CHAPTER 5: MANAGING RISK?: SOCIAL POLICY RESPONSES IN TIME OF DROUGHT

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It should be a natural disaster, you can’t get any more natural. It is like someone up there turned the tap off (Female grazier, CQ).

A drought is only a drought if it is out of your control … if it’s total out of your control, [then] yes, there should be some assistance (Female wheat/sheep farmer, NSW).

1. Introduction

Drought is integral to the Australian identity and lived experience. Our historical and cultural understandings as a nation about what we mean by a natural disaster have always included drought. It would be uncommon to hear ordinary people—even those living in cities—talking about drought as something that could be managed. Yet, despite this broader societal acceptance of drought as disaster, the fact is that since the late 1980s, Australian policies have officially not recognised drought as a natural disaster, thereby exposing a policy paradox.

This paradox of non-disaster also enables a re-conceptualisation of the way in which drought in Australia has now been framed as a risk management issue, one which ‘fits’ with a self-reliance ideology (see Higgins 2001). Drought is now no longer viewed as an external force, one that cannot be controlled. It is, instead, viewed—certainly in policy and government management—as an internal farm matter, one that should be anticipated for, then controlled and managed, and therefore is something that becomes the responsibility of the individual farmer and the whole family to deal with. This chapter suggests that if drought impact is not viewed as a collective matter but rather one left to individuals to resolve, it thereby follows that a building of community capacity as a response becomes more difficult.

In this sense, policies responding to drought reflect the overarching neo-liberal philosophy that has underpinned Australian governments (and those in western nations generally) of all political persuasions since the mid 1970s. Responses to drought in Australia just took a little longer to get caught up in this market driven perspective, but since the late 1980s, as this chapter shows, the transition from disaster to managed risk has challenged the way in which those affected by drought have been dealt with, as well as challenging their own sense of identity in the face of ongoing drought events. The
impacts of the changes to policy in the 1980s were keenly felt in the drought of the subsequent decade.

This chapter takes a historical perspective by tracking the changes in social policy responses to the Australian drought of the 1990s and suggests that the ‘move’ to self-reliance created a dichotomy between policy development (urban) and policy implementation (rural) and a confusion as to service delivery responsibilities particularly in the light of the public/private provider split. Evidence gathered during the 1990s drought from farm families in New South Wales and Queensland explores the transition from ‘disaster’ to ‘managed risk’ in more detail. The chapter begins by establishing the policy and environmental context in which the move from disaster to managed risk was promulgated. It then briefly describes the research project undertaken in the 1990s, from which evidence as to the impact of changes in social policies was drawn. These impacts are then discussed, drawing on the comments from our respondents, as well as from statistical data. The paper concludes with an analysis of the long-term implications of policy decisions made in the 1990s for the current drought and future droughts.

2. A political context

Pinker (1973) writes that the ‘study of social welfare is a study of human nature in a political context’ (p211). Nowhere is this in clearer evidence than in an analysis of the social policy responses to drought in Australia in the past two decades. The changes to social policy towards a neo-liberalist framework commenced in Australia in the early 1980s with a series of Federal government reviews of community services. These marked the move to a market model, one more corporatised in its practice. This change also marked a decided shift in the relationships between the three tiers of Australian government—Federal, State and local. In the 1990s, Federal governments adopted an increasingly ‘hands off’ approach to service delivery, while retaining their benchmarking and funding role. Increasingly, in rural and remote communities, Federal representation was withdrawn, and State governments were left with the responsibility for a ‘presence’, particularly in the large regional centres. This transition accelerated after the Federal election in March 1996, when the conservative Liberal-National Party Coalition was elected, despite one of its members being a party that traditionally represented the ‘bush’ constituency.

Pinker suggested that while social welfare in a western industrialised context derived essentially from ‘collectivist ideologies’, the tendency to a neo-liberal, market dominated view of self-help and individualism stresses a difference in the conceptualisation of citizenship. For some, he writes, ‘citizenship is enhanced and extended by the existence and use of social services. For others, citizenship is debased by reliance upon such aid’ (Pinker 1973, p201).

For the citizens of rural Australia, the paradigm shift to ‘risk’ did indeed touch on issues of identity, community, citizenship and their place in society. The legacy of this transition, as Hancock suggests, ‘privileges the market over the social, and [puts]