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Remaking the Country: Australia’s Rural Reconstruction Commission, 1943-46

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The Rural Reconstruction Commission remains the Cinderella of Australia’s post-war planning agencies. Appointed by J.B. Chifley, Treasurer and Minister for Post-War Reconstruction in John Curtin’s Australian Labor Party (ALP) Government, to advise on ‘the reorganisation and rehabilitation of the rural economy’, it heard testimony from 808 stakeholders, and between 1943 and 1946 issued ten reports containing 330 recommendations on virtually every aspect of rural production and resource management, agricultural commodity marketing and country lifestyle. Yet commentary on the commission, whether from contemporaries or historians, is cursory, mainly unsupported by textual analysis of its reports, and preoccupied with explaining why the most ambitious inquiry ever conducted into rural Australia had ‘the least immediate impact’ of any of the federal government’s ‘major planning agencies’. One group of commentators erroneously contends that the commission harboured a ‘depression’ mentality, whereas the other group applauds its cautious, even ‘pessimistic’, assessment of market prospects and its recommendation that these should determine the limits of new settlement, particularly of returned servicemen. But this group laments that the commission was untimely, ‘academic’, remote from ‘concrete policy considerations’, and too preoccupied with ‘rigorous long term planning’ when what ministers wanted was advice on the short term transition of rural industries from war to peace.

With a couple of exceptions, this commentary predates the growth of scholarly interest in public inquiries. It consequently focuses on the content — as opposed to the process or form — of the commission; simply assumes that it was established to provide ministers with disinterested expert advice for rational decision making; and assesses whether commissioners satisfied ministerial expectations by ticking off those of the commission’s recommendations which were actually
implemented by governments. The problem with this approach is that it is by no means easy to determine the precise character of these ministerial expectations. As Scott Prasser reminds us, public inquiries like the Rural Reconstruction Commission are among the most powerful instruments of executive government because they have the capability to address the pragmatic needs of the ministers who appointed them. They are thus rarely established for just one reason. Elucidating those reasons is, however, far from straightforward. Ministers’ public statements, and even their cabinet submissions, are invariably tailored to their audiences, and reflect not only their own views but those of the bureaucrats, policy advisers and party officials who have had input into the establishment process.  

Ostensibly the commission was expected to advise on ‘the reorganisation and rehabilitation’ of the crisis-ridden rural economy, which was still suffering from the disastrous pre-war slump in agricultural commodity prices, shortages of labour and essential materials, and loss of markets through enemy action against shipping. But ministers sent mixed signals. Chifley envisaged the commission investigating specified matters ‘both long-term and short-term’, whereas Curtin — when arranging the secondment of commissioners — referred to them assisting ‘the Government to formulate plans covering the difficult transition from war to peace time conditions in the rural industries’. Curtin’s official letters of appointment, by contrast, indicated that commissioners ‘should have a general rather than a specific charter relating to all the problems associated with rural life’. Chifley too had fluid agendas which mutated over time. One urgent, ‘very large’ and potentially costly matter that he raised at the outset was the necessity for a national policy on War Service Land Settlement (WSLS), before the states began setting their own favourable agendas as they had done in 1918. Another pressing matter on which Chifley sought commissioners’ advice was price stabilisation and marketing of agricultural commodities. Writing to the commission’s chairman in July 1944 (shortly after the government accepted most of the commission’s recommendations on WSLS), Chifley reminded him that price stabilisation was a critical component of the government’s macroeconomic policy; its full employment objective was dependent on not allowing temporarily high prices for agricultural commodities to fuel inflationary pressures that would lead to demands for higher wages and in turn create adjustment problems, particularly in secondary industries.
It can be conjectured that ministers were also attracted by the flexibility which a public inquiry offered in dealing with the diverse and divergent interests and the entrenched jurisdictional boundaries that confronted federal governments seeking to formulate national rural policies. The root of the problem lay in the Australian Constitution’s reservation of residual powers to the states. These enabled state governments to exercise control over most agriculturally related matters. The creation in 1934 of the Australian Agricultural Council (AAC) and its bureaucratic sub-committee, the Standing Committee on Agriculture (SCA), was intended to provide a ministerial forum in which differences could be resolved. But, as Chifley complained: ‘The trouble is not only that the States do not agree with the Commonwealth; they do not agree with one another.’

The states’ dominance created a further complication for federal policy makers because most rural producer groups were state-based, loosely federated nationally, and oriented towards a specific commodity. Federal and state governments were ‘thus presented with an array of confusing policy options’ to which they responded with a series of independent, largely uncoordinated, policies for different agricultural industries.

Unsurprisingly, Chifley approached this complex rural policy making environment by resisting persistent lobbying for a ‘representative’ inquiry. He refused membership to nominees of the Queensland and Victorian governments and spokesmen for organised interests, among them the Australian Wheat Growers’ Federation, the Queensland Dairymen’s Association, and the Returned Sailors Soldiers and Airmen’s Imperial League of Australia (RSSAILA). Instead he selected four commissioners of ‘broad national outlook, capable of sifting and weighing evidence and conflicting views’.

His choice as chairman was a former farmer, F.J.S. Wise, who was Minister for Lands and Agriculture in the government of Western Australia, where (unusually for the ALP) a majority of its parliamentary members held rural and goldfields seats. The deputy chairman was J.F. Murphy, Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Commerce and Agriculture, and the other members were C.R. Lambert, Chairman of the Rural Reconstruction Board of New South Wales, and S.M. Wadham, Professor of Agriculture at the University of Melbourne. Murphy and Lambert neatly bridged the constitutional division of responsibility for the rural sector with the federal bureaucrat experienced in marketing and overseas trade and his state colleague experienced in rural finance, debt adjustment and farm reconstruction. Wadham was a
veteran of several inquiries, most notably the Royal Commission on the Wheat, Flour and Bread Industries in 1934-36. He was also a controversial journalist and broadcaster who was in no doubt about his stakeholder status, telling the Director-General of the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction that, as an established commentator on rural issues, he reserved the right to speak publicly about the inquiry and to voice disagreements ‘without being accused of discreditable conduct’. His fellow commissioners were more circumspect, but just as conscious of their own allegiances and preferences for particular institutional arrangements.

