

## FOR THE UNITARIANS

### Food and fools

Thank you Susan for your gracious introduction. You may not know but I have been here before and I'm a bit concerned that they could have run out of speakers by having me again!

It's a beautiful day outside isn't it? When we meet family or friends or associates there are two main questions...the first about health and the second about the weather. Hasn't it been hot, hasn't it been cold, hasn't it been humid. Seldom in Australia do we say "hasn't been wet. I am sick of rain". Rarely do we make this observation in this the driest of all continents apart from Antarctica. If you look at the monthly rainfall figures on the Internet you will see that once again its been a poor wet season in the far north of the country....and its dry through most of the inland. If you have friends at Tamworth or Broken Hill—certainly Tamworth people will have told you how they have to carry water for their gardens and have done so for many months.

The cotton harvest is about to start in northern NSW and also in Queensland. This harvest will be down 50percent on last year..50 percent!!

What does that mean in dollars? According to one man I know in the industry Havid Anthony. He is the Boss of the company Auscott and he tells me revenue for the whole crop this season for the growing industry will be down by about 1.8 billion dollars compared with last year. The main reason is that there was very little inflow of water into dams in the north of the State this past summer. Wisely many growers did not plant cotton because of the lack of water for irrigation in the north.

By contrast there was an increase in cotton plantings this past season in the south of this State along the Murrumbidgee River. Many farmers who normally grow rice in those southern districts switched to cotton this season and for good reason—the payments are faster and you get higher returns from cotton.

Now when I worked down south in the main irrigation areas a very long time ago cotton failed....very poor yields. To-day it's a very different story...new varieties have been developed by the CSIRO using genetic

engineering techniques which do not require as much water and much fewer sprays to control insects.

In the wider community there are still concerns about genetic engineering.

But consider that that our cotton industry would be minute without these new varieties. They have allowed us to cut insect sprays by more than half. Consider too that Americans have been eating genetically engineered soybeans and corn for the past...well 25 years at least. And look at them..they do not seem to have been affected although opinions do differ about Americans!!!!

I cannot emphasise too much how important research and development like genetic engineering is for the farming industries. Australia has a unique system whereby farmers pay research levies for their crops and the Government matches those funds.

The system was put in place by the Hawke Government and it has survived 6 changes of Government. Keating, Howard, Rudd, Gillard, Rudd and Abbott.

Now I want to go back to the lack of rain-- California a major farming state is in terrible trouble because of the lack of water. Farmers there say the drought is the worst on record, with the lowest rain fall, very poor dam storage and poor ice pack. Most of the dams are below 20 percent of capacity and in the Sierra Nevada the snowpack is now at the worst ever levels--just 18 percent of normal.

During the NSW election campaign water or the lack of it or the misuse of it was a major issue where fracking is occurring for coal seam gas. One of the areas signalled out was the Liverpool Plains where Quirindi, Werris Creek and Gunnedah are major centres.

Why are those plains so important? They cover 1.8 million hectares and there is a lot of coal and coal seam gas underneath them as well as water. Whatsmore those plains have some the very best soils in the world equal to those in the Ukraine and the American States of Iowa and Illinois.

The Liverpool plains are one of the most important food bowls in the world. Worth preserving. I hope the new State Government can find a

way to preserve those lands for FOOD production forever. For our sake, our kinds sake and their kids sake...and all generations to come.

If you watch ABC television you will know that CHECKOUT...the consumer affairs programme starts again very soon. I love the ads for it. Some highlight the words SPECIALS...REDUCED SPECIALS. Was \$5.98 now \$6.00.

There has been a lot of focus by the Governments of Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott on the labelling of foodstuffs. Back in 2019 Rudd appointed Neal Blewett, who was a Minister in the Hawke Government, to recommend ways to improve labelling so that its more relevant, with accurate descriptions and highlighting those products with better nutrition qualities in line with public health priorities. The Blewett committee received 7000 submissions. Then its recommendations got lost in FSANZ (Food standards Australia and New Zealand) and most were objected to by the Australian Food and Grocery Council.

So what do we need? We want to know if the whole product is Australian or not; if not what is the origin of the constituents of the packet or tin and in what percentage. And we want to be able to read the labels. We oldies. When I was in a supermarket in Tokyo some years ago the apples had tags with a phone number on them. And when you put the number your phone up popped a picture of the people who grew the apples ...a new way to connect growers and consumers

Food and fools. What about this story. Back in 2011 Australia's top science body recommended that we develop a national food plan. We'd had innumerable national agricultural policy enquiries---Whitlam, Fraser. Howard. So now how about developing a plan embracing the whole food industry growers to consumers. Many, many consultations, a green paper, an issues paper and finally a national food plan delivered for the Gillard Government not long before the 2013 election. What did the Gillard Government do about after its launch? Forgot it. And ever since the Abbott has ignored it. I wonder how much money went into its development? How many brains developed and nurtured it. Talk Food and Fools!

Just recently I went to the launch of this book at the University of Technology.

Its simply called MEAT ...THE FUTURE. HOW CUTTING MEAT CONSUMPTION CAN FEED MILLIONS MORE. Never have I heard such passionate speakers against meat consumption....people opposed to hard hooved animals wandering our landscapes and people against the killing of meat animals for human use.

Food and fools are never short of issues.

Plenty of issues around food and fools aren't there?