

When are the Real Housewives of Dubbo coming to Foxtel?

Well when are they?

Every Sunday night I watch the girls of Real Housewives of Melbourne. Their ostentatious and lavish ways - private jets, Portsea weekend homes, ski chalets.... The fabulous lives belong to a caterer, a cosmetic doctors wife, lawyer, rock stars wife and an interior decorator. Each and every episode the girls can be seen around town in their Porsches, Mercedes and BMW's. None seem too busy, and to be honest, none seem too bright. Yet the lifestyle they lead is purely jet set. This truly is the lucky country... for some.

It got to me to thinking, where are the fabulous enclaves of wealth in country Australia? Where would you film the next Real Housewives franchise in country Australia? I understand not all lawyers and doctors and interior decorators make millions, and I understand that I am probably seeing the privileged few when it comes to the girls of Toorak. But where are the really rich farmers today? Where are their glamorous wives? Where do I find agricultures high earners who grow the grain, graze the cattle and shear the sheep? Surely there must be some. Every industry has an elite level that comes with an elite pay package. Top bankers make millions each and every year, same too for lawyers, doctors and sports stars. It is considered an entitlement. So I ask again where are the really rich farmers? There aren't any.

The Industry just will not allow it. Don't get me wrong Australian farmers work hard, they work smart too. Yields today are often 4 times what they were just 20 years ago. Not long ago a 1 tonne per hectare rice yield was a good earner, now farmers need 3.5 tonnes per hectare to break even. Are lawyers 4 times more productive today than they were 20 years ago? What about bankers? Are doctors paid roughly the same salary as they were 30 years ago, like farmers are? Just this past summer I could have sold cows for 70 cents per kilo. Not so easy to make a buck at that level is it?

Let me punctuate this point. Recently a company by the name of PrimeAg came and went. Backed by a veritable who's who of Australian Industry. PrimeAg was smart, or so it seemed. It invested in the choicest black soils Australia could offer. It looked to grow grain and cotton, and run a few cattle. It expertly located each property in reliable climate zones and started life with a strong capital structure virtually devoid of debt. One backer, Roger Corbett, would be considered by many to have the midas touch. His expert stewardship of Woolworths over the years earned himself millions and a directorship on the Reserve Bank of Australia no less. Yet after 6 or so years, with equity value of the company nearly cut in half it decided to cease trading as a listed company because it could not deliver adequate returns to investors. Why did this happen you ask?

Quite simply Australian farmers are forever doomed so long as oligopolies manifest themselves at every turn in Australian agriculture. Whether it be a virtual domestic supermarket duopoly, a beef market dominated by Cargill and JBS Friboi, or just a handful of Grain Handlers. These parasitic corporations feast off Australian farmers. We have stupidly relinquished the marketing rights of all our major commodities. Just last week we lost a key export market (Russia) for beef on the back of hormone use in cattle. That is a marketing decision that was not made by the Australian farmer but by an international Meat company, yet all Australians have now lost access to that market for their beef regardless of whether they use hormones or not.

Why is it that Australian grain farmers lost the ability to market their wheat because the AWB was named in the Iraq Oil for Food scandal, yet Glencore which also was named in that same report remains a major marketer of Australian grain?

The way forward is clear. A legislative agenda that puts Australians ahead of International corporations. A Parliament that cares about enriching country Australia, not a few grain traders in Switzerland. There must be legislative changes that allow farmers to organize and form Co-Ops, to collectively bargain for inputs, and to take back the marketing rights to the goods they produce. If those suggestions are unpalatable to the venerable minority at the ACCC owing to misguided fears of consumer price rises, then I suggest a royalty system that is linked to agricultural production volumes that would be paid by all International Companies ie. Cargill, Monsanto, ADM, JBS Friboi, Glencore and others to the benefit of Australian farmers. Let's not fret about foreign ownership of agricultural land when already foreigners have managed to own and control all major choke points of agricultural trade.

In lamenting the depressing landscape that confronts those involved in Australian agricultural primary production my brother Ivor has a joke about rapeseed, I won't be quite so graphic. But let me leave you with a different image. The Australian farmer today is like a cow in a cattle crush. Being squeezed ever so tighter, to the point where it can no longer bellow in protest. Meanwhile it is simultaneously getting gunk (red tape, green tape, high input prices) shoved down it's throat and a fist (Glencore, Cargill, Monsanto, JBS Friboi) up it's rectum. Enough is enough.

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