

A fair go for farmers

A mate of mine whose life has been spent farming explained to me that making a living on the land these days involves constant struggle: tackling all the vicissitudes and uncertainties of business grafted on to complex biological systems – and being at the mercy of the weather.

As well, globalisation is now a hard fact of life – competition is on a world scale and some competitor countries heavily subsidise. Add to this fluctuating exchange rates. (It seems that in some of these countries the principles of free trade are honoured more in the breach.) Farming is certainly no place for the commercially faint-hearted.

In business these days much thought is given to risk management: risk is factored in when considering return on investment capital. For farmers the risk-to-return factor is much higher than in most industries and certainly much greater than for any of the other industries that make up the chain from the producer to the consumer.

For the urbanised majority of us who don't extract a living from the land, the gulf between town and country has never been wider. And most don't live with the uncertainties that perpetually confront those in the bush. What most of us have come to expect is high quality produce on demand and for prices that in real terms have continued to fall for decades.

The recent public protests from Tasmanian farmers that took them and their tractors all the way to the national capital indicate that, for some, their industry is in crisis. Many are leaving the land and there is concern at the lack of young people in agriculture.

We need to ask ourselves as a nation: can we afford to lose this expertise for ever?