Like ministers, commissioners were sensitive to the opportunities which a public inquiry offered to advance their own agendas, as analysis of the commission’s voluminous transcripts of evidence discloses. Previous commentators have neglected these transcripts and simply assumed that, because the commission was established under National Security (Inquiries) Regulations, it operated ‘in the style of a royal commission’. This is misleading. Commissioners chose to adopt the comparatively informal procedure of a ‘policy advisory’ inquiry, rather than invoke the coercive powers or quasi-legal procedures that distinguish royal commissions. They did not compel witnesses to attend and produce documents; took evidence themselves rather than engaging legal counsel to examine witnesses; and supplemented witness testimony with extensive research. Untrammelled by judicial rules of evidence or any obligation to maintain procedural fairness, they were free to use hearings to negotiate, bargain, persuade or even cajole in order to win support for their individual and shared agendas.

For these reasons attempts by previous commentators to evaluate the commission’s effectiveness (or ‘success’) by focussing on outcomes (that is, recommendations adopted by governments) are doubly flawed. In the first place, their content or outcome-focussed approach fails to recognise that ‘the process of investigation, consultation and negotiation may be ultimately more significant than the report because the process cleanses, legitimises or befuddles’. And, in the second place, they fail to register that the commission may have a vision ‘of sufficient stamina and attractiveness to alter ways of thinking even if the government at the time wants to ignore [it]’.

The only historians to discern such a vision on the part of the Rural Reconstruction Commission are Allan Martin and Janet Penny, in an article published in 1981. However, they dismiss the commission’s vision as being out of step with
government policy makers and the public at large because of what they see as commissioners’ preoccupation with a level of ‘rigorous long-term planning’ and ‘expert direction’ of the rural sector which they believe no government could have contemplated at the end of a war fought to preserve individual freedoms.\textsuperscript{19} Although the two historians provide a detailed assessment of the commission’s work, elucidating the ‘bureaucratic context’ in which its reports were produced, they do not actually analyse the reports themselves. Instead they offer ‘a general observation on their tone and the broad assumptions they appear to embody’. This follows A.B. Ritchie’s 1945 critique of the first four reports, emphasising their ‘strong moralistic tone’ and the ‘pie-in-the-sky aspect’ of presenting ‘a package of principles’, replete with ‘seemingly self-evident assumptions about the social good’, that stressed the importance of ‘knowledge (getting the facts and getting them right), logic, the priority of “national” over individual interests, and the responsibilities of land users to posterity’.

Martin and Penny are critical of commissioners for resorting to exhortation rather than formulating ‘a practical recipe’ for ‘an all-Australian agricultural policy’. But they maintain ‘it may not be too fanciful to see … the broad vision of a new order’ behind recommendations that each state government establish a Land Utilisation Council and the federal government establish a Bureau of Agricultural Economics. ‘Putting the other elements together,’ the two historians depict this ‘new order’ as ‘a capitalist rural economy flexibly responsive, through a mixture of persuasion and compulsion, to expert direction based on economic, and particularly market, research’ and attribute the vision to bureaucrats in the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction. Ministry officers provided commissioners with administrative and research assistance, and (according to Martin and Penny) transformed them into ‘propagandists’ for ‘rational planning’ and the interventionist, expert-mediated ‘approach to economic and social engineering which [the Ministry’s Director-General Dr H.C.] Coombs and the group around him had come to stand for’.\textsuperscript{20}

Martin and Penny’s interpretation is frankly conjectural. It selectively cites the third, sixth and ninth reports, but (like most other commentary) neglects the remaining reports, the transcripts of evidence, and the intellectual baggage stakeholders brought to the inquiry. Scrutiny of these suggests an alternative interpretation which recognises that the four commissioners embraced ‘a measure of planning’ out of ‘necessity’ and with misgivings that they frankly acknowledged in the third report.\textsuperscript{21}
They accepted, as Wadham put it in one of his regular radio broadcasts, that long-term agricultural planning was preferable to the ‘rescue measures’ and ‘patchwork palliatives … we have been adopting in the last 15 years’. Yet they were ‘well aware’ of the ‘mental resistances’ of farmers, their ‘profound distrust’ of any sort of expertise, and their ‘antipathy … towards plans … prepared by others to regiment [their] actions’. The prevalence of these attitudes, and the ‘very serious loss of morale among the farming population’, made it essential for commissioners to adopt collaborative, rather than regulatory or coercive, approaches and to complement government-centred measures with a variety of farmer- and rural community-centred recommendations.

We argue here that the commentary of most of the commission’s critics has been overweighted towards the regulatory, as opposed to the coordinating, functions of the institutional measures, and correspondingly neglectful of the commission’s commitment to the principles of mutuality and self-help. Convinced that rural stakeholders had responsibilities as well as rights, commissioners seized opportunities, which their Australia-wide hearings presented, to persuade witnesses that the achievement of sustainable development was not simply a matter of governments ameliorating problems of land utilisation and management, but of rural families on farms and rural communities in towns taking the initiative in addressing their own needs. Far from embodying an ‘extreme’, technocratic blueprint for a ‘countryside full of controls’, the Rural Reconstruction Commission’s reports can be seen as a forward-looking attempt to lay the foundations for what Wadham described as ‘a sane land view-point in Australia’.

**Commissioners and the inquiry process**

The burden of taking evidence from witnesses, making tours of inspection in every state, and drafting nine of the ten reports, fell most heavily on the two full-time commissioners, Wadham and Lambert. They embraced this onerous task, requiring uncomfortable travel by rail and road in a tight, ten month timeframe, with vigour and enthusiasm. The part-time commissioners, Wise and Murphy, participated more selectively. Wise oversaw the taking of evidence in his home state and Queensland, but was reluctant to make the long journey from Perth to the commission’s Melbourne headquarters on a regular basis. He withdrew from active involvement well before becoming Premier of Western Australia in July 1945 and for this and various other reasons was not disposed to sign either the ninth or tenth report. Murphy acquired
additional duties as Controller-General of Food in May 1943, and did not sign the third report, but took part in hearings in Victoria and South Australia. He and two members of his departmental staff drafted the tenth report.

