

# Populating the country to help communities survive

**A** MAJOR issue confronting rural people is the population decrease in their communities as people drift towards the coast and towards urban areas.

This population loss makes rural business more difficult; sustainability a greater challenge; it reduces services such as health and education; and it impoverishes the social life we once had around community centres and sporting clubs.

In short, it reduces the diversity of experience and recreation that can be found in rural communities.

This situation is made worse by the announcement recently of a spate of food production factories shutting down and shedding staff.

I read recently that since 1992, most rural regions in Australia have lost population to larger cities and coastal towns and some shires, for example Buloke in Victoria's Mallee and Bourke



**COMMENT by  
SIMON LIVINGSTONE**

in NSW, have lost 27 per cent and 30pc of their populations respectively, since 1992. Apart from some mining areas and some regional towns that are dormitories for other urban centres, there has been a steady drift away from rural areas.

These are serious statistics and issues for us to deal with as a nation and as rural communities.

Dr Peter Smith, Principal Research Associate at the Centre for the Study of Rural Australia

“These are serious statistics and issues for us to deal with as a nation and as rural communities”

has taken some heart when he said:

“There are signs at last of planning interest in these matters at State and Federal Government levels.

“The Victorian State Government has, for example, recognised that Melbourne's growth and sprawl can't be allowed to continue forever and they have moved towards a policy of encouraging people to live in regional towns.

“Premier Denis Napthine has said Plan Melbourne is designed to develop a number of cities throughout Victoria, rather than just allowing Melbourne to grow.

This is basically good news for rural areas, although the outcome is likely to be a continued decline in small local towns and growth in larger regional areas.

“However, good services and facilities in large regional towns in Victoria is a good deal better than having them mainly housed in Melbourne.”

At Federal Government level there are also indications of an interest in ensuring rural economies have an opportunity to grow through economic management that is not as city-centric as we may have experienced over the last several years.

Time will tell if these policy directions help rural communities and towns to survive as we move into what is believed to be a new set of opportunities for agriculture in the 21st century.

Crucial to this growth though, is going to be our ability to bring real business and employment opportunities to the bush; and attractive and stable careers that will attract young people to stay in rural and regional areas. Also crucial is to ensure that we have education and training programs and institutions that can provide the programs needed to support rural work.

There is much we need to do if we are to prevent population decline in rural areas continuing to reach a tipping point such that more and more communities become less and less viable.

■ **Dr Simon Livingstone is principal of Marcus Oldham College in Geelong**