

## Australia Dossier by Robert Barwick

### Free trade slashes agriculture

*Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer is leading the charge for the policies which are destroying Australian farmers.*

In mid-April, desperate pork producers across the country began shooting their stock, as the market collapsed to its lowest level in 30 years. Producers were hit with pork prices ranging from \$1.28 to \$1.70 per kilogram, against production costs of \$2 per kg. An average piggery of 100 sows, with a weekly production of 32 pigs, is now faced with a loss of \$35 per pig, or \$1,120 per week. On April 17, Pork Council of Australia (PCA) head Brian Ramsey charged that “the industry situation is deteriorating rapidly.”

Australia’s pork producers, and the PCA, unanimously lay the blame for the crisis on cheap imports. According to the PCA, current prices have been caused by the record imports in 1997 of more than 11,000 tons, which drove down prices before Christmas, prices which have continued to fall. They are also angry at the federal government, especially Deputy Prime Minister and Trade Minister Tim Fischer and Primary Industries Minister John Anderson, both farmers, who have pushed the free-trade policies responsible for the present plight. Glenn Baker, general manager of the Queensland-based Monto Pork Enterprise, bitterly told the May 8 Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, “The politicians just don’t want to know about the damage that has been inflicted on this industry by cheap imports.”

In an April 30 memo to the pork industry, PCA head Ramsey was blunt in his assessment of a recent meeting with Fischer: “The message from Mr. Fischer to producers facing financial ruin was: ‘The pork industry has had

25 years to get its act together, so don’t blame us for your problems.’ ”

Meanwhile, Primary Industries Minister Anderson brazenly endeavored to explain the inexplicable logic of free trade in the April 1998 *Australian Pork Newspaper*. “Australia is dependent on overseas markets for the prosperity of our farm sector,” he wrote. “If we retreat to Fortress Australia and erect protectionist walls, we are hardly going to get a good hearing from our trading partners.”

In fact, it is some of Fischer’s own “trading partners,” in particular those in the Cairns Group, a body of 15 nations devoted to global free trade in agriculture, who are helping to destroy Australian agriculture.

The Cairns Group was first convened by Australia in Cairns, North Queensland, in 1986, to spearhead free-trade initiatives at the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the predecessor to the World Trade Organization. It is the main vehicle used by Fischer and Anderson to peddle free trade globally. Fischer chaired the latest Cairns Group meeting in Sydney on April 2 and 3, which was hosted by those other champions of rural industry destruction: the National Farmers Federation, a group of free trade lunatics founded by Australia’s rural oligarchy. In a speech to the forum, Fischer lobbied strongly for even more free trade, as soon as possible, and claimed that the “biggest single failure on all sides of Australian politics” in the past 30 years was the failure to convince the people that free trade was a “win-win” situation.

It is not only pork producers who are being decimated by free trade. Australia’s citrus industry is also in its death throes, after being swamped with cheap orange juice concentrate imports from Brazil. In 1997, growers pulled out or burnt almost 1 million citrus trees as they deserted the industry, after being offered only \$30 a ton instead of the \$200 per ton they expected, and despite the fact that Australians consume more orange juice than the nation’s growers can produce.

The free traders are also on a crusade to eliminate all quarantine rules, which have been crucial to keeping Australian agriculture relatively disease-free. Now targetted is Australia’s pristine salmon industry, which, until now, has been protected by strict rules banning any disease-ridden foreign imports. Following an appeal from Canada to the WTO, the quarantine law is set to be scrapped as an unfair “non-tariff barrier.” A similar decision risks introducing the devastating Newcastle Disease to Australia’s clean poultry industry. In the cases of pork, citrus, and salmon, the threatening imports are coming from Fischer’s Cairns Group buddies, Canada and Brazil.

Indicative of the growing discontent caused by Fischer’s free trade policies, the long-serving Member of Parliament is being challenged in his local election district of Farrer in southern New South Wales in the next federal election, by a fellow farmer, Alan Boyd. Boyd is a candidate for the Citizens Electoral Council, the Australian co-thinkers of Lyndon LaRouche. “I am running against Tim Fischer because of his free trade policies,” Boyd told *EIR*. “There is not a ‘level playing field,’ and Fischer knows it. He is supposed to be our Trade Minister, but instead of looking after the Australian farmer, he is looking after the interests of free trade cartels.”