Wadham proved to be the ‘most forceful’ commissioner, whose influence derived from his entering the inquiry with an already formulated and widely publicised agenda — articulated in ABC radio broadcasts during 1941-42, published as *The Land and the Nation* in 1943, and reaffirmed in public lectures thereafter — which the fortuitous combination of his personality and the absences of the commission’s chairman and deputy chairman assisted him to advance. University colleagues described the professor as ‘one of the most lovable personalities in Australian academic life’, but many witnesses found him hot-tempered, opinionated and uncompromising. He examined Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) officers with collegial amiability, struggled hard (despite being a returned serviceman himself) to find common ground with RSSAILA witnesses, and became bellicose and overbearing when confronted with pusillanimous public servants or farmers whose vision stopped short of their boundary fences. Together with his fellow commissioners, he gave preference to rural industry stakeholders (59 per cent of witnesses), and strictly rationed witnesses from Commonwealth agencies (less than 3 per cent of all witnesses) in favour of their state counterparts (29 per cent of witnesses). And, like his three colleagues, he approached evidence taking with less emphasis on seeking information or accommodating divergent viewpoints than on identifying guiding principles on which there was broad agreement and persuading those who advocated ideas contrary to his own of their error or irrelevance.

Wadham and Lambert were both individualists, but Wadham went further, espousing an economic individualism which stopped short of *laissez-faire*. In a 1943 public lecture on post-war reconstruction, he insisted that farmers were locked into a culture of rural dependency. They were ‘so accustomed to getting adventitious assistance that they [had] begun to lose their independence of thought. … Initiative and energy [were] necessary for successful farming and men whose only hope [seemed] to centre on artificial financial aid [tended] to lose that independence.’

Echoes of these sentiments can be found in questionnaires which were distributed to state government departments as commissioners planned their work. These encouraged them to endorse the commission’s view that rural communities should take greater responsibility for funding ‘amenities’ such as libraries, public parks and
halls as well as infrastructure for water conservation, irrigation and electrification.  

Lambert also canvassed this view directly with farmers, telling a conference in Wagga Wagga that growers should ‘make greater endeavour to adjust farm usages to prices’.  

Strongly attacking government sponsored domestic price maintenance schemes, he contended these covered-up ‘the deficiencies of the inefficient grower. The consumer,’ he declared, ‘had the right to insist on efficiency.’

**Sustainable development**

Efficiency recurs like a leitmotiv throughout the commission’s hearings and in its reports. Unsurprisingly, the third report put efficient, low cost production at the top of the list of issues which needed to be addressed if Australian agriculture were to develop on a sustainable basis. The commission did not use the term ‘sustainability’, but instead declared its objective to be the creation of conditions which avoided impoverishing or undermining natural resources and did not prejudice the prospect of future responsible expansion of agriculture and forestry.

Taking a lead from Wadham and his University of Melbourne colleague Gordon L. Wood, the commission approached sustainability as dynamic: ‘a process rather than an end point’. It devoted particular attention to the agricultural aspects of sustainable development in its third, sixth, eighth and ninth reports, but gave equal attention to the financial, economic and community (or ‘sociological’) aspects which were addressed respectively in its fourth, fifth and seventh reports. Writers on rural community development often accuse Australian governments and their policy advisers of conflating the ‘farm’ and the ‘rural’ and failing to recognise ‘that the task of developing rural Australia is more than simply a matter of ameliorating the problems of agriculture’ or the difficulties confronting farmers. This is not a criticism that can reasonably be made of commissioners whose plan for sustainable development comprehended the needs of rural families and rural communities, whether on farms or in towns.

Sustainable development, the third report explained, was possible only if costs of production were held ‘at the lowest possible level consistent with the maintenance of reasonable standards of life’ and measures were put in place to maintain or enhance the viability of the natural resource base. This depended on commodities being produced in areas with appropriate soils and climatic conditions; on farming practices ‘which impoverish the soil and undermine its usefulness for future generations … [being] discouraged, if not prohibited;’ on the abolition of ‘systems of land tenure’
which were ‘inconsistent’ with these objectives; on ‘the gradual increase in the size of farms … until they [were] large enough to warrant reasonable mechanization which would facilitate relatively low-cost production and at the same time give reasonable returns to whose who work them’; on the provision of education and ‘amenities’ to establish and retain ‘an efficient rural population’; and on careful planning when expensive infrastructure projects for the use of scarce resources like water were contemplated.\textsuperscript{34}

The same issues were flagged in the first and sixth reports, and explicitly linked to the mindset of farmers. The ‘general success of any district’, commissioners insisted in the first report, ‘is to a large extent’ related to the suitability of soils and climate to the production of particular commodities, ‘yet the technical knowledge and skill and industry of its farmers and workers may modify the success of those industries to a marked degree. … An illiterate farmer with a suspicious mind may be quite unable to appreciate the need for changing his methods of farming.’\textsuperscript{35} The sixth report reiterated this conviction, and contended: ‘change is inevitable if progress is to be made. Any industry unwilling to … change in methods as a result of discovery and invention is courting disaster.’\textsuperscript{36}

Commissioners struggled to find ways of bridging ‘the wide gap … between modern knowledge and field practice’\textsuperscript{37}. Agricultural professionals who testified before them evinced a high level of consensus about measures to address reduced soil fertility and erosion, as did some of the more progressive farmers who were well advanced with pasture improvement. Yet cross-examination revealed that the uptake by state government departments of scientific practices such as soil and climatic surveys was patchy. More worrying was what commissioners knew of farmers at first hand: exploitative grazing had robbed ‘millions of acres of grazing land in Victoria [of] their top soil’. Gully erosion became ‘more evident every year. Anyone who looks at the hill slopes when travelling [by rail] from Albury to Melbourne will see plenty of instances’, Wadham lamented. ‘I am not sure, but I believe that the great majority of these have begun since I first travelled that line sixteen years ago.’\textsuperscript{38}

The problem for individualists like Wadham and Lambert was how to reconcile the absolute rights of individual owners of freehold land with the need for conservation of what was also a national resource. For them there was never any doubt that the ‘lessons of history’, which Wadham invoked in the first report as well as in his 1939 monograph, \textit{Land Utilization in Australia}, offered unambiguous
confirmation that ‘private ownership … [was] the most satisfactory basis of individual holding of agricultural land’. Where leasehold tenure prevailed there was ‘low-grade exploitative occupancy’; freehold gave farmers incentives to service their holdings properly and laid foundations for agricultural sustainability. Together they devoted considerable effort to disabusing those who championed perpetual leasehold, including witnesses from the Victorian Chamber of Agriculture and their own chairman.

