



## ONE MORE NAIL

### *Chapter Five*

## **The Northern Territory**

During the winter recess of 1959, my first in parliament, I was appointed as a member of the Forster Committee under the chairmanship of Professor Carl Forster, the Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture at Melbourne University. The other member was Dr Don Williams of the extension side of the C.S.I.R.O. Our task was to draw up a blue print for the development of an agricultural system in the Northern Territory. The main reason for interest in this question was some recent work done by the C.S.I.R.O. which demonstrated that peanuts could be successfully grown in the Katherine district where the rainfall is about 35 inches, with most of it falling between November and March. As is usual in Australia, as soon as some work has been done showing some hope for agricultural development, enthusiastic people began to see visions of the desert blossoming as the rose and the development of closer settlement schemes under the wise guidance of a beneficent government. The unfortunate fact that almost all such schemes turn out to be failures had not escaped the notice of the government so we were appointed to run a ruler over the enthusiastic reports and to advise the government as to how they should handle their problem.

It was an interesting assignment. One of the first things that had to be established was the technique and cost of clearing the rather thin scrub from the land. This clearly was the first step if traditional farming was to proceed. So I arranged with my brother Bill from Kangaroo Island, who had cleared more country than was really decent, to come up with me during January and February 1960. With the co-operation of the Commonwealth Department of Works we obtained the use of two Caterpillar D 8s, two good drivers and a long length of anchor chain, and we set to work to clear three areas of country, one at Katherine, one further north of the Daly River road and the third near Darwin. It was interesting work. Sometimes an aircraft would fly over very fast and very high, and I would make wistful remarks that it probably contained Members of Parliament from Canberra who were busy composing speeches telling the world how to develop the North.

The Northern Territory is covered with the bleached bones of past failures. All the crops at which we looked had been tried before, sometimes with infinite effort and supreme courage. The most recent then about to be chalked up was rice growing. A group of Americans had been encouraged by the flatness and fertility of the coastal plains country about 40 miles from Darwin where the rainfall was about 50 inches, to grow rice there. With the rashness and the enthusiasm typical of the Territory, they rushed in and developed far too much country the first year, only to find that the water in the Adelaide River was salt at the time of the year that they needed fresh water for irrigation. The rest of the time, when they didn't need it, the water was fresh. Fortunately they were able to blame the failure of the project on to the magpie geese who suddenly appeared in large numbers and ruined the little bit of rice that survived the salt water.

But the succession of failures continued. The next big one was at Tipperary, about half way between Katherine and Darwin. This time the great crop was going to be grain sorghum, which was to be grown by the thousands of acres. But you didn't need to have a degree in agriculture to see that you could not treat soils with such slopes and with such a concentrated summer rainfall, in the way they had programmed without running into weed and soil erosion problems

that would quickly bring the scheme to an abrupt conclusion. In both of these projects Sir William Gunn had a great influence.

I became sceptical of the Tipperary project when I heard that they had sent samples of the soil from the area to the U.S.A. for analysis. This seemed to indicate that the Americans who were financing the scheme didn't have much idea of Australian farming. And I remember seeing their big new "Rome" plough which was a huge machine without any ability to ride over the stumps as have our Australian stump jump ploughs. So I told them that they would break their ploughs in pieces and would shortly be scouring the country looking for Shearer Majestic ploughs. This indeed happened and you didn't need a degree in engineering to see it coming.

The next big project to fall flat on its face was the big sorghum and cattle fattening scheme at Willeroo, between Katherine and the Victoria River. Here again the programme, though exciting on paper, depended on flogging the guts out of the country. Besides, when they were about ready to sell their first lot of cattle, the bottom had dropped out of the cattle market. But people got very cross with me when I said that it would inevitably fail.

To go back to peanut growing, it was clear that the area at Katherine could grow peanuts — not as well as at Kingaroy in Queensland but well enough. But it didn't take long to find that the Kingaroy growers had a favoured position in the peanut world. I will not go into a technical explanation as to how this happened but it centred around the fact that the Kingaroy growers could import duty free peanut oil to mix with their home produced oil, and were so able to undersell the imported duty paid oil price. And as the Minister of Primary Industry in Canberra lived at Kingaroy, it was clear that the favoured position of the Queensland growers was not likely to suddenly disappear. So we had to do all our costing on the N.T. peanut scheme on the basis of an export parity price for peanut oil.

The other part of the plan was to use the peanut meal, left after the oil had been taken out, to feed cattle. In the top end of the N.T. where the wet is so wet and the dry is so dry, cattle on native pasture gain weight during the wet and lose most of it during the succeeding dry because the dry season pasture is lacking in protein. So it didn't take a man of genius to see that, if you could feed a protein-rich supplement such as peanut meal to cattle being run on native pasture, then the cattle should gain weight steadily instead of living on beef steak during the dry as is their wont. So a series of experiments were set up by the C.S.I.R.O. and indeed everything worked out splendidly; the cattle gained weight on native pasture during the wet and, when fed peanut meal supplement during the dry, they continued to gain weight. The only trouble was that the more peanut meal they ate the more money we lost because we found that we just could not produce peanut meal at a price cheap enough to make any money out of growing peanuts.

As you can imagine, this made everybody hate us because Australians in general are always attracted to closer settlement schemes. But the report did a lot of good because it pointed out the pitfalls. Most Territorians knowledgeable in agriculture still look at the Forster report for guidance on agricultural development.

When we were on this N.T. work we had the opportunity to have a close look at the Ord River irrigation scheme. Here much basic research had been done by the Commonwealth and the West Australian governments. Again it had been demonstrated that cotton and other crops could be grown but again the trouble was to make money out of them. The basic problem with cotton in this area was that, because the Ord is in a subtropical area, the hosts of pests of the common plant grow their naturally. This means that you get build-up of insect pests that make cotton growing on the Ord more expensive than in other parts of Australia.

I tried to point this out to the government before they committed themselves to building the big dam on the Ord, but there was an election looming and at each election I can feel a dam coming on. We may not know what to do with the water we store in these dams or whether we will have to ask the taxpayer to subsidise the crops we grow with the stored water, but building dams makes us feel better somehow. And the opening ceremony offers a marvellous opportunity for eloquence and phrases like “the desert shall blossom as the rose” come bubbling out of the officiating statesman. The only drawback is the near certainty that the poor farmers who will be induced to go there will probably go broke but that never seems to worry statesmen kicking with the popular wind behind them.

I do not think Australians should feel guilty about what are called “our great open spaces.” In most cases these spaces are empty because they are too rough and touch to handle. The N.T. may look enticing on the map, but on the ground it bristles with problems that daunt people who know agriculture. I have seen undeveloped country in the middle of India and Sri Lanka which, if it was in Australia, would have been cleared years ago. But we have a guilty feeling about undeveloped land, as if we were squatting on country which other people would have used if it was theirs, but this feeling is seldom justified.

There is one golden rule we should always remember when developing land and that is never to let the government near it. It is true that governments mean well but they almost always end up doing badly. And it is also about time we stopped worshipping at the closer settlement shrine, whether it is the government running it or private enterprise. It is almost always better to let development take place naturally.