# From Protest to Partnership? Rethinking Local Responses to Change and Restructuring in Rural Australia

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**Abstract**

Since the mid 1980s, rural Australia, like many other non-metropolitan areas in advanced societies, has been subject to an intense process of neoliberal-inspired reform. The impacts of this process have been both numerous and profound, resulting in rural industry downsizing, community decline, public and private sector contraction and a general feeling amongst rural dwellers that they hold little importance to federal and state governments. The purpose of this paper is to chart the responses of rural people to economic and social change in rural areas, and to examine the potential of these responses to challenge the neoliberal trajectory. Drawing upon empirical research, it shows that although strong anti-globalisation sentiments have been voiced by a range of rural protest groups in Australia, current forms of resistance have been piecemeal, short-lived and, at best, only locally effective. Moreover, the advice from state agencies and industry bodies is that change should be embraced rather than resisted, and that there are opportunities to be gained through exposure to the new, deregulated, global economy. While many rural people are seemingly unconvinced of the perceived benefits of globalisation, the likelihood of any coherent rural backlash emerging also appears unlikely. Instead of reacting against government decisions, rural citizens are increasingly working in partnership with state agencies through new structures of governance. Rather than see this merely as a form of acquiescence on the part of rural people, or an attempt by the state to govern local conduct in an advanced liberal manner, this paper adopts a 'translation' approach to explore the ways in which local power is exercised through these arrangements. It argues, however, that while such action has the potential to transform the policy agenda according to local, rather than state, ambitions opportunities for a more profound critique of neoliberalism remain limited.

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## Introduction

In July 1984, when Australia's farm population stood at about 126,000 (Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1986) some 40,000 farmers and their families and supporters demonstrated outside Parliament House in Canberra to demand the implementation of policies that would contain costs in farming. Since the time of the Federation of Australian States in 1901, farmers had been granted concessions on tariff imports, fertilizer bounties, monopoly marketing schemes, output subsidies, and a host of other support measures, which bestowed upon the farming sector a high level of economic stability as well as low-cost inputs (see Lawrence,1987: 183-3). In the 1970s, however, the then Federal Labor government began dismantling these policies, arguing that they constituted a form of 'agrarian socialism' that allowed producers to privatise their gains while socialising their losses (Buckley, 1972). While farming lobby groups had been vocal in their resistance to previous attempts to undermine their 'regulatory cocoon' (Sorensen and Epps, 1993), the actions of producers in response to the changes in the 1980s bordered on militancy (Lawrence, 1987: 12-13). In the wake of the formation of a National Farmers' Federation (NFF) in the late 1970s to counter policies that were viewed as overly disadvanting rural industries in favour of the urban labour and manufacturing sectors, a number of important protest rallies took place, reaching their height in the mid 1980s. As well as the 40,000 strong crowd demonstrating in Canberra, other protests took place that year around the country: 9,000 farmers marched through the streets of Perth protesting against high interest levels, rail freight charges and low commodity prices; another 17,000 marched through Adelaide, while 30,000 met in Melbourne to attack the imposition of new government taxes and charges. In the decades that followed, farmers and rural dwellers continued to react to a range of policies that threatened their way of life, yet the 1984 Canberra demonstration still remains the largest protest rally ever held in the nation's capital.

Since then, Australian farmers have been exposed to even greater challenges through the continuing cost-price squeeze, the seemingly-inevitable contraction in farm numbers and the imposition of free trade policies (including a current free-trade agreement with the US which, amongst other things, has raised questions about the future viability of the Australian sugar industry). At the beginning of the 21st Century, the legacy of protectionism in Australia has all but disappeared under the narrow agenda of neoliberalism, which actively promotes the freedom of the market, global competition, individual choice and user-pays. That many Australian farmers and other rural dwellers are suffering from the effects of a neoliberal rural policy is no longer a matter of dispute as public and private services are withdrawn, population sizes deline, farm profits fall and an increasing number of rural citizens face poverty and unemployment (see for example, Cheers, 1998; Duff and Tonts, 2000; Tonts, 2000; Gray and Lawrence, 2001). In spite of this, and in the face of evidence of an increase in rural activism in Europe in recent years (Woods, 2003), the impetus and energy for collective action among Australia's rural dwellers appears to have dissipated. This is not to suggest that anti-globalisation sentiments no longer exist in rural areas, nor that pockets of resistance do not emerge in particular spaces where certain government policies prove especially harmful. What it does mean is that contemporary forms of rural protest show a tendency to be piecemeal, sectorally-specific, short-lived and, at best, only locally-effective. Moreover, the official position of Australian governments is that globalisation cannot and should not be halted or resisted, but embraced because of the large number of opportunities it affords to those who follow this course of action. Hence, the policy response to globalisation has been to convince rural people that the solution to their problems lies not in mounting any challenge to the existing policy agenda but, rather, in forming partnerships with the state to enhance their competitiveness for the much-vaunted tourist, and other, niche commodity markets.

