

A Rejoinder to Godden (1995) and Searston (1995)

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When Ted Coladarci, *JRRE* editor, called me to say he had just received a very lengthy response to "Beyond the Conventional Wisdom: Rural Development as if Australia's Rural People and Communities Really Mattered" (Sher & Sher, 1994), I was pleased. When he told me it had been written by an agricultural economist at the University of Sydney, my sense of pleasurable anticipation increased. After all, my wife (Katrina) and I wrote this paper to encourage discussion of the issues involved—and now an academic from a respected institution had made the effort to write much more than a brief reply.

After reading David Godden's manuscript (Godden, 1995), however, we were left with an abiding sense of disappointment and dismay. This was not the reasoned analysis we had expected. Our arguments had been so willfully misunderstood, our words so blatantly twisted, and our recommendations so cavalierly dismissed that we tried to imagine what had prompted this relentless attack. It read like the kind of "critique" one might have expected of someone with a personal grudge against us, or of an unscrupulous politician attempting to score points off an opponent, or of a graduate student writing a smart-aleck parody of academic debate. Yet, Godden fits none of these categories.

Out of curiosity, I called him to ask what inspired him to write this piece. I couldn't reach him on my first attempt because he was out playing cricket. This struck me as ironic, given that the way he dealt with our paper was decidedly "not cricket" (i.e., not fair or honorable). When I did speak with him later, he was perfectly civil and told me it simply was the Australian style to be more "vigorous" in debates than Americans. However, substituting vigor for rigor is not characteristic of good academics in any society.

It would take another lengthy paper to refute every cheap shot Godden takes—and frankly, doing so would only accord his paper a degree of credibility it doesn't merit. Four quick points will suffice. First, before the body of his critique starts, Godden suggests we would label him a parasite because he is based in Sydney. He even surrounds the word parasite with quotation marks, as if we actually had used this term in this context. Yet, nowhere in

our paper do we label urban dwellers "parasites." Arguing (as we do) that national policymakers have not treated rural people as well as they deserve is hardly the same as denigrating urban people (which we never do).

Second, Godden makes a big deal (on more than one occasion) about our comment—made in the context of describing the *extensive* literature review we carried out (yielding citations of 90 relevant references in our article)—that we couldn't find a single source that captured the "big picture" of rural Australia or of national policy in relation to rural Australia. He twists our point about the lack of *even* one comprehensive analysis into a mini-diatribes about how odd it is that we only searched for one source. Godden goes on: "Indeed, to rely on such a single source would imply (perhaps unwitting) acceptance of a previous author's own biases and world view, and would be a dangerous practice for an analyst to adopt" (p. 46).

Third, Godden repeatedly criticizes—as ahistorical, unsubstantiated, and overblown—our observation that, at the national level, rural policy is basically subsumed under agricultural policy. Leaving aside the evidence we cited in our article, Godden's effort to discredit us only underscores the validity of our original point. On page 46, for example, he tries to refute our point by referring to four national major studies done between 1944 and 1982. Yet, he acknowledges that the first study "essentially focussed on farm matters," the second was "predominantly concerned with agricultural policy," the third was "again predominantly concerned with agricultural issues," and the fourth had a "narrow focus of its terms of reference on agricultural industries." We could hardly have made our point better ourselves!

Fourth, Godden often resorts to one of the oldest, and lamest, tricks from the standard bag of academic criticism: He chastises our report for failing to be something it never purported to be in the first place. Thus, the article is skewered for not fully developing the historical context, although we never suggested we were writing a history of rural development or rural policy. He laments our lack of attention to state policies, even given our express intention to focus on the national level. And, all too predictably, he accuses us of making "sweeping generalizations," as if a single article addressing a vast topic could possibly avoid doing so.

In the final analysis, what really seems to gall Godden about our article is that *we* wrote it. He appears to labor

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under the impression we are a couple of Yank tourists who stopped just long enough in Australia to offer hasty, baseless, and uninvited opinions. I plead guilty to being American, but one who has taken an active professional interest in Australian rural affairs for more than 15 years (beginning when Australia actively participated in two international projects on rural education and development that I directed for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). I also have had the privilege of visiting and working on and off over the past 10 years in the rural areas of all but one state, as well as in the Northern Territory.

As for Katrina, her credentials include not only being a true blue Aussie, but also one who worked for many years in rural Australia as a farmhand, as a packer in an abattoir, on the production line in a fruit canning factory, and as a teacher. Her experience as the head of an innovative, federally-funded teacher education and support program based in the South Australian outback—a program through which she worked closely with Aboriginal schools—makes Godden's accusations of racial ignorance and insensitivity the most offensive of his interpretive errors.

And finally, I wish to remind readers of two facts. First, we did not dream up the idea of writing this article on our own. Rather, Katrina was commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE) to do this work, with my assistance. Second, our article was carefully reviewed—and approved as factually accurate and as a reasonable, if controversial, interpretation—both by a cross-section of the staff of DPIE's Rural Division and by two knowledgeable academic reviewers in rural Australia. Thus, Godden's belief that we got virtually everything wrong is not one shared by a number of his colleagues.

Despite all of the above, we agree with several of Godden's points. He is right that the historical development of rural policy and rural communities is an important topic. He is right that state by state reviews of rural development policies and actions would be a valuable piece of analysis. He is right to point out the tension between the impulse to treat everyone *equally* regardless of where they live and the desire to treat them all *equitably* by taking into account the unique circumstances and conditions of the places in which they live and work. He is right that, at a certain level of generality, there are commonalities between the goals of development policy for both urban and rural people. And he is right in implicitly suggesting that a comprehensive book substantiating every assertion made

about rural Australia and rural policy would have greater academic integrity than our admittedly broad-brush article.

Godden obviously has passion for these issues—and no lack of vigor! To date, however, he has not made any substantial contribution to the published literature on rural policy and development in Australia. Instead of writing more critiques like this one, he might channel his prodigious energy in more positive directions—such as producing a book that fills in the gaps he correctly identifies within “Beyond the Conventional Wisdom.”

We have no particular rejoinder to make regarding Ivan Searston's reply to our article (Searston, 1995). It arrived months after Godden's piece and provided a welcome contrast in both style and substance. Searston uses this opportunity not to score points in some imagined academic game, but, rather, to remind us of the distinctions between “rural” and “regional” Australia and to helpfully analyze these distinctions.

Searston's criticism of our article—that we neglect to deal with either the reality or the implications of this rural/regional distinction in national policy—is right on target. He is gracious in noting that the major reports triggering the new national policies appeared after we had completed our article. However, we knew that regional development policies and programs had been undertaken by the Government in past decades (with mixed results). We also knew that a new wave of regionally-oriented reports and policies were in the works when we wrote our piece. Our lack of attention to this matter was an unfortunate error and omission on our part. We are grateful Searston took the time to correct our error and to present the missing analysis himself. We hope he will write more extensively on this important topic while there still is time to help shape the debate and inform the action.

References

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