

THE CHALLENGE OF RURAL LEADERSHIP COURSE – 8 NOVEMBER TO 21 NOVEMBER 2009

In November last year I had the great privilege to participate in the “Challenge of Rural Leadership” course run by the Duchy College sponsored by the Worshipful Company of Farmers. The course was held at Dartington Hall, and was a very intensive two weeks in which I was exposed to many inspirational and thought provoking presenters and challenging situations.



The course focused on identifying the skills and attributes required for effective leadership and why going forward strong leadership will be vital for Agriculture's future and success. While the attributes of good leadership was interesting it was the time spent looking at “the big picture” for agriculture and why strong leadership will be required that I took most of my take home messages from.

Personally it was an incredible opportunity to step out of the day to day issues of owner/managing a mixed farm through what has virtually become a decade of drought in Southern NSW, Australia and obtain a global big picture perspective on agriculture. The story was very positive.

The underlying theme running through the course as presented by many of the specialist speakers was that Agriculture is potentially heading into a long period of prosperity and growth. Initially, I was a little sceptical when the reasons behind this boom were things like world population growing to 9 billion in the next 30 years, loss of arable land, food security and global warming as it seems we have been hearing the “farming will be good because people have to eat theory for the last 30 years”. However, when it was highlighted that for the first time the countries predicted to experience the largest population growth are also experiencing major economic growth and will have the resources to purchase the food required the message became clearer. At the same time consumers in wealthy industrial countries are becoming a lot more discerning on the health, traceability, source and quality of their food and are starting to pay to get these boxes ticked. The rejection of GM food by consumers regardless of how ill informed this decision makes the likelihood of them embracing real Frankenstein food like test tube grown chicken very unlikely.

The problem lies as farmers are already well aware in the fact that consumers paying more for food doesn't necessarily equate to improved prices at farm gate. There is no doubt that a lot of money is being made in the Agriculture sector. Unfortunately, farmers have found themselves in most cases at the bottom of the food chain with suppliers of inputs (fertiliser, chemical, advice, finance and machinery companies) and post farm gate supply chain industry such as grain storage and handling, supermarkets, grain marketers and middle men taking the lion's share of the agricultural sectors pie.

In conclusion if this situation is going to change and grass root farmers are going to benefit from the forecasted increase in agricultural commodity prices then strong and organised leadership will be required. I believe the “Challenge of Rural Leadership” provided all of the 2009 participants with a solid platform to build on if they choose to become more involved in leadership roles within their industries and the broader Agricultural sector. I encourage all farmers to get behind and fully support the passionate individuals and organisations that take on these leadership roles. Farmers from all industries need to become unified behind strong leadership with the simple message that agriculture is the solution to many of our perceived modern day problems such as food security, the environment, carbon reduction and water and land management not the cause.

I would strongly encourage others to consider doing the course as the opportunity to challenge and analyse yourself and your beliefs, be exposed to new concepts and to make new lifetime friendships is nothing short of life changing.

Course member Andrew Bouffler, Nuffield Scholar from Lockhart, NSW, Australia