the same newspaper there was another feature article that quoted Janet Holmes a Court:

> Everyone in farming in Australia realises it’s a new ball game. It’s not all about hands in the dirt, it’s about hands on the computer. It’s not about talking to your bank manager, most of them have disappeared; it’s about talking to your rural adviser and scientific adviser.

The same article reported that Stanbroke Pastoral Company, the largest landholder in Australia and the biggest cattle producer, was well down the road to vertical integration, owning its own feed lots and abattoirs. Kerry Packer’s cattle company, Consolidated Pastoral Company, also was reported as vertically integrated, with its own breeding, fattening and abattoir operations. Now, that’s the changing face of rural and regional Australia. The ruling equation is how best to operate in the international marketplace; if you can’t get bigger or get better, then get out.

And in my view, and with some tragedy attached, there’s no going back. Our nation simply is too small to stand apart from the rest of the world. While we’ve got a population of 20 million people, we’ve got a small domestic market so our companies have to export in order to grow. Our small population also translates into a small tax base so the levels of support and assistance that are available here are much lower than the levels available to countries with large populations. The major economic decisions of the eighties to float the Australian dollar, deregulate financial markets, free up the labour market and reduce industry protection were inevitable and they’re irrevocable. They recognised finally that Australia had no option but to become part of the growing international marketplace.

Now, change, of course, always has occurred in Australian society but I’d put it to you that the pace now is accelerating. The competitive environment in which Australia has to operate is evolving ever more rapidly. The Chief Scientist noted in his report: “Thirty years ago knowledge doubled every 14 years; it’s now doubling every seven years”. Not only is the speed of discovery increasing but the rate at which knowledge is applied also has become more rapid.

Now, as change continues to accelerate, groups in the community have been left behind, but not only in rural areas. They’re concentrated around primary and manufacturing industries where employment has fallen in relative terms. So I put it to you that the problems are common in the bush, some regional cities and the outer suburbs of the capitals. They’ve developed over a long period of time but became much more severe after the big economic decisions of the eighties, particularly floating the dollar and reductions in industry assistance; and they were compounded by the mostly laissez-faire “let-the-market-rule” approach adopted by successive governments.

I want to look briefly at what might constitute an agenda for healthy rural and remote communities but, in doing so, I make this point. There are lots of other people out there
in the community who believe that their issues should have priority. It’s not only farmers who say “Why doesn’t the rest of the world or the rest of the nation understand us?” You hear the same thing from the youth of our nation, you hear it from women, you hear it from people who are older, you hear it from people who are interested in the health system, like you, the tax system, the education system.

So, eventually, where Australia has to get to is to have an open and sophisticated debate where we can analyse the costs in terms of financial and political capital and, hopefully, get behind the decisions that ultimately are taken. But here are some brief thoughts about an agenda for healthy rural and remote communities. The first agenda item should be sustainable natural resource management. In many ways it’s the defining issue; care for country is basic to the survival of our entire nation, not just particular sectors.

Without more sustainable use of resources, the ability of the country to support families and communities is going to be reduced even further. If we want to improve the chances of managing change, we have to look after the resource base and particularly look after water. Now, I don’t think we’re doing a very good job at all. Land degradation is extensive. Around 2.5 million hectares of land currently are affected by salinity, which in time could rise to 15 million hectares. Weeds cost over three billion a year in lost production. Nearly 90 per cent of temperate woodlands and mallee have been cleared, resulting in loss of biodiversity, and large-scale clearing continues, particularly in Queensland, and despite clear evidence that it increases salinity.

There’s also increasing concerns about water quality and there’s not enough water in some of our river systems to meet the combined demands of agriculture, human consumption and environmental flows. Now, the cost of arresting those trends is enormous, let alone remedial action, but if comprehensive action is to be taken there have to be permanent partnerships between landholders and government. Neither can do it without the other and it’s going to take a long time. The partnership has to include long-term public funding so landholders have the confidence to change their management practices and that implies the support of all of the political parties.

The National Farmers’ Federation (NFF) and the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) estimated last year that the cost of necessary work was around 60 billion dollars over 10 years. They proposed that government meet half the cost and the other half come from landholders and industry. To build on that proposal Phillip Toyne and I, in a paper for the Australia Institute last year, suggested a one per cent tax levy to raise the Government’s 30 billion. That would be a transparent mechanism to raise public funds in the long term. Now, I choose to believe that the electorate would support such a levy providing they were confident it would be used effectively and there are many precedents, including, of course, the Medicare levy.

The second issue for an agenda, I think, is infrastructure because, if industries are to compete successfully and therefore support communities in regional Australia, they must have access to efficient public infrastructure. However, the Institution of Engineers, in 1999, expressed considerable concern about this. They issued a report card in nine categories, from national roads to planning. The highest mark was a C, there were five Ds and the Melbourne–Sydney–Brisbane railway system rated F. The
The report found major problems with the road and rail systems, water supply and sewerage, not just in rural and regional areas but in the cities as well.

So I put it to you that upgrading of national infrastructure is overdue and would have benefits across all industries, everyone’s competitive position would be improved and rural and regional areas would benefit to the extent that they’re now disadvantaged.

The third issue, I think, is communications. Equal access to information and service flows is a critical factor in dealing with the relative depopulation of the inland — the shift towards the coast. As markets have internationalised, access to efficient communications has become essential and without it industries are at a very serious disadvantage. Now, that plainly is the case in some rural and regional areas where there’s no mobile phone coverage, Internet access is restricted and so on.

