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I write to express a contrary view about the potential of this vast nation to grow greatly increased amounts of food and fibre crops for selling to Asian markets. Suggestions in the press and made by politicians and even by agricultural scientists are far too optimistic, giving the impression that all we need to do is to expand the supply of capital and adopt new technologies and we will be able to greatly increase our levels of agricultural production. The ability of drought to strike virtually anywhere in Australia even in farming districts with relatively reliable rainfalls is the reason why there must be a degree of caution about fostering the expansion of our cropping base.

It is not by chance that the fore-fathers of Australian agriculture concentrated their efforts on developing our grazing industries. In vast areas of the country grazing will continue to be the back bone of our agriculture making use of short periods of lush rain-fed pastures combined with extended periods surviving on dry native grasses and leaves of woody perennials. In areas with a slightly more reliable rainfall grazing will continue to be supplemented by opportunistic cropping in years of above average rainfall.

In southern latitudes only a limited amount of land with both high and reliable rainfall is available for further development into cropping. This is not the case in the northerly subtropical and tropical parts of the country where we have many regions of high but unreliable rainfall. However the climates of these regions demand a different range of crops to those we currently grow in the south. Growing these crops presents new challenges and in many cases requires further inputs of transferred knowledge together with significant scientific research before their potential can be fully exploited. These cropping limitations will be both long term and expensive to overcome leaving the massive challenge of both the timing and amount of the rainfall to solve.

Planned irrigation schemes, using waters conserved either in dams or those that naturally infiltrate to the lower soil layers and are accessible via wells are a pre-requisite for further agricultural development in northern Australia. These will be both costly and take time. These problems can be worked through but will require considerable Government investment.

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