



SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE: RURAL POVERTY
15 February 1996

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders): This report was initiated when parts of Eyre Peninsula had suffered from a series of exceptional circumstances over a long period. In addition to adverse grain and wool prices on the world markets and high interest rates, many farmers had had several years of drought, coupled with frosts, unseasonal rains at Christmas and, to cap it all off, a mouse plague. Few people in the city have experienced a mouse plague and, seeing the pictures on television, although disgusting enough, give little idea of the revulsion felt when they are discovered in beds and clothing and nestling in linen cupboards, or the revulsion of the smell that pervades everything. I was born and bred on Eyre Peninsula and I do not believe that I have experienced morale in some regions being so low. However, I am pleased to report that in 1995 we experienced an excellent season over most of Eyre Peninsula with good grain prices and better wool prices.

Country people are hardy, and they bounce back quickly. There is a great feeling of optimism about. That has been buoyed by the State Government's rural arterial road program. Roads are very important in the country, and the start of the Kimba-Cleve road and, more recently, the Lock- Elliston road have given a great lift to these areas as tangible benefits of having a Liberal Government in power in the State. A Federal Liberal Government after 2 March will be an added bonus. However, the weather and the prices are fickle and the improved optimism must not be an excuse for not taking heed of this report and its recommendations, nor those of a strategic task force which focuses particularly on Upper Eyre Peninsula.

There is still a crisis in most country regions of South Australia. The prices, although better, in real terms are still not up to the prices in the past. When I married 28 years ago a bale of hay sold for about \$2; a bale of similar quality hay today would fetch only around the same price. In real terms this should now be at least \$14. As one farmer put it to me, 'We used to be considered the landed gentry and now we are more like peasant farmers.' One farm would often support two or more families with additional working men at the busy times.

Nowadays, the wife is often the labourer or is out earning additional money off the farm. Quite young children can be found driving equipment—not as we did, to help feed the sheep during the holidays, but as a serious part of the farm's survival. There are major stresses and strains on communities as football teams are reduced, as shops, schools, businesses and clubs are closed and as people move away. Also, there is the additional burden of Government workers being withdrawn as our Government copes with the huge State debt we inherited from the former Labor Government and, of course, along with the Government workers go their families. Often these people have become community leaders in sport or cultural pursuits. They have brought into these communities their knowledge and training gained from the cities. It is difficult for people who have not lived in small towns to appreciate the complexity of the social fabric and how interdependent everything is.

As illustrated by this report, urgent action is needed to address some of the disadvantages suffered by rural people before the deterioration goes any further. Country people realise that, due to the isolation and sparse population density, it is not economical to provide the same level of services, but there are alternative strategies that can be implemented: these need to be put in place.

It is obvious from the report that reducing access to Government services compounds the isolation factors for rural people considerably, and should be avoided where possible. I support the committee's recommendation that all Government departments, both State and Federal, should have toll-free telephone numbers for rural callers. It is noted that many individuals in the country have low incomes and that this is a significant deterrent to accessing Government services. Telephones will play an extremely important part in the future. I

support the recommendation that telephone services for rural callers must then provide a level of service compatible with face-to-face services, and that Government personnel be multiskilled in being able to answer and respond to country issues appropriately, that is, with confidentiality, with knowledge and with empathy and understanding. There is no point in providing services if, as often happens, people are not aware of them. The updating of the *Country Book* and the promotion of the Country Link services and the *Rural Book* by the Commonwealth and primary industry departments have rightly been supported.

Many recommendations of the committee suggest that a different method of delivery of services will help, for example, in the area of education. Education is highly valued by rural people. The Eyre Peninsula has experienced a decrease in the offering of secondary school subjects over the past few years. A new model has been developed by officers of the Department for Education and Children's Services locally, and it is currently with the Minister.

The committee proposes a number of alternative ways in which more face-to-face delivery of subjects can be achieved by using state-of-the art technology in distance education delivery, thus providing a more equitable way for students on the Eyre Peninsula and across the rest of the State to be educated. Staffing levels need to be guaranteed for more than one year, enabling families to plan the courses for their students with the knowledge that the subjects are available over a greater period of time. Many parents, at great cost, decide to send their children to school in Adelaide to ensure they have the subjects of their choice. This is a great cost, not only to the parents but also to the community and needs to be avoided where possible. As it is, tertiary education is often available only in the city and many parents cannot afford to send their children. In both cases, parents often decide to move the whole family.

The Chairman of this inquiry comments on the lack of quantifiable data and the difficulty in defining exactly what is poverty in rural areas, or even what is 'rural' or 'country'. The job the committee took on was indeed mammoth. The primary production problems and the social problems, particularly relating to isolation and the effects on health and education services, would take years to analyse fully. I have touched on very few.

I support the proactive, differential treatment of rural communities that helps to ensure the social justice and more equitable access to services that is at the heart of many of the recommendations of the committee. Country areas are different and must be treated differently. Meanwhile, we will continue to seek increasing population and more profitability by diversifying, value adding and promoting new industries. I commend the committee on producing such an excellent report in such a short time with limited resources.