

## **The peculiarity of Australian rurality and how it has shaped national agricultural and environmental policies**

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Australia is a global exception in the way it treats agriculture and the environment. Its policy settings embrace market rationalities to a far greater degree than any other developed nation, excepting its Antipodean neighbour, New Zealand. This paper argues that the embrace of market rationality in Australian rurality is a product of the historical peculiarity under which it evolved. British-led invasion and settlement of the Australian continent coincided with the rapid transformation of Britain into an urban industrial society demanding food imports. Rural spaces in the Australian colonies hence developed not through peasant systems tailored to local markets, but as export platforms for the British working classes. Making this potential a reality was expedited through frontier violence that relieved land of its Indigenous owners, hence creating for farmers and pastoralists a blank slate from which they could extract income. Hence, the Australian policy imagination has come to see the rural as primarily a site for profit-making, devoid of the messiness of prior claims, past histories, and social traditions in need of preservation. In the 1980s, buoyed by the global surge of neoliberalism, Australian rural policy-makers began to interpret the tabula rasa character of Australian rurality as a template for the world. From 1986, agricultural production and trade policies premised on single desk mercantilism were steadily replaced by hand's off neoliberalism. This was undertaken in the expectation of international free trade in agriculture, managed by the WTO. Meanwhile, from the mid-1990s, environmental resources, notably water, were commoditised and managed by the market. Likewise, the expectation was that Australia would show the world the merits of market-based environmental management, and inspire waves of policy reforms emulating the Australian model. Several decades on, 'the global rural' remains a more complex set of spaces than anticipated in the imaginaries of Australian policy makers. It is timely that Australian rural policies be understood not as vanguard models for the world, but as the outcome of historical peculiarities that may not be quite relevant to other national contexts.

### **Bio**

Bill Pritchard is a Professor in Human Geography specialising in agriculture, food and rural places. He is interested in the ways that global and local processes are transforming places, industries and people's lives. He remains a skeptical internationalist - believing in the promise of a better world but frustrated by the obstacles that beset this objective. Bill has undertaken research for a number of leading national and international organisations, and his work is cited widely within professional circles. He is an author of three books, an editor of a further four, and has published around 50 refereed articles and chapters. He has been engaged in several major consulting research projects, and given over 50 conference presentations. Dr Pritchard carries with him a geographer's passion to understand our world. His philosophy is to eschew abstract modelling in favour of approaches which seek to appraise how places and economies are forged through the clutter of geographical circumstance, historical process, and institutional practice. In his own life, by way of contrast, he tries to avoid as much clutter as possible with interests in bush and urban walking, falling asleep on beaches on warm days, kayaking on Sydney Harbour, and taking an entire day to read the paper.