Wise was persuaded to join the other three commissioners in recommending in the second report that WSLS should be based on freehold rather than leasehold tenure for reasons of equity. In this he was influenced by the Pike royal commission, set up to apportion losses resulting from soldier settlement after the 1914-18 war, which found that in New South Wales ‘the ordinary civilian settler had his land on terms far and away superior to those granted to the average soldier settler’. Keen to avoid creating ‘psychological’ difficulties among returned servicemen, especially ‘the attitude that they were under-privileged and handicapped … [in comparison] with … their neighbours’, Wise resolutely refused to give ground when senior officers from the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction tried to pressure him into withdrawing this recommendation. However, he continued to favour his own state’s ‘long term but limited tenure’ leasehold for pastoral holdings and ‘outer areas’ and opposed the ninth report’s recommendation that ‘existing Crown leasehold tenures … be reviewed with the object of providing rights to convert to private ownership by compounding the annual rent payable’.

Wadham wanted ‘to see farmers farming with a minimum of outside interference’, but accepted that ‘freedom without control is only possible in a community where every individual recognises his responsibilities as well as his rights — and we haven’t reached that stage yet’. In the first report he accordingly advocated ‘effective statutory powers to restrain the individual … not prepared to cooperate in a general scheme designed to prevent or stop erosion and wastage of soil fertility’. But in his public statements he emphasised that coercion was a last resort; likened the proposed powers to those already used to ‘prevent private owners from turning their holdings into reservoirs of noxious weeds’; and dismissed regular inspections of all landholdings as intrusive, administratively onerous and un-cost effective. And while the third report (which Wadham also drafted) conceded in its introduction that planned land use would require a measure of regulation that some
might find obnoxious after years of ‘irksome’ wartime controls, the emphasis in the rest of the document was on collaborative approaches aimed at disseminating improved methods of land utilisation.

Commissioners wanted to bring ‘an advisory service to the gate of every farmer;’ foster ‘an attitude of mind among farmers which [would] make them open that gate and act on the advice given;’ and deliver assistance, ‘financial and otherwise, which [would] enable the farmer to put the advice into practice’. This would be achieved through a mix of institutional creation, enhanced access to education and curriculum reform, incentives for a variety of cooperative initiatives in fields such as retail trading and commodity marketing, and the provision of loans (or, in certain defined circumstances, subsidies) for the construction of rural ‘amenities’ (particularly community centres) which (together with strong local leadership) would help promote the development of a ‘good spirit’ in rural townships and encourage self-help, voluntary association and collaboration for mutual betterment. ‘I’m a little doubtful,’ Wadham told his radio listeners, ‘whether as a general rule people want to have their lives reorganised by someone else. … If there is to be a change, they would like, if possible, to work it out for themselves.’

**Land utilisation and soil conservation organisations**

The key institutional recommendations in the third report were the establishment by each state government of a Land Utilisation Council (LUC), ‘a special soil conservation organization’, and adequate extension services with ‘well-trained technical staff sufficient in number for the task of bringing an advisory service to every farmer’. All these recommendations had been foreshadowed in witness testimony, with strong stakeholder support for the creation of bodies to coordinate land settlement and utilisation. For instance, the chief of the soils division in the CSIR had testified how his agency had undertaken soil and climatic surveys as precursors to new settlement for state irrigation agencies in New South Wales and Victoria, but not for their lands departments, despite them being responsible for the bulk of new settlement. The Victorian Chamber of Agriculture also pointed to a lack of interagency coordination, recalling that timber felled to make way for roads had simply been allowed to rot; and the New South Wales branch of the RSSAILA testified about the inconsistent treatment meted out to soldier settlers by the state’s lands, agriculture, irrigation and rural finance agencies. Questioned by Lambert, its representative agreed that an effective coordinating body needed to have statutory
powers. Wadham then wrapped up the issue with a leading question — ‘What you would like to see is one authority dealing with land settlement and finance?’ — to which the RSSAILA replied, ‘That is so.’

In view of Martin and Penny’s claim that LUCs and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) were the fundamental building blocks in the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction’s ‘new order’, it is worth reiterating that the idea of creating LUCs does not appear to have originated in the ministry. Furthermore, one searches in vain for the animating ‘vision’ discerned by the two historians. The BAE was proposed almost as an afterthought in the closing pages of the tenth report (completed in August 1946), which noted that Australia had ‘lagged behind most other agricultural countries in the field of research in agricultural economics’. But the LUCs were first mentioned in the third report on land utilisation (drafted by Wadham and completed in June 1944). At that point, commissioners simply envisaged them providing an interagency coordinating function. They would comprise the departmental heads of agriculture, forests, lands and survey, water supply and soil conservation (if that was a separate organisation) and would ‘have the task of coordinating the policy of the state on all phases of land use concerning the allocation of land for farming, forest development, water resources, national parks and reserves, and erosion control’. Each would be accountable to its respective state premier and have ‘a full-time executive officer of status equal to that of a head of a department with a small expert staff’ capable of overseeing interagency investigations. Its statutory powers would be restricted to ‘requiring any department to carry out investigations on its behalf or supply any information required’.

At no stage did the commission envisage LUCs exercising a regulatory (or ‘statutory’) role vis-à-vis landholders, although subsequent reports not only augmented but greatly diversified their functions. For instance, the sixth report on farming efficiency (drafted by Wadham and completed in April 1945) augmented the coordinating function when it proposed that each LUC assist in developing an ‘all-Australian agricultural policy’ by taking responsibility for preparing advice to its government on matters before the existing national intergovernmental coordinating agency, the AAC, and its sub-committee, the SCA. In order to do so, LUC membership would need to be supplemented through appointment of a specialist or specialists in rural finance. The eighth report on irrigation (drafted entirely by Wadham, who felt its ‘main use’ was ‘educational’) meanwhile envisaged LUCs
overseeing water supply companies and regulating methods of land use on catchments to prevent erosion and maximise runoff.\(^56\) And the ninth report on land tenure (drafted by Lambert and finalised in June 1946) proposed even greater functional diversification when it recommended that each LUC review its state’s existing statutes and administrative arrangements relating to land management with a view to preparing advice on consolidating departmental functions and avoiding overlap and inconsistency.\(^57\) Whether it was wise of commissioners to augment and diversify functions in this piecemeal fashion is another matter. There can be little doubt that these deficiencies in existing policy making machinery needed to be rectified. But it is questionable whether organisationally modest bodies like the LUCs could handle the heavy burdens that commissioners now envisaged. It also is questionable whether it was wise to interlink recommendations and tie their implementation to specific institutional arrangements which, if not adopted (as was the case with LUCs), would result in the entire structure collapsing like a house of cards.

