

## **Address given by Prof Frank Vanclay at the ceremony to confer a PhD to Amabel Fulton for her thesis entitled: “*Enabling change in family farm businesses*”**

Chancellor, distinguished colleagues, family and friends of Amabel.

It is my pleasure to give you some sense of the impact Amabel has made to her field, to Tasmania and to Australia, and to tell you about the impact she has had on me.

As you will all know, from very beginning to now, Amabel’s PhD candidature has taken more than 15 years, and for many good reasons – three of them are called Tom, Ben and Sarah.

Over that time, Amabel started more than one thesis, and she changed disciplines and topics along the way as she learned and progressed in her thinking.

In many ways, Amabel was an excellent student, and her examiners were full of praise for the thesis and wrote glowing reports. She also helped raise my profile within the University because she was at the top of the list of PhD candidates who were over time – this was perhaps a little embarrassing for me as a member of the Board of Graduate Research!

Amabel received her ag-science degree from UTAS in 1987 with a major in animal production. She was awarded First Class Honours for her thesis on the genetics of footrot in sheep. Her name as it was then, Amabel Townshend, is inscribed, or should that be enshrined, on the plaque of honor which hangs at the top of the stairs in the School of Ag Science, a constant reminder to me as I walk past it each day on my way to morning tea.

After her first degree, Amabel started work as a rural journalist, and later as a horticultural extension officer for DPIWE. In one way or another, those early work experiences were very influential in her life. They gave her practical experience on which she has continued to draw on to inform her work, and they gave her legitimacy with her constituency. Most importantly, they got her thinking about the lack of relevance of much science and research, and about how to bring about change in rural communities.

Partly in response to opportunity, partly on reflection inspired by mentors, and partly because of her own drive, determination and desire to make a difference, Amabel initially embarked on a social research PhD intended to assist in promoting the adoption of new practices in the Tasmanian potato industry.

As she found – and as everyone else doing similar things finds – the starting assumptions embedded in such a topic are naïve, the answer is quite complicated, and the research question needs to change. To make matters worse, the intellectual disciplines that have bearing on the matter complicate things (especially for people starting out in this area), and, in their own way, they also have naïve assumptions and perhaps a lack of realism.

Rather than swallow the ideological rhetoric of the various theories she was reading, Amabel needed to **know** for herself. The word ‘know’, of course, is one of those wonderful words in English that is layered with meaning. To know, is not just to have been told and to be able to sprout back – as hopefully we do **not** require in the exams we set for our students. To **know** is to believe to be true, to have personal conviction that it is right, to have deep understanding, empathy, and personal experience.

In effect, this meaning of “to know” is what farmers have in the form of their tacit knowledge that is derived, not from the cognitive machinations that us academics engage in, but from their visceral and tactical interaction with the land and with the crops and animals they farm.

Similarly, Amabel struggled and resisted as she wrestled with the artificial concepts and half-baked ideas of some of the theories she encountered in her readings. It was her struggle for the truth, for deep meaning, for real relevance, to know, that led to an extended period of candidature. Rather than view the PhD as a project to be completed on time and within budget – which I expect she requires for the projects she manages through her consulting company, Rural Development Services – she viewed the PhD as something that needed to be a valuable contribution to society, something that she would be proud of, something that she believed in; something that she knew to be true.

Ultimately Amabel’s contribution has been substantial – and that is not only from the size of her thesis. It was designed to be printed double-sided, but unfortunately that instruction was not communicated to the printer. Perhaps single-sided printing enhances the impression of impact. Certainly it had an impact of me when I was carrying them back from the printer on Amabel’s behalf.

Seriously, Amabel's contribution is substantial because she has been part of a movement in Australian agriculture circles that has advocated a new way of understanding farms and farming, and the way farms might be encouraged to innovate.

Essentially there are two main elements to her story. The first is that instead of seeing the farm as a singular entity under the management of a male farmer, she has advocated for appreciating the existence of **family farm businesses**. Each of these three words is important. Agriculture in Australia (and in Tasmania) largely comprises family farmers. As all of us with families know, being in a family means having to make compromises and not necessarily getting what we individually want. But being in a family also means having a love of others that means we are prepared to go to great lengths to do what is best, well beyond what is economically rational. Being in a family means that priorities change through the life course. Decisions about the farm are also affected by family. 'Family' is the first of the three words, in family farm business, because family comes first, it is the most important.

In those three words, 'business' comes last. Farms have to function like businesses because inevitably, like it or not, they are economic actors and will only survive while they remain profitable over time. But it is very important to appreciate that farms, as economic units, are very different to other businesses. There are many social values tied up with farming, both in terms of the act of farming, but also, in many cases, with the actual bit of land being farmed, which may have been in the family for many generations, especially here in Tasmania. These social values about farming should not be seen as being a barrier to change on the road to economic prosperity, but rather should be seen as being the fundamental basis of why people farm. Rather than suppress these values in trying to entice farms to be more like commercial operations, in the social perspective these values should be respected and celebrated. In fact, most small, family-owned enterprises are not like other commercial businesses, and a new socially-informed model of thinking about them is needed.

The second element of Amabel's work relates to how farmers might be motivated to change, to adopt and adapt new ideas and practices, to innovate. Here, Amabel has promoted the idea that rather than old-fashioned top-down methods of telling farmers what to do, change in agriculture is best enabled by a demand-driven approach which addresses the specific needs of family farm businesses. Amabel calls this a brokerage model.

Amabel's thesis is a fine example of the value of social research in agriculture – an area where the University of Tasmania demonstrates excellence, distinctiveness and engagement with its various communities. I believe it is very important that the University and the Tasmanian Institute of Agricultural Research maintains its commitment to this area of activity, because it is only with the help of social research that physical science can achieve its full potential value for society. But that social research must be genuine research that seeks the truth. It is only through questioning the question, that research delivers an answer that is indeed an answer – that is useful to society in the longer run. This is the purpose of a university.

In some sense, I owe a personal debt to Amabel. I have greatly appreciated supervising her. Through the many different interactions I have had with her – for example in organizing a conference together in 2003, in co-facilitating a participatory workshop for the members of TIAR's Rural Social Research Group in 2004, through participating in many workshops and other events, and in sharing the odd bottle of red wine with her and husband David – I have learned a lot from her. I respect her facilitation skills. I value her friendship. I admire her courage and confidence.

DOCTOR Fulton, with today's conferral ceremony, this particular journey is now over. Congratulations! You are now a fully qualified member of the field of rural social research. I look forward to ongoing interactions with you, and I and the rest of us here today, wish you strength and courage in the other travels and travails you are facing.

Prof Frank Vanclay  
4 May 2009