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From bicycles to Mercedes. Italians in rural New South Wales and political choice: Griffith 1947-1984

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Griffith is a town in the State of New South Wales, Australia, the centre of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA), about 500 kilometres from Sydney. By the end of the 1960s, it had more people of Italian birth per head of population than any other town or city in the State. Why did this concentration occur? How did the circumstances of their settlement affect the Italians' accommodation to their new country, their social attitudes and their political allegiances?

The way in which the MIA was established provides part of an answer to all these questions. After a disastrous drought at the beginning of the twentieth century, the New South Wales Government began planning a massive public irrigation scheme on the Murrumbidgee River, and by 1913 it had released the first blocks for settlement. The conditions on which they were granted reflected the Labor government's closer settlement policy, which aimed to establish a 'vigorous yeomanry' wherever it could. Most of the blocks were of one or two hectares only, on which orchardists could grow fruit for the government's cannery at nearby Leeton, and there were some 'large area' blocks of about 20 hectares for dairying. All land was available on cheap lease (there was no freehold), but there were strict rules on tenancy to prevent 'landlordism', speculation and aggregation into large estates.

The First World War interrupted settlement, but from 1919 the Government encouraged returned soldiers to take up blocks, and by 1923 (the peak year) they occupied 878, or almost half, of all the blocks available. The blocks were too small, the soldiers were inexperienced and sometimes debilitated by the War; and the falling prices of the late 1920s and then the Great Depression made it hard for them to get a decent living. Their failure offered opportunity to prospective Italian settlers:

Although there were many efficient and industrious farmers among the soldier settlers, taken as a group the returned men were neither conspicuous either for hard work or meek submission to the poor living standards that were typical of the MIA at the time. On the other hand, both these features were accepted as normal by the Italians, for most of them came from poor peasant communities.⁽¹⁾

On Census Day 1933, there were 444 males and 171 females who had been born in

Italy living in Wade Shire, where the town of Griffith was situated.⁽²⁾ In 1947, the Census found 646 males and 400 females of Italian birth in Wade, and there were probably about another 400 males living close to Griffith.⁽³⁾

Most of this increase seems to have been due to the migration to Griffith of Italians already in Australia, since Australia received practically no immigrants in the thirties or during the years of the Second World War. But a sizeable colony of Italians had established themselves in the sugar-growing country of Queensland in the twenties, and several of them seemed to have headed south attracted by the kinder climate and better opportunities that Griffith offered. During the War some came involuntarily, as interned enemy aliens transported to the Riverina area around Griffith, and allocated to farm work there.⁽⁴⁾ The demand for food during the war years had produced a boom in vegetable growing on the small irrigated blocks of the MIA, to the great benefit of the local Italians who showed more interest in market gardening than the local Australians. At the 1947 Census, 37 per cent of the Italian-born males in Wade Shire were either employers of labour, or self-employed. Just over three-quarters of them were naturalised Australian citizens.⁽⁵⁾

This does not mean that they had been - to use the official policy term - 'assimilated', because pressures to naturalise in the thirties and forties were very strong, and besides, Australian citizenship was necessary to securing the bank loan that poor Italians needed if they were to establish themselves on an irrigation block. It does mean that in 1947 the Italian-born of Griffith had had some experience of Australian society, and some considerable success in establishing themselves in its economy.

