

**Worshipful Company of Farmers Duchy of Cornwall Challenge of Rural
Leadership course - Dartington Hall, Devon, January 2020
By Paul Bethune, 2004 Victorian Nuffield Scholar**

An Excellent English Adventure (Except for the weather !!!)

With thanks to Nuffield Australia, The Worshipful Company of Farmers, Itravel Griffith, the Commonwealth Bank and my extraordinary better half Sally Bethune.



The basic concept of the course is training people how to or to be leaders in the agricultural sector whether that be in their own business or in the wider industry. A shorthand version of the course and some key messages from my excellent course, go like this.

Key Messages

The most important rule is to look after yourself first, not in a selfish way but to recognise that your decision making is clearly affected by state of mind and general health. Being mindful of your own strengths and limitations will give you the best opportunity to look after others and in turn to lead your family and community.

Surround yourself with quality people, build good culture and relationships in your family, networks, organization, nothing else will have such a big effect on outcomes. The leader also needs their own network of people to bounce strategic ideas off and its usually better if there is a balance of this so that some comes from within regular circles but crucially some external mentoring of the leadership as well.

Take time to be looking strategically at whatever you are doing and don't get lost in the detail and the doing, always have the ability to step back and look at the broader landscape.

Leadership can come in many forms from having, giving clear vision or direction, personally taking on responsibility for the most difficult issues, through to empathy and abandonment, the trick is to know which one or which combination to use at a certain time.

We learnt a lot of adaptive tools for critical analysis such as considering the other point of view, mind mapping, managing difficult conversations, change management, communication strategies and lots of others, sometimes when you are trying to be strategic having the right framework tools can be of help to get you going in the right direction and then formalizing that thinking.

That is a brief summary of the course content but sometimes I think the better question rather than what did you learn is what are you going to do with it?

The answer is its early days but the broad themes I am taking onboard are highlighted below.

I've had a few trips to the UK and on this occasion most farmers I talked to over in the UK were going OK, last time I went they were a mess, all going broke, this time after the usual farmer rant about how bad things are, they said we actually we've got a bit of cash at the moment or we are about to do this capital project, all indicators were they were tracking OK.

I was also encouraged by the quality of the people at the course, there was a lot of horsepower in the room, I was in the older brigade but its always a joy to think yes agriculture still rocks and there is a lot of great people involved, gives great hope for the future.

As far as opportunity, as usual they are further down the line with environmental and animal welfare stuff than Australia, they have more pressure on their social license to farm than we do. Essentially at this point we are clearly losing the communication battle with our city counterparts, but we are also slow to ask the question how could we do it better, so we can drive the change.

In the environmental space in Australia there is a constant battle between agriculture and environment both for funding and the right to take the high moral ground. The water and carbon debates are classic examples of where we should be feeding off and working together to get better outcomes for everyone. One of the participants had a leadership role in a program called LEAF which is an acronym for Linking Environment and Agriculture and its a multi-faceted accreditation program in agriculture, and after accreditation farmers get to use the LEAF logo.

We have a lot of quality control programs in Australia, but they are typically narrower in focus and the outcomes of these are OK you can keep going rather than presenting our green and ethical credentials to market. LEAF is a charity and that funding model would not suit here. Anyway, most can that there is a pathway to improve the status quo. Question is who is going to lead.

In animal welfare there is some big changes afoot with a few companies mandating that dairy farmers must keep bobby calves for a minimum of eight weeks. Some milk companies require as part of your milk price payment for farmers to pass certain standards on attaining minimum amounts of mastitis and lameness in herds to ensure a premium payment. Saputo Australia is introducing animal welfare guidelines for the first time i.e. 'we will refuse to pick up milk from farms where calves are dehorned without suitable pain medication'. The bigger societal change is traditionally there was a clear line of delineation that used to say we are humans and animals are animals and its OK that's there is a difference and its OK to farm animals as animals so long as we treat them well, that line is being gradually broken down and animals are being lifted in first world societies hierarchy.

There are a lot of opportunities and a lot of need in the field of farmer mental health at the moment. How do we create better access to world class treatment for farmers in particular but also rural communities? Headspace in Australia is a new model (10-15 years old) for people under 25 and seems to be showing good results locally, there is no doubt they have been a big part of taking away the stigma that used to surround mental health problems. It's now accepted and OK to talk about mental health. The question I have is where do you go if you are over 25?. How do you manage people who have significant mental health issues but will not self-refer, without violating their personal freedoms? If its acute and diagnosed there are pathways that are established (but not very good) but not well known by farmers but could we do more for farmers at an early stage to try to prevent acute cases developing. Could we provide a free, comfortable situation for farmers to come and talk through issues at an early point and how do you get them to come. 20 years ago young people would never have come to a facility like headspace and openly talked of how they are feeling and their issues. We should

not underestimate the adaptive ability of our farmers and their capacity to know when they need a hand, we need to do some pilot trials.

I also did a brief study on small scale dairy processors and challenges and opportunities in that sector as we have started a small value-add venture. A number that greatly surprised me was the 85% of cheese consumption in the UK is now of mature cheddar (78% of all statistics are made up on the spot). Mostly the outcome of my research was that industry fragmentation continues and as a farmer moving into processing it is a long, challenging and winding road. But if you are good enough it is eminently doable I think the takeaway message came from one of the lecturers who advised “*Paul It will not go where you think it will go, that’s not to say it might not be great, but be flexible enough to move with the direction it wants to go in*”. As an Australian dairy farmer. I was really hurt through the demise of the Murray Goulburn Co-operative. I took it personally, I stayed till the end of emotion, not good decision making and nearly jeopardized our whole business. With hindsight what I was protecting was doomed anyway. Murray Goulburn the huge co-operative behemoth would have no chance of thriving in the current marketplace. Things have a place and season.



The basic philosophy of Nuffield and the Worshipful Company of Farmers is very much aligned although presented in a different format and its one I have adopted.

Make sure you are looking out over the balcony of your business, don’t be stuck on the dance floor.

Over time in our business my involvement in the regular farm work has diminished to the point where I am rarely involved in the day to day work anymore, I’d like to say it was brilliant strategy on my behalf but the reality was the combination of Nuffield training and with five children under seven I learned to delegate mostly out of necessity.

Mostly my reflections on my excellent English adventure are that we should count our blessings we work in agriculture as its so diverse and challenging. Imagine having a desk job, that I am so lucky to have brought up in Australia where I was, and that I need to crack on. The Duchy course was timely for me and my hope is that I can use what I learned to great effect in benefiting our local community.