No such fate befell the third report’s recommendation that each state ‘establish a special soil conservation organization with specialised staff’ because New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia had already done so, and Western Australia was drafting the necessary legislation.\(^58\) Post-War Reconstruction’s Coombs was nevertheless eager to heed the commission’s explicit ‘warning’ and convene an interdepartmental conference on 11-12 January 1945 to take urgent action on what commissioners described as a ‘national responsibility’. That they had not themselves proposed machinery to formulate a national soil conservation policy is perhaps surprising. Development of ‘an all-Australian agricultural policy’ was a key element in their shared agenda, and Wadham and Lambert made no secret of their belief that soldier settlement after the 1914-18 war and rural debt adjustment during the 1930s demonstrated the necessity for the federal government ‘doing some policing’ to monitor ‘progress of all [federally funded] plans, schemes and authorised rehabilitation methods’.\(^59\) But commissioners suffered a serious setback when Treasury advised the prime minister that recommendations for the establishment of dedicated federal authorities to oversee WSLS were ‘overweighted’ fiscally and administratively against the federal government.\(^60\) There was, however, strong support among federal agencies for a national intergovernmental Soil Conservation Standing Committee, and a series of resolutions was transmitted to the AAC and afterwards endorsed by state premiers.\(^61\) This was an important success for the commission, since
both the detail and the intent of its recommendation won acceptance. The significance of the initiative was reinforced through federal government action to implement several related recommendations, the more important being provision of an improved agro-climatological service, enhancements to aerial survey and mapping services, and the introduction by CSIR of soil classification training for surveyors.

**A national farmers’ organisation**

Commissioners failed to agree about whether institutional creation was required to allow farmers direct input to the existing national policy making bodies, the AAC and the SCA. Both Wadham and Murphy accepted that the ‘array of confusing policy options’ presented to the commission by rural producer groups, organised along commodity lines on a state basis and loosely federated nationally, demonstrated the need for a national farmers’ organisation that could speak with a single voice. But they differed over the feasibility of Murphy’s proposal that governments sponsor a regionalised National Council of Farmers. Encouraged by the success of the District War Agricultural Committees, Murphy was receptive to a National Catholic Rural Movement plan to create what in effect was a ‘Parliament of Agriculture’. Wadham, by contrast, believed that organisations of this type needed to ‘grow and evolve’. They could not be created by government ‘from outside’. Moreover, he doubted whether the rural community currently had sufficient or appropriate leadership to initiate the process. In a dissent appended to the tenth report, Wadham recalled that many of the witnesses before the commission ‘lacked breadth of outlook … and were often almost solely concerned with demanding a higher price for the product, without thought as to the efficiency of producers or the fact that they had responsibilities as well as rights’. Councils composed of men of this calibre ‘would be a hindrance rather than a help to satisfactory agricultural development. … The solution of the problem [lay], therefore, not in setting up one more series of organisations which [would] absorb money and effort, but in ensuring a wiser and more effective system of rural education’ that would give farmers ‘broader appreciation of the true problems of the countryside and its industries’ and prepare them for leadership roles.

**Rural education**

Education was fundamental to the commission’s plan for sustainable rural development. It was all very well to establish soil conservation organisations and augment existing extension services, as officials from federal agencies were quick to point out, but if these were to offer credible guidance they needed sufficient staff who
had received appropriate technical training. Working farmers also needed technical education to provide them with an appreciation of the fundamentals of wise land use and adult education to equip them for leadership roles in both producer organisations and their own communities.

Commissioners’ recommendations on how these objectives might be achieved were embodied in their sixth and seventh reports and drew on ideas which Wadham had already outlined in his broadcasts. He took it for granted that most rural people were ‘badly’ educated. They lacked an appreciation of the countryside, of ‘such things as the balance of nature in a piece of bush … the way in which the forces of nature have worked and have given the land its present form’. And their children were untrained in the ‘various crafts associated with farming — carpentry, engineering principles, and farm machines, perhaps metal working’. Very conscious of his own expertise, he found to his chagrin that many witnesses were opposed to his proposals for a vocational curriculum, the closure of one-teacher schools, and the bussing of students to central schools or technical and agricultural high schools in order to concentrate resources and facilitate ‘special teaching’.

He clashed sharply with the ‘organiser of school agriculture’ in New South Wales, insisting his department’s refusal to embrace bussing made New South Wales ‘the most backward state in regard to primary education in the country’. The witness replied he was responsible only for ‘post-primary’ education. He nonetheless was questioned aggressively, and at length, about why there was ‘what you might call cultural education’ but ‘no specific craft training for the land?’ When he pointed out that technical training was offered in ‘opportunity’ classes for intellectually challenged students, Wadham retorted: ‘We are not interested in the nitwits or semi-nitwits — the ordinary farmer’s son who gets a reasonably high IQ — does he receive any craft training?’ The professor was more cordial, but no less emphatic, with the Farmers and Settlers’ Association of New South Wales, inquiring whether the association had considering sending members over to Tasmania where craft education was well established. The witness responded that they had ‘never gone that far; … there is the psychology of country people, everybody wants to train his boys for something else, … they want to train their children to get away from the land’.

Without appearing to have grasped what he had heard, Wadham continued to drone on about craft training which had now become an idée fixe: ‘Under the Tasmanian
scheme a child between the age of 12 and 15 has his time divided to doing useful things, he makes things which he can take home — wheelbarrows and such like.’