The possible reasons for the apparent decline in political action in rural Australia are complex and varied and need to be subjected to rigorous investigation and analysis (see Halpin, 2003 for an important contribution to this debate with regard to farm interest groups). Since this is impossible to achieve within a single paper, the objective here is to problematise the relationship between the emergence of new modes of governing in rural Australia and the discourses, forms and outcomes of local responses to change that arise in these spaces. Theoretically, the relationship between the exercise of rule by contemporary governments and the subsequent 'conduct' of human conduct may be understood, from a Foucauldian governmentality perspective, as indicative of an advanced liberal rationality of rule that shapes the discursive and practical conditions in which individuals make decisions about appropriate courses of action (see Miller and Rose, 1990). What this might suggest is that partnership arrangements have enabled political authorities to govern the conduct of rural citizens in a more direct manner so that oppositional-type activities have been eschewed in favour of those with more politically-desirable outcomes. While this interpretation is a compelling one, it does tend to overstate the subjection of rural people to the will of the state and understate their capacity to recognise this subjection and to act against it (MacKinnon, 2002: 310). At the same time, it also limits questions of agency to overt forms of resistance to state power, while ignoring the more subtle and complex forms of engagement and negotiation that take place between rural people and the state within the context of these partnerships. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine the question of whether a shift – from protest to partnership – has indeed taken place in the way local people respond to change and restructuring in rural Australia, and whether that shift is indicative of their growing aquiescence as they enter into new kinds of relations with the state. While this conclusion is rejected for the reasons stated above, the paper does raise questions about the potential for rural people to articulate a more profound critique of neoliberalism and globalisation under these present arrangements.


**Anti-globalisation sentiments and actions in rural Australia**

The farmer militancy that developed in the 1980s can be read as a response to the Federal Government's attempts to address the instability that a small trading nation like Australia was experiencing in a globalising world arena (Lawrence, 1987; 1996). The abandonment in 1971 of the Bretton Woods agreement, which helped to stablise the global system of financial exchange, and the rise of oil prices during the 1970s, which lead to increases in farm input costs, dramatically increased the cost-price pressures that farmers were facing. So too did the growth in inflation, which caused increased interest rates and greater debt servicing for those with substantial borrowings, and the loss of a significant preferential market for rural commodities following Britain's decision to join the Common Market in 1973 (see Lawrence, 1989). Policies such as deregulation, industry restructuring, the removal of barriers to the flow of transnational capital, and the rationalisation and privatisation of government services were also part of economic rationalist policies that were evolving during the 1980s, and which have continued to the present day (Lawrence, 1996; Tonts, 2000). These have gone hand-in-hand with neoliberal policies that have sought both to justify the need for the state to foster free market conditions, and to endorse a specific direction in domestic policy that, at one and the same time, rejects welfare state-ism and exhorts budget stringencies (Gerritsen, 2000; Stilwell, 2002). Under this agenda, additional policy shifts have taken place in the form of reduced industry protection, deregulation of the farming sector, micro-economic reform, value-adding via R&D expenditure and increased efficiency in public service delivery (Sorensen and Epps, 1993: 17). Individually, and in concert, each of these reforms has had a major impact upon Australia (Stilwell, 2000) and, in particular, rural Australia (Lawrence, 1996), where processes such as the reduction in the financial viability of farming and the subsequent 'rural crisis' of the 1980s; the de-industrialisation of regions; a decline in rural service provision; privatisation of government activities; devolution of responsibility for the provision of many services to local communities; and an increasing socio-economic division between rural and urban areas have been occurring over the last two decades (Lawrence and Williams, 1990; Cheers, 1998; Gerritsen, 2000; Tonts, 2000; Gray and Lawrence, 2001).

