

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RURAL INDUSTRIES RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
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Mr Nicholas Ford
Productivity Commission
Australian Federal Government
Canberra ACT

Dear Mr Ford -

Please accept my submission supporting the importance of the RIRDC, the only remaining RDC which includes social and cultural research activities within its portfolio.

Only yesterday I completed writing a report for RIRDC entitled *Resilience and Innovation in Indigenous Communities* [to be published early in 2011]. This research project interrogated exactly what resilience and innovations are in society – indigenous and western – and the results have important implications as to Australia's capacity to survive in the event of a serious event or catastrophe. Technology will probably cause it but it will not save us; practical knowledge and self-reliance will.

Indigenous Australians are the longest continuing and surviving group of people with history more than 60,000 years old. As acknowledged by many anthropologists, this is an extraordinary achievement especially considering there has been at least one maximal Ice Age during this time. No other race of people can claim this continuity.

The ability and capacities to achieve this hasn't been due to object-based innovations, often known as technologies. Aboriginal cultural and social structures – laws and intellect, customs and spirituality – have provided the enduring framework; these are known as subject-based innovations and are the realm of qualitative societal structures.

The Productivity Commission's focus on measuring commercial outcomes of innovations [object-based technologies] represents an unrealistic and narrow understanding of what constitutes society. Capacity, be it individual, organisational, government, volunteer or corporate, does not solely rely on technology for its output.

Individual and collective intellectual contributions, especially in rural and regional Australia, are the foundations and nourishment of dynamic rural communities – the only technology used may be a kettle to boil for smoko and make the tea for the gathering.

Friendships and emotions, joint experiences and ideas are the glues and connections of vital importance and the research projects RIRDC has initiated over the past ten years are of immense importance to ensuring regional and rural Australia remain diverse, active and dynamic.

May I ask – do you eat?

Do you wonder where your food comes from, who grows it and how? Do you care? Do you take any personal responsibility for what you choose to put into your mouth for your three meals EVERY day?

I sincerely hope you do as your decisions have a direct impact on the landscapes and our biodiversity – either positive or negative. Your food decisions can assist in supporting local regional economies or contribute to the declining terms of trade for Australian farmers.

If you eat foods other than beef, wheat, dairy, fruit and vegetables, you are relying on smaller-scale farmers who provide the more niche products; these are the artisanal farmers and producers who rely on traditional knowledge and skills – not technology – to produce nourishing foods which they are proud to put their brands on. If you want to continue enjoying such products, please understand that from an 'economic'

perspective, they may not be as 'productive' as an industrialised entity but the value of their outputs go far beyond what can be measured in dollars and cents. How do you put a value on the enjoyment you derive?

Productivity is so much more than economic rationale and monetary measurements. A standard of living is not the same as the quality of life and this is where the Terms of Reference for the Productivity Commission are lacking. Not everything has a monetary value but social and cultural values are critical to the quality of life and have little to do with technology.

Human speech comes freely; can it be made more 'productive'? Does it need to be? Can you put a monetary value on human speech? No? Well if the Productivity Commission cannot, perhaps it has no value.

I use this analogy to argue the importance of RIRDC to Australia and especially for the rural, regional and agricultural sectors. My recommendation is to quadruple the funding for the organisation; at present it has an annual budget of \$25 million. In comparison to what the government has contributed to object-based innovations research, [especially genetic engineering with dubious benefits to society but many for the proponents], this is a paltry amount.

Please explain to me how the Productivity Commission values collective wisdom, personal experience gained from living eight decades, a family sitting together at the dinner table, or cultural knowledge tested and practised for more than 60,000 years? How does the Productivity Commission place a monetary value on a cheese-maker's skill and intuition; on the innate knowledge of a stockwoman who has been working with cattle for 50 years; of a medicine man who has been trained in traditional law? If the Productivity Commission is unable to put a monetary value on these skills and knowledge, does this mean they are worthless?

Is fresh air and clean water, bird songs and ecosystem services of little or no value as they do not have a dollar value attached to them? Is the laughter of a child lacking value? Is the capacity of a friend to comfort another in a time of crisis worthless? Are the myriads of social and cultural values a waste of time and space as they do not 'contribute' to or are measured in the Gross National Product?

This is the crux of the issue being discussed.

Margaret Thatcher was wrong when she said '*There is no society; there is only the economy*'.

Mr Ford – you are part of society and you benefit from the extrinsic manifestations of our diverse, colourful, enriching, creative capacities. These are the elements which RIRDC supports plus nurturing innovations in new ways of thinking and doing; there may not be a commercial outcome from that but the contribution is nevertheless profound and valuable.

To conclude, I reiterate my profound and undying support for RIRDC and the breadth and depth of resourcefulness they provide to the quality of life from which all Australians benefit.

Please remember this the next time you enjoy a mouthful of boutique olives, hand-made cheese and a glass of small vineyard wine.

Yours sincerely

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