Although Wadham’s broadcast on rural education conceded that significant educational reform would require ‘the support of the countryside’, neither the sixth nor the seventh reports engaged seriously with the ‘psychological’ impediment identified by the Farmers and Settlers’ Association. It is tempting to suggest this was because what Wadham actually was seeking to develop was a class of rural people equipped only for farm work: a point underscored by the sixth report which gave most attention to the school system and dealt cursorily with post-school education. It recommended ‘more craft training in primary schools’, the preparation of a curriculum ‘in closer touch with the facts and requirements of country life, the development of rural technical training in technical and other high schools in country districts’, and greater attention to ‘biological subjects at all stages of education’. At the post-school level the report recommended ‘specified entrance standards’ and ‘approved curricula’ for those seeking careers as agricultural extension officers and a review of the relationship between agricultural college and university education.

The seventh report meantime signalled that ‘a sound system of education and … a wider dissemination of literature on appropriate subjects’ were needed to foster ‘a progressive community spirit and sound leadership … among the local citizens’. It insisted disingenuously that leadership among men was ‘naturally stimulated in the course of the school’, but maintained that farm women ‘left school at an early age’ and so required training for local leadership roles through courses offered by organisations like the New South Wales Agricultural Bureau. Elsewhere the report touted the merits of adult education for both men and women, and regretted that, with the exception of agricultural extension activities, it was country town dwellers rather than working farmers who availed themselves of opportunities to get a better sense of their place ‘in a world of ever-expanding horizons’. This it judged ‘unsatisfactory’, declaring its conviction that more farmers and their sons would participate if courses were ‘arranged in periods when the work of the farms was relatively slack’. Such self-confident assertion sat uneasily with the seventh report’s defensive advocacy of bussing, which it conceded could rob some small settlements of the school that provided the sole ‘centre of interest’ for the local community. However, it outlined nine reasons why ‘consolidation’ was to be preferred. More special pleading was mobilised in support of Wadham’s view that it would harm existing metropolitan
universities if resources were diverted to create new universities in rural and regional centres. He did not believe Australia could afford more than one university in each state, and proposed ‘advanced schools at larger country centres’, offering tuition in selected subjects to first or second year university standard, and students transferring to metropolitan universities to complete their study. That this might have adverse financial implications for many rural students was not explicitly addressed, although the sixth report had expressed the commission’s conviction ‘that the family should be expected to make some sacrifice for the education of the children. Experience suggests that those who have had to strive most for a higher education have often profited most from it.’

Rural amenities
The language of individualism, with its emphasis on self-help, mutuality and deservingness, permeated the seventh report’s recommendations on rural ‘amenities’. These bore the stamp of Wadham’s special interest in ‘the sociological aspects of farming’ and findings from research projects sponsored by the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction. The process of gathering testimony disclosed a high level of agreement between witnesses and commissioners about the ‘disparity’ between living conditions in the country and the city and about the desirability and benefits of reducing it. ‘The extension of amenities,’ commissioners confidently asserted, ‘should result in a more progressive rural community with less sense of frustration.’ Where commissioners differed from the various rural stakeholders was on how responsibility for the provision and financing of these services and facilities should be apportioned between governments, organisations and individuals.

Almost every stakeholder said something about amenities. The Primary Producers’ Union submitted that people would not leave rural districts if they had access to better housing, reticulated water and electricity, improved health services, education, and communications. The New South Wales Council of Primary Producers’ Associations agreed. It argued that the pre-eminent role of farmers in Australia’s export economy entitled them to federal government grants which could be administered by local authorities without charge to ratepayers. The Victorian Wheat and Woolgrowers’ Association took a similar stance as it called for ‘a very definite plan to make country towns more attractive to country dwellers’. On its submission Wadham pencilled, ‘any idea how?’ Finding its representatives unconstructive, Wadham told them it was necessary ‘to get the country to make the
initiative’. Without a commitment from residents, it was ‘no use trying to improve the appearance and amenities of a country town’. Indeed, it had repeatedly struck him ‘that some country towns could have had these amenities long ago provided they [had been] willing to rate themselves sufficiently’.85 This was perfectly consistent with the position he had taken in his broadcasts where he argued that planning should be left to rural communities because they were better able to identify their own needs.86

The seventh report accordingly proposed guidelines for apportioning responsibility for the provision of rural amenities, which it divided into two categories: those that would be the responsibility of governments and those that would be a matter for communities themselves. The first category included education and health services, ‘in the provision of which the nation cannot afford to fail its members, for without such amenities the individual citizens are less likely to be of use to the community as a whole’. The second category included ‘electric supplies, recreational facilities and schemes adding to urban beauty’, all of which were ‘highly desirable’, but projects ‘in which the individuals and communities concerned [had] responsibilities as well as rights’.87 The inclusion of electric supplies in the community category was curious, because commissioners had already suggested that the ‘extension of electricity into a greater number of farming districts … [was unlikely to] grow from many locally governed organizations’, and was likely to require state and even federal government subsidies. Yet in a last ditch attempt to salvage a vestige of mutuality, commissioners proposed that financial assistance to enable farmers to connect electricity should be offered only if their farms were ‘efficient in size’ and the ‘system of farming’ was ‘satisfactory and stable’.88

Cooperation

Wadham and Murphy evinced considerable interest in the potential of rural cooperative movements to give farmers more control over their own destinies and patiently questioned witnesses about their experiences. Both men’s support for cooperation was strengthened by an ‘intensely practical Christianity’.89 Wadham was a Methodist lay preacher and an activist in the Student Christian Movement; at Cambridge University in the 1920s he had ‘flung himself into social service work, especially at the Christ’s College Boys’ Town in London’.90 Murphy was a member of the League of St Thomas More (the Catholic Action organisation for business and professional people), and attended meetings of the National Catholic Rural Movement, which advocated cooperative settlement and ‘independent’ (that is,
‘family’ as opposed to ‘commercial’ or ‘corporation’) farming. Wadham entered the inquiry convinced that Australian farmers had never wholeheartedly embraced the cooperative approach. They joined out of a desire for individual gain rather than for the greater good. Cooperation, he believed, could be successful only if there was a ‘spiritual force’, a genuine desire to use resources for the improvement of all.

