

Welcome Address

The Hon John Anderson AC, FTSE
Chair of the Crawford Fund for Food Security



Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for the opportunity to say a few words this morning and welcome you to the 2025 conference. We started last night with Joel Fitzgibbon, the former minister for defence, agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, giving a thought-provoking address and perhaps encouraging us to ground ourselves in the realities that confront us.

First, I want to thank everyone who made this conference possible, and also acknowledge organisations like ACIAR and the state and territory governments who provide funding behind the scenes to keep many of our activities running. It

certainly makes my job easier.

Today is our opportunity to listen, to challenge assumptions, to seek out the facts, and to start guiding changes in practice, policies, and community development.

I thank all the delegates and particularly our speakers for the commitment of your knowledge, your time, and your perspectives to our discussion today.

This is my last stint as chairman. I've been involved with Crawford since I left this extraordinary place in 2007, after 19 years here. I did not contest that election, but I just want to say that I think Crawford is a remarkable institution. It is about the business of good works, of feeding people.

Nothing engages me more emotionally than the thought of looking into the eyes of a starving child begging for nutrition. As I look at my grandchildren—how well-fed, how fortunate, how they laugh and enjoy everything they have—I think how terrible it is that in a world that has for a long time not produced enough food for every child to eat properly, we still have millions of children who are starving. We still have people who are malnourished, who cannot reach their potential.

The people involved in Crawford, as Tim Reeves commented yesterday, have something of a calling. In a way, it's aid, it's a projection, it's taking Australia forward on the cheap for the taxpayer because of the people on the board. I want to pay tribute to the Crawford Board—colleagues who give their time, energy, and wisdom not for recognition but because they believe in this cause.

If you'll indulge me for a moment, I'd like to name them: Tim Reeves, Tony Gregson (who can't be with us), Dick Warner from Tasmania, Richard Sheldrake from New South Wales, Kay Bashford, Wendy Craik, Mark from Western Australia, Joel Fitzgibbon (our deputy), Sue McCluskey (our new chair), Rosemary Dent, and Professor Kim Anderson from South Australia. And to our younger scholars: look to these people. They may have a few more grey hairs, but they continue to contribute long after many would have stepped back. That is the kind of lifelong commitment we hope you will embrace. Be engaged, have a go, keep contributing while you can in this age of disengagement.

Board, thank you for the privilege of counting you as friends over such a long period of time.

I could talk forever about previous board members, but time is a constraint. Sean, thank you for your very long-term involvement with Crawford. You took over at a moment of instability for the fund a couple of years ago, in circumstances that reflected very well on your character and your commitment to what we do. With the help of Sarah Paradice, Sue Faulkner, Larissa Mullot, and Bronwyn Refshauge, you have manned the place and taken Crawford to a new level. I will be forever grateful for the reflected glory you give me.

Cathy, I mentioned last night, you've done a fantastic job over a long period of time. I can't believe it's been 37 years. Thank you for everything you have done. Lucy Broad takes over, and Lucy will do a fantastic job.

I just wanted to pay tribute to the marvellous team I've worked with and had the privilege of being part of for a long time. Neil Andrews, a previous chair, and John Kerry, who remains committed, are here today. It's terrific to see you.

Let me encourage us all to zoom out and recognise the remarkable achievements of the last 80 years. It's estimated that the world's farmers have provided enough food for 10 billion people for each of the last ten years. The fact that people go hungry has more to do with broken infrastructure and political corruption—and, let's be honest, food waste in wealthier parts of the world—than with a lack of food. We've lifted an estimated 5 billion people to better nutrition over the last few decades. The progress has been extraordinary, but it doesn't happen in a vacuum.

I am deeply concerned about global instability, and I want to mention it today because we need to be aware of it. Western nations are complicit because we've lost touch with our core values—the things that drove us to create a better world.

As Joel said last night, the 20th century was a shocker. After WWII, the Allies were determined: no more world wars, no more Holocaust, no more turning our backs on less fortunate peoples who needed nutrition and opportunity.

Under that liberal global order, with the Americans as global police, we've had 80 years where the things we're concerned about have been taken forward. You need global stability to help people in need. You need research and development in great universities, with great academics and thinkers.

Just talking to a couple of wonderful researchers here today, doing incredible work in Canada, taking that work forward doesn't happen in a vacuum. It happens in an environment with structures that provide stability and possibilities. You also need affordable and available energy.

As a farmer, I urge you not to overlook this. The end of fossil fuels is not here. We do not have the alternatives yet. My family runs a reasonably sized farming operation with over 30 internal combustion engines—no obvious replacements for them yet. We use a great deal of fertiliser—no obvious replacements for that yet. There's a lot of work to do, and we need to be careful about the trade-offs.

Agriculture and the business of feeding people is far too dependent on fossil fuels. There are all sorts of reasons to pursue technology and innovation, but let's remember: there's nothing more

destabilising, nothing worse for humanity, for peace, and for the environment than reversing decades of progress in lifting people out of poverty.

Tim Reeves quoted the old saying: If you don't put food into people's hands so they can feed their families, someone else will put a rifle in their hands. That's an important concept.

I want to mention the next generation—our conference scholars. You're here to experience our conference and get special mentoring, networking, and learning activities. Thank you to those mentoring them. As you work with young people, think about their skills and capabilities, and encourage them to pursue pathways forward so they can one day do what our board members are doing. Network members have helped with the scholar program, and we have a diverse group: DFAT, Australia awardees from Indonesia, and students from Western Sydney University.

If all our next-gen attendees would stand for a moment, let's give them a round of applause. You are the future!

For those new to our venue, we're here to capture the attention of legislators and decision makers. Agriculture is disappearing from the national agenda, and that's disappointing. Nothing is more important than feeding people, and no country does it better than Australia.

Where is our food security package? Where are our reserves of fuel, fertiliser, and chemicals? 70-80% of our ag chemicals are imported, and we don't have the recommended reserves of fuel.

Unfortunately, it's not a sitting week, so we don't have MPs and senators here to interact with. But it's a challenge for the future, and I know Crawford will continue to advocate.

We're grateful that the Honourable Kate Thwaites, Special Envoy for Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience, has recorded a welcoming video for us.

Thank you for indulging me. Special acknowledgment to ACIAR and Wendy Umberger for all your work. Thank you all for being here, for your commitment, and for making this conference—and Crawford—so special.

John Anderson has been a long-serving member of the Board of the Crawford Fund for Food Security and has been Chair of the Board since 2017. He was appointed Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) in the Queen's Birthday 2022 Honours List for eminent service to rural and regional development, to leadership in international agricultural research and food security, to social commentary, and through contributions to not-for-profit organisations.

John Anderson is the former Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the National Party of Australia (1999-2005); Minister for Primary Industries and Energy (1996-1998); Minister for Transport and Regional Development (1998-2005); served on Expenditure Review (Budget) Committee, National Security Committee and Standing Environment Committee while in Cabinet. He was the member for Gwydir, New South Wales 1989 to his retirement in 2005. John has returned to farming and is also active in the not-for-profit sector.