Not surprisingly, in the light of the restructuring of rural Australia, the farm protests of the 1980s spilled over into a more widespread populartist regional (and peri-urban) political vote in the 1990s, signified by the emergence of the One Nation Party. In the 1990s the former federal member for the Queensland seat of Oxley, Pauline Hanson, founded the One Nation Party on a platform of restoring the supposed 'backbone' of Australia – that is, providing a livelihood to those who worked hard, curtailing the excesses of the city-based professionals who were being favoured by globalisation, and supposedly representing those who had become marginalised economically and disaffected politically (McManus and Pritchard, 2000). It sought to do this by attributing blame to government policies that promoted Asian migration and gave seemingly unwaranted support to single parents, Aboriginal people and the unemployed (McManus and Pritchard, 2000). While the policies have been described as 'reactionary economic nationalism …. strongly overlaid with racism and xenophobia' (Stilwell, 2000: 169), there is little doubt that One Nation secured a strong protest vote, particularly in regional areas (McManus and Pritchard, 2000: 4). Significantly, the One Nation rhetoric of the benefits to Australia of a return to industry protection and public intervention (Stilwell, 2000: 169) contrasted with that of the National Famers' Federation, which endorsed free trade as the key to prosperity for the rural sector. Hence, there were two competing strategies for those in the regions to deal with their economic marginalisation: to 'retreat' into protectionism or to accellerate Australia's integration into the world economy.

The demise of the One Nation Party commenced with its poor performance at the Federal election of 1998 and concluded with the jailing of the party leaders over presumed financial impropriety. As a result, much of the oppositional steam had been taken out of the 'protectionist option' for rural Australia, leaving stronger engagement with global processes and practices the (only) favoured political option (Stilwell, 2000). This is not to say, however, that rural people have become compliant. They have, at numerous times over the past decade, taken to the streets to protest about the closure of banks, schools and court houses (Cheshire and Lawrence, 2003) and they have held rallies to complain about sugar prices, dairy deregulation and a host of other commodity-specific issues (see Gray and Lawrence, 2001). There have also been heated debates over such issues as the introduction of genetically modified organisms into farming (see Kinnear, 2004). Yet, the characteristics of these latest bursts of resentment and anger are that they are fragmented, limited to particular commodity types (sugar or dairying, for example) and are often locally-based. As symbolic expressions of resistance to state (or corporate) power (Woods, 2003: 322), they also tend to recede soon afterwards, either when the objective has been achieved (in some cases, this may simply be to draw public attention to the cause), or because further action appears unlikely to lead to change.

**Advanced liberal forms of rule: a partnerships approach**

In a recent paper on the collective political actions of Australian farming and rural communities, Halpin (2003: 150) argues that we need to know more about the extant 'points of contact' between rural civil society and political institutions. It is worth exploring these points of contact in more detail because they illustrate the changing nature of the relationship between the state and civil society and, by implication, the way rural people make decisions about appropriate courses of action in seeking to arrest the decline of their industries and communities. That we have witnessed a blurring of the boundaries between civil society and the state is illustrated by the language now used to describe the process of governing in contemporary society: from that of govern*ment* to new forms of gover*nance* (see Stoker, 1998a). What this means is that the activity of rule is no longer simply a matter of concern for the state, but relies, increasingly, upon the active participation by citizens in the formulation and delivery of policies and services (see Rose, 1993; Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996). New policy settings that have emerged as a result have, in part, been driven by a desire to democratise contemporary forms of government so that there is greater acceptance of, and increased efficiencies within, the policies that ensue. Much is made, therefore, of the *rights* of citizens to have a greater say in the policy making process, and the perceived benefits of empowering citizens to do so via participatory decision-making structures, community consultation activities, state-community

partnerships and bottom-up strategies of development (see for example, Taylor, 1998; Atkinson, 1999; Fung and Wright, 2003).