Witnesses who supported cooperation were received cordially by commissioners and not subjected to as many leading questions. Among them were two members of a group settlement, farming cooperatively at Denmark in Western Australia, and representatives from the Council of Primary Producers’ Associations. But the Farmers and Settlers’ Association, which was a signatory to the Primary Producers’ submission, rejected cooperation when giving evidence and received a harsh reception. Its representative contended that although cooperative machinery programs appeared to have the potential to reduce production costs on farms too small for adequate mechanisation, they were difficult to administer in practice. In his opinion, the problem of overcapitalisation on small farms loomed needlessly large in some people’s minds, prompting a tart riposte from Lambert: ‘it looks to me therefore that mechanisation in farming is going to force you into larger holdings unless you can find a way to overcome it yourself’. With evident reluctance, the sixth report accepted that cooperative use of machinery did not offer a realistic solution to the problem of farm efficiency. ‘Theoretically, this solution [was] sound,’ but commissioners could find no evidence ‘that a sudden change [had] occurred in the mental attitudes of Australian farmers’.

On the other hand, commissioners believed that cooperative farming had ‘gained some impetus’ from wartime stringency and shortages. Provided land was not deliberately cut up ‘into small farm units which [could] only be farmed successfully if worked on a cooperative basis’, they recommended in the third report that it be ‘given every encouragement particularly where it [would] reduce the costs of production’. However, it should be embarked upon only ‘under voluntary organisation’ and with ‘adequate financial cover from individual guarantors’. The fifth report (on rural credit) offered cautious endorsement of retail, processing and distributional cooperatives, which were ‘fairly prominent in Australia’, while the sixth report recommended that state governments ‘make provision in their rural finance services for granting loans to efficiently run cooperative societies’. But commissioners summed up their views on cooperation by warning that those who believed ‘the
economic salvation of farming industries [lay] in the spread of the movement’ failed to appreciate ‘the importance of the spiritual force which must be strong in the minds of all true co-operators’ and the need to be ‘at least as efficient as … competitors and more progressive in … outlook’. 98

**Conclusion**

If ministers establishing public inquiries are unlikely to set down all their reasons, they are even less likely to engage in post-mortems once they receive the reports. Commissioners too are more likely to concentrate on promoting their recommendations than on lamenting short-falls in ministerial enthusiasm. So judgements about how well any given commission satisfied ministerial expectations are bound to be at least partly speculative.

Those pointers that do exist are by no means unambiguous. For instance, Wadham confided in private correspondence that the commission’s recommendations on WSLS did ‘not seem to have pleased the Government much’: 99 a viewpoint that almost certainly reflected his disappointment at the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction’s failure to grasp the centrality of freehold tenure (or ‘ownership’) to commissioners’ vision for sustainable agriculture. It also is possible that his comment reflected the prolonged, and at times bitter, negotiation that had been required to secure the inclusion among guiding principles of the proviso that new settlement should only be embarked upon where the economic prospects for the production concerned were ‘reasonably sound’. 100 Yet the cautious attitude to new settlement that underlay all the reports, and particularly the first three, was embodied in the Chifley Government’s 1946 ministerial statement, *A Rural Policy for Post-War Australia*; and this, together with the reports themselves, played a crucial part in prompting governments to conceptualise the farmer as a businessman and to ‘jettison’ what Marilyn Lake describes as the ‘eighty-year project’ to create an independent Australian ‘yeomanry’. 101

It can also safely be concluded that the commission’s process was as important to ministers as its recommendations because it allowed for input from key stakeholders and delivered nominally ‘independent’ advice that could form the basis for negotiations with state governments. Indeed, it is plausible to suggest that commissioners delivered more than the Curtin and Chifley Governments had bargained for, albeit belatedly and with priorities that served commissioners’ interests rather than those of ministers. When Chifley wrote to Wise in July 1944 he voiced his
expectation that commissioners would conclude their work by October or November of that year, and submit a further four reports in addition to the three they had already provided. Eventually twelve reports were completed, but the (tenth) report on commodity marketing that Chifley had wanted urgently was not delivered until August 1946. For Wadham this was more than an issue of timeliness. Reflecting on the various inquiries on which he had served, he pointed to the fundamental mismatch between the mindsets of commissioners and the politicians who appointed them. Politicians, he wrote, were ‘being pressed for action and … [were] accustomed to making rapid decisions, often based on guesstimates’, whereas commissioners were of necessity concerned with planning for the longer term.¹⁰²

Commissioners’ guiding vision for sustainable development was a case in point. It conceptualised sustainability in terms of sociological as well as agricultural dimensions, envisaging it as a multifaceted series of on-going processes, open-ended and achievable only through collaborative action on the part of federal, state and local governments on the one hand and rural stakeholders on the other. In privileging collaboration over regulation, and attaching such importance to voluntarism, mutuality and self-help, commissioners were animated by a deeply rooted individualism. Previous commentators, concerned with depicting commissioners as ‘willing tools’ of Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction technocrats, have failed to appreciate the depth of this commitment. They have also failed to grasp the significance of the commissioners’ decision to make use of the comparatively informal procedure of a public inquiry of the policy advisory type to interact with other stakeholders, to point out the shortcomings of their submissions, and to persuade them of the superiority of the commission’s own plan. As Post-War Reconstruction’s Coombs commented, commissioners were using their inquiry to pursue an educational agenda: they were not simply preparing a plan for post-war society but preparing society for their plan.¹⁰³

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¹ Australia, Rural Reconstruction Commission, Reports, 10 Vols, Canberra, 1944-46; hereafter cited as RRC followed by report number and paragraph (not page) number. Two further reports (on the commission’s guiding principles and Australia’s forestry industries) remained unpublished.


6 Letter from Curtin to Wadham, 18 December 1942, and copy of letter from Curtin to Mr Justice Lowe (Chancellor, the University of Melbourne), 18 December 1942, Wadham Papers (WP), 9/79, University of Melbourne Archives (UMA).

7 Letter from Chifley to Wise, 28 July 1944, A9816/3, 43/618, National Archives of Australia (NAA), Canberra, ACT.


12 Letter from Wadham to Coombs, 11 May 1944, WP, 9/79, UMA.


14 Scott Prasser, ‘Royal Commissions in Australia: When should Governments Appoint Them?”, *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 65, September 2006, p. 32, argues it is misleading to classify inquiries established under National Security (Inquiries) Regulations as ‘royal commissions’, even when they invoke their coercive powers and are chaired by members of the legal profession.