These were the people who wrote home to family and relatives to encourage them to migrate, especially after 1954 when the Australian and Italian government reached agreement on a scheme for assisting Italians to migrate. At the 1954 Census, there were 922 males and 695 females who had been born in Italy living in Wade Shire, and perhaps a total of 4,200 people 'of Italian origin' in the MIA as a whole. By 1966, the peak year, the number of Italian-born in Wade Shire was a little more than half as great again as it had been in 1954.⁽⁶⁾

In the early stages of this migration particularly, most of the new settlers came from the north of Italy. In the province of Treviso, Cavaso del Tomba and some other villages sent thousands of their inhabitants. Most of this was chain migration - the first of the Italian settlers of the MIA in the 1920s came mainly from the north - but it was assisted by a bias towards northern Italians in the minds of Australian

immigration officials in Canberra and Italy. Most came from rural areas and had some experience of farming, although not of irrigation farming.⁽⁷⁾

Typically, their first few years gave them opportunities to learn. They began their new life by living in the home of the family or friends who had sponsored them, and got their board, but often only low wages, in return for work on their sponsors' blocks. In season, the work was hard and the hours long, but their ambition to acquire their own land sustained them.

Married men saved to bring out wife and family; bachelors sought wives by proxy, or on a trip home. Banks helped them with loans; they liked Italian borrowers because they worked hard and were willing to become Australian citizens. This was also true of women who worked long hours to establish or renovate the blocks with their husbands.⁽⁸⁾

By the end of the 1960s the hopes of those who had planned the MIA were being amply fulfilled, but in a way they had not imagined. There was an industrious and thriving yeomanry, but it was almost entirely Italian. Of the 523 farms of between eight and 27 hectares (which made up two thirds of all farms in the MIA), Italians owned 420, or just over 80 per cent. They also owned the great majority of farmlets under eight hectares.⁽⁹⁾

But by then, the aims and methods of the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission, which allocated land and water, had already changed, and would change further. Even by the twenties, the Commission had been criticised for not making larger blocks available, for not allowing the amalgamation of blocks, and for prohibiting freehold tenure. The Commission had relented on all these issues, and by the sixties was planning the release of large area holdings on land outside the original irrigation area. Some of those at Colleambally, about fifty kilometres south of Griffith, were above 300 hectares, and encouraged the growing of rice together with broadacre crops and fat lamb raising. In 1969, only four Italians, as compared with 35 Australians, held properties of 291 hectares and over. But another dozen owned properties above 190 hectares, and in the seventies and eighties Italians holding these larger properties increased both in numbers and proportion. Some share-farmed, sub-leased to others, and became employers of labour.⁽¹⁰⁾

Other changes accompanied these changes in landholding. The proportion of Italians who earned their living by farming declined. At the 1947 Census, about half of all

Italian males of all ages in Wade Shire worked as farmers; by 1971, that proportion was down to a little less than a third, and the growth of white collar occupations accounted for the difference.⁽¹¹⁾ The role of women began to change, and they now only rarely worked on the blocks alongside their husbands. Houses Italians owned became larger and more elaborate, as the owners proclaimed their success. Some of the older generation were thought to be millionaires.⁽¹²⁾

The success of the Italian settlers provoked some hostility among the Australians. This had been apparent as early as the twenties, especially among ex-servicemen who resented the transfer of farms to Italians who undermined the Australian way of life by working too hard and accepting a lower standard of living.⁽¹³⁾ In 1941, the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission prohibited the sale of land to unnaturalised Italians, and when the number of Italians in Griffith began to increase after the War, refused to permit the transfer of farms to 'persons of Italian origin' whether they were naturalised or not.⁽¹⁴⁾ In 1947, the Supreme Court of New South Wales ruled that the Commission had no power to discriminate in this way, although it was entitled to use its discretion in the granting of individual transfers. The Commission appealed against this decision to the High Court of Australia, which decided that the Commission's decisions were entirely at its own discretion, and not subject to legal jurisdiction.⁽¹⁵⁾

At another level, prejudice manifested itself in the use of disparaging language and the occasional street brawl. The Italians protected themselves against this behaviour by mirroring their co-operation at work in their social organisation. The short distances between the small farms made it easy for them to form a number of clubs which not only supplied food and drink but catered for card games, bocce and other sports. By the 1970s, these clubs had about 3,000 Italian members. They admitted non-Italians, but Australian membership was small.⁽¹⁶⁾