The changing relationship between the state and its (rural) citizens has also been reflected in the emergence of new models of citizenship in recent years, which place a growing emphasis on the *responsibilities* of individuals to play a greater role in securing their own economic and social well-being. Such changes have been discussed at length by Woods (2004 forthcoming) and others (see also Kearns, 1995) who point to the rise of notions of 'active citizenship' as an indication of the growing expectations placed upon citizens to exercise themselves in a responsible and self-reliant manner. Thus, it is not simply a case that individuals have a *right* to seek their own solutions to the problems they face, but that it is their duty, to act, as Dean puts it:

> … as active and free citizens, as informed and responsible consumers, as members of self-managing communities and organizations, as actors in democratizing social movements, and as agents capable of taking control of … [their] own risks (Dean, 1999: 168).

In rural Australia, as elsewhere, the concept of active citizenship underpins a range of new policy measures that expound a self-help approach to fixing rural community and industry decline (Herbert-Cheshire, 2000). Once protected from the vagaries of the global market by a benevolent state, rural people are now being told that it is up to them to secure the future of their town or district through the cultivation of local leadership, community capacity, a 'can-do' attitude, and an endogenous approach to development (Sher and Sher, 1994; ABARE, 1998; Mouritz, 2001). While it might appear – indeed, it is claimed – that self-help is a source of empowerment for rural people because it enhances their capacity to act for themselves, a countervailing discourse of 'globalisation-is-inevitable' sets the type of response made possible within this framework. From this latter perspective, the rural downturn is not seen as the product of a series of deliberate policy choices by Australian governments, but an outcome of the unstoppable forces of globalisation and technological progress that even governments are unable to halt (Anderson, 1999; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services, 2000: 2). Given such circumstances, the only possible course of action is an acceptance by all of the inevitability of these processes and the adoption of a reform agenda that seeks to secure a place for rural Australia in the global economy. Resistance to this policy agenda is not only considered futile, but rendered illegitimate by discourses of active citizenship (see Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004: 292), which expect citizen demands for rights to be accompanied by a corresponding set of obligations for those citizens to assume some responsibility for addressing the problems they encounter (Woods, 2004 forthcoming). Rather than mounting any opposition to the rural policy agenda, therefore, rural citizens are increasingly encouraged to accept the inevitability of change and work in partnership with the state to secure the prosperity of their industries and communities.

The idea that rural people must now work 'in partnership' with the state is not simply a rhetorical device but manifests itself in a range of organisational structures, agreements and funding programmes that draw together a broad range of stakeholders from the state, community and corporate sectors in the pursuit of a common objective. Their purpose, as Stoker suggests, is to achieve 'some collective benefit that could not be obtained by governmental and non-governmental forces acting separately' (1998b: 41). Thus, a partnership approach to policy formulation or service delivery is frequently promoted as being in the interests of all partners (Atkinson, 1999). For the state, it allows community resources and energies to be harnessed to central objectives, thereby reducing the fiscal demands placed upon the public purse; similarly, for the community, partnerships provide access to governmental resources and expertise while simultaneously (and supposedly) allowing local citizens to have a greater say in, and understanding of, the policy making process.

In Britain, public-private partnerships were first promoted in the early 1980s as part of an attempt by the Thatcher government to imbue the public sector with an enterprise culture so that public services would become more efficient and business-like in their operations (Hastings, 1996). Commonly referred to as quangos (quasi-autonomous non-government organisations), these initial partnerships

tended to exclude the community sector – until the early 1990s, that is, when a broader range of stakeholders began to be included. At the same time, the virtues of partnerships were also beginning to be recognised in Australia, with a number of regional based partnerships already in operation (Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy, 1995). By 1994, the concept of a partnership had been firmly established within the Federal Government's rural policy agenda following the release of the Keating Labor government's Rural Partnership Program. Arguing that the key to rural prosperity lay in the creation of self-reliant rural citizens and communities, the programme nevertheless identified an important supporting role for governments in providing the 'policy framework, infrastructure, basic information, leadership, expertise, resources and coordination of networks' that would enable this to occur (Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy, 1995: 10). While the Rural Partnership Program was eventually abandoned following a change in government in 1996, an underlying commitment to partnerships in Australian rural policy remains strong. Indeed, the belief that a partnership between business, community and government sectors is the most effective mechanism for revitalising Australia's rural regions continues to underpin a range of current policy measures including the Federal Government's $100m Sustainable Regions Programme (Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services, 2002) and the $700m National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAPSWQ) (Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Mines, 2001).