The next issue is adjustment. Adjustment packages can be targeted to industries and regions experiencing particular difficulty. Regions also can be targeted for special development. Premier Beattie in Queensland now is talking about enterprise zones and, of course, there’s many such examples; motor vehicle plans, steel plans, the Brigalow schemes, Albury–Wodonga and so on. They can include things like access to discounted capital, tax incentives, education, training, provision of infrastructure, research and planning.

Now, I believe that elements of the primary and manufacturing industries have a legitimate case for special adjustment assistance. They were largely left to fend for themselves after Australia’s markets were opened in the mid-eighties. The social impact of change was managed woefully by successive governments. If the issues are to be addressed, however, I still think there needs to be a national debate because there will be other people in the community who advocate priority for their issues.

The next issue is local ownership and delivery. Now, we know from the recent State elections and public opinion surveys, that a lot of people feel disconnected from government and public institutions and absolutely frustrated about their ability to control their lives. We also know that the most effective government programs are those that reflect the priorities of the local community and which are owned by the community. So the concept of giving communities some control of government programs in their region should have some attraction. It could serve both to engage those who now feel shut out and improve the ownership and effectiveness of the outcomes.

Noel Pearson is discussing an exercise like this with the Beattie Government on behalf of Aboriginal communities on Cape York. He calls it the Partnership Program. The principle is to regionalise program administration, identify all the ways that government is dealing with the community and then give the community some say in priorities and how the programs are delivered. I think it’s particularly important that that issue is addressed because, at the end of the day when everyone else has packed up and gone home — the politicians, the lawyers — it’s the people in the community who have to live next door to each other and deal with each other. If they’re not happy with the outcomes there’s still a problem for government and for politicians.
However, I also believe that the most important step is to look forward, for everyone to look forward. There certainly have been mistakes made in the past but they’re in the past. The most relevant question today is what should be done to fix them so that work can begin on a forward agenda. The politics of revenge can only go so far. Eventually, people have to roll up their sleeves and get on with the real job which is to find some solutions; there really is no other alternative. Internationalisation of trade, capital and information is going to continue. Australia can’t stop it and we’re too small to remain as an isolated fortress economy.

Change will occur faster and faster. Consider the recent breakthroughs in gene mapping and the possibilities that they raise. Australia has no option but to swim in the international whirlpool and our industries will have to continue to adjust. Part of the challenge, I think, is to provide leadership and the vision necessary to chart these waters and leadership needs to be at many levels, certainly from the Prime Minister and Premiers but also in the regions from business, trade unions, Indigenous people, learning institutions. Providing capacity-building skills and leadership skills is integral to the future of regional and remote communities.

A co-ordinated national effort in which everyone looks forward certainly would be in Australia’s best interests. We’ve got little enough resources as it is and it makes no sense for our communities to diminish our potential and national effort by indulging in vendettas. In terms of looking forward, I think it’s instructive to contemplate issues which are common to all Australians — rural, remote, metropolitan — because part of looking forward is to recognise the issues that we all have in common rather than to concentrate on the things that divide us.

Now, I put it to you that there are three fundamental issues which affect all Australians: number one, how we look after our land and waters; number two, how Australia shapes its involvement in the international marketplace; and three, how the pain and benefits of change are shared by people and families. But in the last analysis I invite you and all Australians, as I did yesterday in the Barton Lecture, to think about the soul of our nation. Our future is not just about economics and population trends. The country, the land and waters sustain us all. If the country is sick it can’t support us. If we don’t care for it, it can’t care for us. If the country is sick, the soul of our nation also is sad and diminished; our enthusiasm and our energy as a nation fall. Our faith in ourselves and our national confidence are sapped.

Now, I think that there are two areas where we can do much more to nourish the core of our communities. Our land and waters now are badly degraded and we need to manage them much better. The country is sick for that reason. The country also is sick in its spirit because there are disputes over it. The different interests of the first peoples, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and those who came later haven’t been reconciled yet. The first peoples have special rights arising from their unique position. Until they’re accepted and respected the cultural fabric of Australia is incomplete and our soul will stay sick.

So the real problem, I think, the real equation, is how the Australian national community manages change respecting the interests of all groups in our society. We haven’t been very good at it so far, and rural and remote communities have suffered a lot. Now, I think it’s up to all of us to create the opportunity for a mature debate about
where the political and financial capital of our nation should be allocated and not just to concentrate on short-term political fixes to deal with a particular political problem. To put it in context, what’s the point of talking about 1.5 cents a litre on petrol? We should be talking about why there’s excise on petrol at all.

So I leave those thoughts with you. I think there is a responsibility on all of us as individuals and as communities to attempt to create a more sophisticated national debate. I also have confidence that if we can create that debate Australia can go forward together. The volunteer effort that we as a nation put into the Olympics shows what can happen if we all put our shoulder to the wheel. I look forward to working with you in that endeavour.

AUTHOR

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Rick has been a member of the National Native Title Tribunal, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and its executive committee, the Australian Landcare Council, the Australia China Council and the Commission for the Future. He worked for rural organisations for 20 years and was the Executive Director of the National Farmers’ Federation and the Cattlemen’s Union of Australia.

Rick facilitated the Cape York Land Use Heads of Agreement and pioneered the national Landcare program with the Australian Conservation Foundation. He was a key figure in the passage of the Native Title Act in 1993.

Rick now provides advice to a range of development companies and Aboriginal communities throughout Australia.