There were other divisions in the membership. 'Clubs catered for men, and women remained on the fringe'.⁽¹⁷⁾ In the seventies, the membership of women in the clubs was less than 10 per cent. This was true of all clubs, whether they catered mainly for Veneti or Calabresi. The North-South division was even sharper; in the Catholic Club at Yoogali, Calabresi were only 3.2 per cent of the membership; and in the Coronation Club, Veneti were in the same proportion.⁽¹⁸⁾ Writing about Griffith in the 1960s, C. A. Price noted that some Veneti 'were more open and critical than Australians [on the subject of] their alleged superiority',⁽¹⁹⁾ an attitude reflected in the very low rates of their intermarriage with Calabresi.⁽²⁰⁾ These social divisions among the Italians were to have some important consequences for the Labor Party and the representation of

Griffith in State Parliament.

The town of Griffith is situated in the State electorate of Murrumbidgee, and the town and its nearby irrigation areas constitute a subdivision of that electorate which corresponded approximately with Wade Shire in the period up to 1984. For the whole of the period, Griffith subdivision was easily the numerically largest in the electorate.

When Italians began to arrive in Griffith in large numbers after the Second World War, the Member for the Murrumbidgee was [Ambrose] George Enticknap. In 1953, at the first election held after the Italian-Australian Agreement on assisted immigration in 1951, Enticknap was again the Labor candidate. In the Griffith subdivision, he won 60.4 per cent of the primary vote, and held Murrumbidgee with 69 per cent of the total vote. He was appointed Minister for Conservation, which positioned him perfectly to legislate on the supply and use of water for irrigation. He held that post most of the time until his retirement in 1965, by which time he had represented Murrumbidgee as a Labor member continuously for 24 years. At his last election in 1962, he had three opponents, and won after the distribution of one of the minor candidate's preferences.⁽²¹⁾

Labor's candidate at the 1965 election was Albert Jaime ('Al') Grassby. Grassby was a journalist who had become a Field Officer with the Department of Agriculture. In the course of his work, he visited hundreds of farms in the district. He also became locally famous as the presenter of a regular radio music session, and the organiser of a social club which catered for all immigrants, but especially attracted Southern Italians who were by then coming to Griffith in such numbers as to reduce the Northerners' majority significantly.⁽²²⁾

Grassby built on his contacts to build new branches and revive old ones. After narrowly gaining pre-selection, he went on to win Murrumbidgee, although not resoundingly: even after the distribution of all the other three candidates' preferences, he had only 51.7 per cent of the final vote. But in the subdivision of Griffith, the electors gave him 60.1 per cent of the primary vote, and he topped the poll in all of its 16 booths except two small ones.

Grassby did even better at the next general elections in 1968, when just on seven out of every ten electors in the Griffith subdivision gave him their primary vote, and his primary vote throughout the whole electorate rose to 63 per cent. But soon after, he resigned as Member for Murrumbidgee to contest (and win) the Federal seat of which Murrumbidgee was a large part. This meant that Labor had to find another candidate

for a by-election in 1970.

This was Alan Robert Lindsay ('Lin') Gordon, who by the usual tests had excellent qualifications: a pharmacist at Leeton (in the subdivision adjoining Griffith) he had been President of Leeton's Chamber of Commerce, a district golf and tennis champion, and Leeton Shire President.⁽²³⁾ But at the by-election, Labor's vote in Murrumbidgee dropped by over nine percentage points to 53.8; in Griffith subdivision, it fell from Grassby's 69 to a bare majority of 50.3 per cent.

Once elected, Gordon was able to strengthen his position. Like his predecessor Enticknap, he was appointed to Ministerial portfolios which oversaw the use of irrigation water and land. When he contested Murrumbidgee for the last time in 1981, he won with an overall primary vote which was almost the same as at his first election, despite a very unfavourable boundary change. In Griffith subdivision, his vote was up three percentage points from what it had been then, to 53.1. Labor's vote was a long way short of Grassby's best, but it was still enough for a fairly comfortable victory, and to continue Labor's 40 year unbroken hold on the seat.