The extent to which these partnerships are formalised and ratified by legislative and/or funding agreements varies immensely, as does the degree to which they have been initiated, and subsequently directed, from either the top down or the bottom up. Neither are these partnerships fixed at any particular geographic scale, but formulated and implemented at the national, regional and local levels. At one end of the spectrum lies the NAPSWQ with its complex set of arrangements between the stakeholders of each formally designated regional 'body' (comprising representatives from community, industry and government sectors), the regional Technical Advisory Group, and a State-level steering committee, all of which are governed by a bilateral agreement between the State and Federal Governments. At the local level, less formalised partnership relations have been instituted between community organisations and local government, or locally based State government departments, to provide these groups with relatively small amounts of cash and in-kind assistance (Cheshire, 2005 forthcoming). Access to this kind of support has been invaluable to many such groups in rural areas, which have come to accept that self-help is indeed the only solution to their current predicament, and yet which lack the skills and resources that make community-based strategies of development possible (Tonts and Jones, 1996; Herbert-Cheshire, 2000). That the very idea of self-help holds some appeal for rural people is also apparent in the vast number of community regeneration activities that have taken place in countless small towns and regions throughout inland Australia. Indeed, a number of writers have suggested that discourses of self-help accord nicely with an agrarian fundamentalist ideology in rural Australia, which preaches personal self-reliance, physical activity, independence and individual freedom (see Flinn and Johnson, 1974; Gray and Lawrence, 2001; Higgins, 2002; Cheshire and Lawrence, 2003). Hence, it would seem that the present policy framework of enhancing self-reliance in rural areas through the promotion of state-community partnerships is simply a case of governments giving rural people what they want (see Murdoch, 1997; Herbert-Cheshire, 2000).

It is apparent from this discussion that partnerships constitute a new kind of relationship between the state and civil society in which the boundaries between them are becoming blurred. Similarly, the extant points of contact between the two spheres are also being transformed as citizens are no longer defined as passive recipients of state directed policies, but active partners of the state who must assume their share of responsibility for identifying solutions to the problems they face (Woods, 2004 forthcoming). This raises the question of how, and in what ways, the reconstitution of citizen agency under partnership arrangements limits the possibility of those solutions being sought through protest and resistance-type activities. Is it possible, for example, that by entering into new kinds of partnerships with the state, the agency of citizens is somehow compromised so that the only response available is one that works with, and does not seek to challenge, the neoliberal policy agenda? Kerr and Savelsberg (1999) maintain that this is indeed the case, arguing that when community

organisations enter into relations with the state (including those that have been established specifically for lobbying purposes), their independence is often compromised, or even depoliticised. Everingham (2003) supports this contention and asserts that civil society no longer has the critical voice it once did, but has been co-opted into a neoliberal market agenda that provides citizens with little option but to work in ways that are compatible with state objectives. In drawing upon a governmentality framework, such changes may be linked to the emergence of an advanced liberal form of rule that encourages citizens to transform themselves into self-governing subjects guided by particular forms of conduct (see Foucault, 1985: 28). That this process appears to rest on consent rather than coercion, and on freedom rather than constraint, is highly consistent with advanced liberalism (Hindess, 1996: 131), which seeks to govern people, places and events *through* their freedom (Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996: 8 emphasis added).

Precisely how this works to shape human conduct and set limits on the choices available to local people in the way they respond to the rural downturn may be illustrated more clearly by a brief examination of the Woomeroo Action Group in the town of Austin in western Queensland (see Herbert-Cheshire, 2003; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004 for a more detailed discussion). Established in 1991 in response to the Queensland Government's decision to downgrade the town's railway services and withdraw its court and legal facilities, the initial purpose of the Woomeroo Action Group was to pressure the State Government to reverse these changes through public protests, petitions and media campaigns. The success of these campaigns, was limited, however, prompting the Action Group to reconsider its options and recognise:

> … that we needed to do more than just protest, we needed to take charge of our own future and make things happen, for if we didn't, no one else would and our area would surely die (Woomeroo Action Group, 196: 13 cited in Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004: 297).