Martin and Penny, ‘Rural Reconstruction Commission’, pp. 219, 225, 229-34.


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Martin and Penny, ‘Rural Reconstruction Commission’, pp. 219, 225, 229-34.
RRC, 9:2065(c); Letter from Wise to Wadham, 5 June 1946, 312/10, A6189, NAA.

Wadham, Land and the Nation, pp. 9, 85.

RRC, 1:13.

Wadham, Land and the Nation, pp. 84-6.

RRC, 3:260.

RRC, 3:347.

Wadham, Land and the Nation, p. 97.

RRC, 3:383.

Professor J.A. Prescott (CSIR and Waite Institute, University of Adelaide) transcript of evidence, 8 May 1943, WP, 9/79, UMA.

Victorian Chamber of Agriculture transcript of evidence, 22 October 1943, WP, 9/79, UMA and NSW branch RSSAILA transcript of evidence, 7 September 1943, CP462/1, NAA.

RRC, 10:2660.

RRC, 3:267, 396, 449 (underlining in original).

RRC, 6:1143, 1145.

Letter from Wadham to J.G. Crawford, 16 January 1946, 312 GEN, A6189, NAA; RRC, 8:1763.

RRC, 9:2072.

RRC, 3:384; Letter from G.A. Cook (CSIR) to Coombs, 6 January 1945, 14/2/34, A1422, NAA; Transcript of Chris Jeffery’s oral history interview with Walter Vernon Fyfe (Western Australian surveyor-general), 1978-79, OH335, pp. 162-70, J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, Perth.

RRC, 1:21-22; RRC, 6:1145; Rural Reconstruction Board (New South Wales) transcript of evidence, 10 August 1943, CP462/1, NAA; Wadham, Reconstruction and the Primary Industries, pp. 11-12, 18; S.M. Wadham, Necessary Principles for Satisfactory Agricultural Development in Australia, the Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce given in the University of Adelaide on 5 July 1946, Adelaide, 1946, p. 14.

Draft minute by Crawford for Coombs, 19 March 1944 and letter from C.L. Steele to Ross W. Brownlie (commission secretary), 31 March 1944, item 10, A12085, NAA; Statement by the Prime Minister, Rural Reconstruction Commission’s Report—Soldiers’ Settlement, 19 July 1944, BK326/1/3, A461/7, NAA. That this was a serious setback to the commission can be seen from the fourth report on settlement reconstruction (completed in August 1944) which merely urged the federal government ‘to discuss’ with the states constituting ‘Settlement Reconstruction Authorities’ to foster ‘collaboration and coordination’, (RRC, 4:628, 692, 698) and the fifth report on rural finance (completed in February 1945 but suppressed by Treasury until it was amended at Prime Minister Chifley’s insistence in May 1946) which called on the Commonwealth Bank to maintain nation-wide ‘liaison’ and ‘discussion’ with state-run banks like the Rural Bank of New South Wales (RRC, 5: 890-93; Letter from Wise to Chifley, 14 May 1946, 312/5, A6189, NAA).

Resolutions of the 11-12 January 1945 conference are in 14/2/5, A1422, NAA.

B.A. Santamaria (representing NCRM) transcript of evidence, 18 October 1943, WP, 9/79, UMA.

RRC, 10: ‘Dissent from Chapter IX of this Report’.
Letter from Frank W. Bulcock (director-general of Agriculture) to Coombs, 27 December 1944, 14/2/34, A1422, NAA.

RRC, 7:1411, 1419-21.

Wadham, *Land and the Nation*, pp. 75-83.

RRC, 7:1474-78.

The director of the Australian Council for Educational Research testified that ‘Tasmania is not the only Australian state which has undertaken the consolidation of rural schools’, but in no other state ‘has consolidation been on such a large scale’. He produced evidence that the same pattern was being adopted overseas, but cautioned against wholesale adoption of Tasmanian style vocational training: ‘one cannot accept the view … that all rural children should be trained for rural life’. Dr K.S. Cunningham transcript of evidence, 11 October 1943, CP462/1, NAA.

Ernest Breakwell transcript of evidence, 3 September 1943, WP, 9/79, UMA.

Farmers and Settlers’ Association of New South Wales transcript of evidence, 7 September 1943, WP, 9/79, UMA.

Wadham, *Land and the Nation*, p. 78.

The sixth report, when discussing the failure of agricultural high schools in Victoria, noted that this was attributable (among other things) to ‘the majority of farmers’ sons’ not wanting ‘to go back to the land’ (RRC, 6:1043). It did not pursue this issue more generally, although a paragraph in the seventh report (RRC, 7:1484) asserted ‘that there should be opportunity for country children in the secondary stage of education to obtain a type of training which will fit them for city life if they desire it’.

RRC, 6:1112.

RRC, 7:1679.

RRC, 7:1513.

RRC, 7:1499.

RRC, 7:1475-77.


RRC, 7:1488.

RRC, 6:1036.


RRC, 7:1411.

Primary Producers’ Union transcript of evidence, WP, 9/79, UMA.
84 New South Wales Council of Primary Producers’ Associations, Statement of Submission to the Rural Reconstruction Commission, 1943, CP462/1, NAA.
86 Wadham, Land and the Nation, 97-98.
87 RRC, 7:1426.
88 RRC, 7:1613-14, 1631-32.
92 Wadham, Land and the Nation, p. 29.
93 Scott and Bayley transcript of evidence, 3 April 1943, WP, 9/79, UMA; New South Wales Council of Primary Producers’ Associations, Statement of Submission to the Commonwealth Rural Reconstruction Commission, 1943, CP462/1, NAA. The Council included representatives from the Agricultural Bureau of New South Wales, the Wheat Growers’ Union of New South Wales, the Farmers and Settlers’ Association of New South Wales, the New South Wales Stud Pig Breeders Association and the MIA Rice Growers’ Association.
94 Farmers and Settlers’ Association transcript of evidence, 7 September 1943, WP, 9/79, UMA.
95 RRC, 6:930.
96 RRC, 3:503, 504, 541(d).
97 RRC, 5:826-30; RRC, 6:936, 1133(f).
98 RRC, 6:1132.
99 Letter from Wadham to R.J. Watson, 12 September 1944, A6189, 312/GEN, NAA.