The 1984 election ended that. With Gordon now in retirement, Labor's candidate was Margaret ('Peggy') Delves. She had been Lin Gordon's Electorate Secretary for eight years, knew the electorate well, came from a well-known local farming family, and worked hard campaigning.⁽²⁴⁾ She faced three opponents; her primary vote was well below what Gordon had scored in 1981 in all four subdivisions, but most of all in Griffith, where it slumped from 53 to 38 per cent. The eventual winner and the new Member for the Murrumbidgee was Adrian Cruickshank, who was the Country Party candidate. That Party (later re-named the National Party) has held the seat ever since.

All explanations of Labor's defeat agree that one of the causes was that its candidate was a woman; the electors, and particularly the Southern Italians, were not ready for that. But most explanations also agree on something more: that Al Grassby's defence of the Southern Italians involved in drug trafficking and in the murder of Donald Bruce Mackay punished the innocent with the guilty, and that resentment of this by implication harmed the Labor Party's electoral prospects.

Drug trafficking around Griffith had attracted national attention after the murder and disappearance in 1977 of Mackay, a Liberal candidate at elections in 1973, 1974 and 1976. He had passed on information about marijuana cultivation which led to the conviction of several Southern Italians and the loss of millions of dollars for their

syndicate, which was widely believed to have arranged his murder.⁽²⁵⁾ Northern Italians in Griffith wished to make it clear that they were not the kind of people who would associate with criminals. They did so by rejecting Grassby's attempts to implicate Mackay's family and his defence of Southern Italians; they distanced themselves from him and his political Party by voting against it.

This reasoning helps to explain further the catastrophic drop in Labor's vote in the Griffith subdivision. But like the explanation in terms of prejudice against a female candidate, neither it nor even the two together can explain the increasing and enduring hold of the Country/National Party on the seat of Murrumbidgee since 1984. An explanation with greater scope may be in terms of underlying trends overlaid or kept at bay by the personal vote of the Labor candidates.

What happened at Colleambally suggests an explanation of this kind. The Colleambally area lies just south of the original MIA, and it developed as a large holding irrigation area under the care of the Member for Murrumbidgee when he was Minister for Conservation in successive Labor governments in the fifties and sixties. Holdings were generally larger than 300 hectares, and changes to regulations allowed leaseholders eventually to become owners who grew wealthy through large-scale rice growing and mixed farming. A growing proportion of these were Italians and their sons who had got their start on small plots in the old irrigation area.

In 1971, at Lin Gordon's first general election, the Labor primary vote at Colleambally was 37 per cent. It sagged as low as 21 per cent in the seventies, and recovered but only to 36 per cent at his last general election in 1981. Thinking back to the origins of the Colleambally farmers, Gordon said: 'They came to vote for us on their bicycles, and they came to vote against us in their Mercedes.'

At the same time, similar if less dramatic changes were occurring in the old irrigation area. A relaxing of regulations allowed the amalgamation of farms and their outright purchase; farmers were allowed a freer choice in their use of water and land, and they shared in the prosperity that followed the strong demand for the MIA's primary products. Commenting on the Country Party's victory in 1984, Adrian Cruickshank's Electorate Secretary said that Griffith 'had changed from being a workers' area into being a farm owners' area.'

The Italians who came to Griffith after the Second World War joined a community already firmly established economically, despite some prejudice at both local and

governmental levels. They found ready accommodation with their sponsors, and ample opportunity for learning the more specialised techniques of irrigation for which their rural background had helped prepare them. Like those who had come before the War, they found that their willingness to work long and hard and accept conditions and incomes which some Australians rejected gave them an advantage in acquiring the small cheap blocks that had been the foundation of the MIA.