Rather than adopting a *reactive* stance to the closure of local services, therefore, the Woomeroo Action Group gradually began to channel its energies towards a more *pro*active type of response by working in accordance with federal and state government policies to access funding for community and economic development activities. In doing so, the group's relationship with the state also began to shift. Recognising, as one member expressed it, that it could 'no longer afford to get on the wrong side of governments' with its confrontational tactics, the Woomeroo Action Group began to move out of its antagonistic role with the state and establish a close working relationship with all levels of government, particularly the local council:

> Yes well, we get plenty of support by local government, the council. We're almost interwoven, you can't see where one ends and another one begins sometimes. That's how close we are with our local government. We get a lot of support from our local State member too (Member of the Woomeroo Action Group).

## Rethinking power and agency

It is possible to conclude from the preceding discussion that citizen agency in rural Australia has been reshaped by new modes of governance and that this manifests itself in a growing acquiescence among rural dwellers who recognise that 'getting on the wrong side of government' is no longer possible. While rural protest may be seen to represent a 'postmodern politics of resistance' (Woods, 2003: 322), state-community partnerships constitute a new, emerging form of conduct that is, ostensibly, politically-docile, accepting of neoliberal-driven change and subject to the demands of the state for a globally competitive and self-reliant rural sector. Yet, to draw such conclusions is to rely upon a particular conception of power that limits human agency to questions of resistance. From this perspective, power is exercised by a dominant force and provides those who are the objects of that power with a choice of either accepting or resisting their subjection. When resistance does occur, power is said to have failed (O'Malley, 1996: 311). Where there is no resistance, power is considered to have been successful and its original intentions have been met. What this presents, however, is a

perception of resistance as a negative, external force that emerges in response to an initial exercise of power. Or, as Rose (1999: 279) argues, it becomes 'merely the obverse of a one-dimensional notion of power as domination'. Such an approach does little to help make sense of the many and varied ways in which citizens respond to state power that cannot be categorised as either domination or resistance. Thus, it may be helpful to reframe the question of citizen agency away from a debate of whether – and if so, why – there is a decline in protest activities in rural Australia towards an analysis of *how* citizen agency is exercised within contemporary partnership arrangements so that those arrangements continue to meet their needs.

Conceptually, the way to address this question is by substituting ideas of resistance for a sociology of translation (Law, 1992: 380), which forms part of the body of work known as actor-network theory (ANT). While much of ANT is consistent with Foucauldian ideas of power, the concept of translation is rather more sophisticated than that of resistance for it acknowledges the complexity of power relations as more than simply the acceptance or rejection of an order from above (Latour, 1986: 268). Instead, what occurs is the continuous transformation of that order by all those who encounter it as each seeks to achieve his or her goals (Latour, 1986: 268). More common than either resistance or subjection, therefore, are forms of conduct that do not simply reject or even respond to a command, but involve individuals 'engaging with it by sustaining and adapting their own practices and discourses, actively paralleling and even displacing those of political authorities' (O'Malley, 1996: 316). On occasions, this may take the appearance of compliance to power, yet it remains an active form of compliance if it is driven by the will of those who choose to comply and not simply the power of those who seek to enforce it (Cheshire, 2005 forthcoming). As Latour points out (1986: 268), human beings have their own reasons for accepting power and, in the course of doing so, translate it into a new form, thereby rendering power and politics a far more 'open-ended process of contestation and engagement' (O'Malley, 1996: 312).

In helping us to understand what this means for local agency in rural Australia, it is clear that the partnership approach that has emerged in Australian rural policy since the 1990s has largely been accepted by rural people as a better way to conduct business in the 'bush'. This is not to say, however, that they are unable to contest or 'translate' state power within the context of these arrangements. Research suggests that community groups are becoming increasingly vocal (and hostile) about the complex processes of accountability that are being foisted upon them in the current regional partnership arrangements, particularly since a commensurate amount of decision-making authority has not been forthcoming (Gray and Lawrence, 2001; Eckersley, 2003). Given that the legitimacy and success of these programmes relies heavily on citizen participation, it remains possible that political authorities may be forced to concede to more participatory models of democracy and that this may create an arena in which neo-liberal imperatives can be challenged (see Lockie, 2000: 46). Similarly, Halpin (2003) suggests that collective action facilitated by the state through partnerships may create a platform for more political action. In doing so, he cites the case of Landcare: an Australian Federal Government-funded initiative that seeks to address environmental degradation through the mobilisation of community self-help in a framework of 'partnership with', rather than 'dependence upon', government (Lockie, 2001: 249). While Landcare has been extensively critiqued for its role as a technology of neoliberal rule (Lockie and Vanclay, 1997; Lockie, 2001), Halpin (2003: 150) suggests that mechanisms such as Landcare can actually plant the 'discursive seeds' for political action by revitalising collective sentiments among rural people, or by raising their political interest through their partnerships with the state.

