

## ABC Radio National

### PERSPECTIVE: COMMENT ON IRAQ AGRICULTURE

#### **Keri Phillips' introduction:**

*Tonight's Perspective is presented by Philip Eliason (pron Ellyison). Philip Eliason was a Middle East specialist with the Department of Foreign Affairs before joining the National Farmers Federation, as he recounts, to press for pro export economic and trade policies. He continues an interest in the Middle East and agriculture. He is a member of the Advisory Board to Macquarie University's Centre for Middle East Studies and was a member of Commonwealth Government review of Arabic and Middle East Studies part of the then National Languages Strategy. He is now a Canberra based adviser on government affairs.*

*Australian officials in Iraq are assessing the state of its agriculture. This is one area where Australia has a US mandate to become involved in post war reconstruction. Australia is currently sending emergency relief to Iraq but Philip Eliason says this can be joined by direct people-to-people projects with real value to Iraq and ourselves. (157)*

In thinking about Iraq don't be totally misled by the attention placed on Baghdad's petroleum. Despite its enormous oil wealth, Iraq is and will be a mixed economy. It retains a significant rural sector employing between 20-40 percent of the total labour force.

Iraq is very dry, with limited rainfed farming. Its irrigation areas are more extensive than ours but alike, being river based and in otherwise dry lands. Iraqis grow irrigated sugar, rice, vegetables, fruit, dates and fodder crops. They raise sheep and cattle on dry rangelands and have sought to develop intensive dairying.

Like Australia, Iraq grows wheat and barley.

Like Australia, Iraq suffers from regular droughts which cut crop production and herd numbers. They are concerned, just as we are, with animal health.

Recent policy problems facing farm experts in the region of Iraq, Jordan and Syria would be recognisable to Australians: there's debate about property rights, drought relief, information services, farm finance and income diversification, land exhaustion and degradation, policy neglect of rangelands and of course the ancient and growing scourge of salinity.

A striking feature of 20th century agriculture in Iraq is rollercoaster policy change of land ownership laws. There has been state expropriation of farm and grazing land, use of socialist models of farm production arrangements and privatisation initiatives. Since Iraq's increasingly nationalist and statist governments from 1958, agrarian reform has arced through ambitious but unsettling and unpredictable directions.

Farming also suffered loss of manpower to the oil and industrial goods sectors and irreplaceable loss of workers as casualties in the eight year Iran Iraq war. Under UN sanctions, agriculture has continued to collapse both productively, and socially.

Abandonment of agriculture, poverty based tension in rural areas and the lack of farmer based organisations put new risks on this politically important sector.

Post-war "de-Ba'athification" leaves agricultural industries in Iraq decapitated. Despite private and individual effort, farming was organisationally dependent on the Party and state direction.

There is now no coherent organising force for growers. There is not one by growers. There are however people whom we can and should assist in its farm recovery.

Confusion threatens plans to establish local democratic processes and stable provincial and national governments. America, a competitor of ours for market position in Iraq, is using its aid program to shape agriculture and recreate local governance and administration. Our room for action in our area of agriculture is becoming more limited by the week despite the more positive impression held by Iraqis of Australia.

Now, and well into the next year, Iraqi farming must be stabilised and given a firm basis for policy predictability. This, there as here, is essential for investment and recovery. To deal with this Australia should extend its farm mandate and consider strategic initiatives in an enlarged aid program.

**First**, help stabilise Iraq's farm sector by giving credible support for farm dialogue in rural areas especially engaging women headed households and youth alongside any new season crop support as currently planned.

**Second**, farmers should be assisted in creating their own grassroots representative organisations to facilitate political expression, their policy demands and engagement in national reconstruction.

**Third**, we can cultivate productive relations through a structured visitor and training program for future leaders in Iraqi industry, science and agriculture.

**Fourth**, Australia can help on rangeland grazing issues especially through the use of 'participative approaches' which enlist local level skills. We can help Iraq protect its

resources and lift crop value through a clean and green set of farm policies. Our own advances in living with saline soils will assist Iraq.

Some discussion is happening on people to people contact to assist rebuild Iraq's farmer organisations. Our local farm body and the International Federation of Agricultural Producers support this concept which is being considered as an aid initiative in Canberra. It reinforces the work of our official Government agriculture policy team and will build strategic goodwill at a time when support for self-help activity is at a premium.

Importantly, it approaches profound political and production issues from grassroots, the very level where confidence building and sustainable progress has to be carried out in Iraq.

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