But they did not form an homogeneous community. Values and attitudes towards women persisted, even as they and their children began to leave farming for white collar work. The Veneti brought to Griffith and maintained their attitude of superiority over Southerners.

Both these attitudes helped defeat the Labor candidate at the 1984 elections. Until then Italians in Griffith had voted Labor strongly. But some, occasionally much, of that support was personal. Through the sixties and seventies, changes to the regulations governing the use of water and irrigation land coupled with strong demand for MIA produce had created among the Italians, as among Australians, a class of farmers who were wealthy owners of land, not lessees or low-paid labourers saving for a block. Besides that, by the 1980s the largest sector of the workforce in Wade Shire was the white collar sector.(26) By the 1980s, Italians in Griffith were voting Country/National Party in the same way as Australian rural proprietors and country town dwellers, and they had made their political migration as well.

End Notes

(1) Langford-Smith, Trevor and Rutherford, John. *Water and Land*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1966 p.98.

(2) *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia 1933: New South Wales, Birthplaces of Males and Females*. There were also people of Italian birth in the adjoining local government areas, but the greatest concentration was in Wade.

(3) Price, C. A. *Southern Europeans in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1963. Price does not publish his estimate of the female Italian-born, and does not define Griffith, in Census terms; neither do most other writers on the subject.

(4) See, for example, E. O. Schlunke's short story 'The Enthusiastic Prisoner' in *The Penguin Century of Australian Stories*, Melbourne, 2000.

(5) *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1947: New South Wales, Occupational Status, Birthplace, and Nationality*.

(6) *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia 1954 and 1966: New South Wales, Birthplaces.*

(7) Thompson, Stephanie Lindsay. *Australia Through Italian Eyes*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980, p.22; and Price, *Southern Europeans in Australia*, p.114.

(8) Thompson, *Australia Through Italian Eyes*, p.102; Borrie, W. D. *Italians and Germans in Australia*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1964, pp.95 and 142.

(9) Huber, Rina. *From Pasta to Pavlova*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1977, Table 10, p.68.

(10) *Ibid.*

(11) *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia 1947 and 1971: Industry and Labour Force.*

(12) Huber, *Pasta to Pavlova*, p.75.

(13) Langford-Smith, *Water and Land*, p.97. This resentment was not confined to Griffith - see Thompson, *Australia Through Italian Eyes* p.75.

(14) Langford-Smith, *Water and Land* p.98. He attributed this decision 'at least in part' to pressure from the Griffith Returned Soldiers' League.

(15) *Ibid*, p.99. The Commission subsequently began to use its discretion to grant transfers.

(16) Huber, *Pasta to Pavlova*, pp.97-115; table 20.

(17) *Ibid*, p.114.

(18) *Ibid*, table 20.

(19) Price, *Southern Europeans in Australia*, p.254.

(20) Huber, *Pasta to Pavlova*, p.89.

(21) All electoral statistics are taken from the official publications *General Election for the Legislative Assembly - Statistical Returns*, except for those for 1970, which come from its By-Election equivalent.

(22) Radi, Heather et al. *Biographical Register of the New South Wales Parliament, 1901-1970*, ANU, Canberra, 1979, p.116.

(23) *Ibid*, p.112.

(24) These details and all comments on elections 1970-1984 are based on interviews at Griffith and Leeton in March 2004 with A.R.L. Gordon; Les Spence, President Griffith Branch ALP; Tony Catanzarito MLC; Adrian Piccoli, National Party Member

for Murrumbidgee; and his Electorate Secretary, Lyn Sparkes. The author thanks all of them for their patience and their frankness. See also Hagan, J. and Turner, K. 'The Riverina', in Hagan, J. (ed.). *People and Politics in Regional New South Wales*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2006.

(25) Whitton, Evan. *Can of Worms*, Fairfax, Sydney, 1986, p.306.

(26) Lyn Sparks, interview, Griffith, March 2004.