Moreover, in reflecting upon the experience of the Woomeroo Action Group, it can be seen that when community groups enter into partnership arrangements with the state, their subjection is rarely absolute. On the one hand, for example, the Woomeroo Action Group's role as a political lobby group has been muted rather than extinguished, and re-emerges during periods of crisis (such as when a local service or industry is placed under threat). During such times, the power of local people manifests itself once more in the outright rejection of state power through various strategies of public meetings, political lobbying and media campaigning. On the other hand, the partnership that the group has established with the state – particularly the localised arm of local government – has provided its

members with a far greater opportunity to influence government policy than might otherwise have been achieved. In spite of its shift in direction from rural protest to economic development organisation during the 1990s, the Woomeroo Action Group has retained its commitment to the goal of getting its court and railway services reinstated. If, as group members put it, this required 'jumping through hoops' or 'toeing the government line', this was what they would do:

> … maybe the Woomeroo Action Group is a bit manipulated but it's all for the betterment of the town anyway so it doesn't really matter (Member of the Woomeroo Action Group).

Consistent with a sociology of translation, therefore, the group's compliance with state power through the partnerships it established did not arise from its unmitigated acceptance of the legitimacy of that power, but rather as a deliberate strategy for achieving its own objectives. That this strategy appears to have worked for the group is testified by the reinstatement of Austin's rail freight centre and court and legal services in 1999, which the group sees as its greatest success:

> Our biggest achievement would be probably reversing some of the trends of government actions: the government agent and getting the railway back on track. And just getting government to listen to us. We've become a force now; a spokesperson for our district whenever things need to be brought forward (Member of the Woomeroo Action Group).

## Conclusion

The arguments in this paper are tentative and contain some apparently contradictory elements. On the one hand, it suggests that there has been a marked decrease in farm and rural protest in Australia since the mid 1990s, and certainly no evidence of any rural protest movement of the nature and extent that is presently being witnessed in Western Europe (see Woods, 2003). There are various reasons for this decline – and possibly even debates about whether it has, indeed, taken place – most of which cannot be examined in the context of this paper. What this paper has sought to achieve, therefore, is a preliminary analysis of the emergence of partnership arrangements in Australian rural policy and the possible link between these new forms of governance and the discourses, forms and outcomes of local responses to rural change and restructuring. In exploring this relationship, it has been argued that the partnership approach that has been prevalent in Australia since the mid 1990s has gone some way towards mitigating the political protest that had been festering among farm and community groups during the years of the 1980s. Why this might be so can be attributed to the discursive framework of advanced liberalism under which partnerships have been constructed, which convinces rural people that globalisation and neoliberalism are inevitable; that resistance to these processes is futile; and that the only solution is to work *with* the state in formulating possible solutions by finding a place for rural Australia in the global economy.

On the other hand, it is argued that the decrease in overt forms of resistance to state power in rural Australia should not be taken as a sign that rural people have become acquiescent or entirely subjected to the will of the state as a result of these partnership arrangements. Instead, by considering how rural citizens 'translate' state power during the course of engaging in partnerships, it is possible to see that their political docility conceals a range of other, more subtle, activities that can have equally profound implications for the way that future government decisions are made. Indeed, it is also possible that these new, democratic governing structures will increase the likelihood of a coherent rural protest movement emerging in future years as new kinds of spaces are created for more direct forms of engagement between rural citizens and the policy-making arena. What sort of challenge this can pose to the present neoliberal trajectory in rural Australia is not clear at this stage, particularly since such a move would necessitate the agendas and efforts of a range of competing stakeholder groups, geographic regions and industry sectors to be brought together. However, the unprecedented rise of the short-lived, but politically powerful, One Nation Party points to the possibility that, under certain conditions, these kind of coherent responses can arise. That, ultimately, One Nation offered no genuine solution to the disillusionment felt by those who declared their

support for the party does not negate the widespread depth of despair that existed at the time, nor deny the possibility that rural and regional Australia remains fertile ground for an alternative politics when, and if, one eventually arises.

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