

# CSR sell-off sweet news for growers



**'Not a lot of love':** Sugar cane farmer Tom Callow at his Home Hill property near Burdekin, North Queensland, yesterday

Picture: Michael Chambers

**Andrew Fraser**

UP in the lush canefields of Burdekin in North Queensland, the cane farmers joke that new CSR employees are just fine until they get "the needle".

"It's the needle that turns them into company puppets," cane farmer Tom Callow says.

"We sit there sometimes when one of the CSR boys goes on and on, and say, 'you can tell he's had the needle'."

CSR, the Colonial Sugar Refinery, yesterday announced it was leaving off its sugar division, which most analysts see as the start of the end of the company's involvement in the industry it has dominated for more than 150 years.

If so, it would be the end of one of the longest standing business prac-

tices in Australian history, with the name CSR branded on many packs of sugar sold in supermarkets.

It would also be the end of one of the great enmities in Australian corporate history. CSR and growers have had an uneasy relationship — to put it mildly — for the best part of a century, and growers in areas where the only mill was owned by CSR resented the monopoly.

"It's very hard to find any of the growers around here who've got a good word to say for CSR. They've let the mills run down and they're very unreliable," Mr Callow said.

"It makes it very hard for us as growers. There's not a lot of love between the growers and CSR — there hasn't been for a long time."

Alf Cristaudo, the chairman of Canegrowers, the peak sugar cane

farmers group, said growers were generally disappointed with CSR.

"CSR hasn't been all that well regarded by growers — a lot of our fellas think that they've let their assets run down, and the performance of the factory is below par," he said.

"I think growers will see this as a good thing. You might find one grower who likes them, but you'd have to look hard."

CSR's first involvement with sugar refining came in 1883 when it built the Victoria Mill near Ingham, north of Townsville. That is one of seven mills it still operates in Queensland.

Over the years as the industry has shrunk, so has CSR's involvement as sugar processor, with the company moving out of marginal areas and consolidating in the richer districts.

In the late 1970s, CSR sold its three

mills in northern NSW to a co-operative group of local farmers, and in the late '80s and early '90s it sold its mills at Goondi near Innisfail and Hambleton near Cairns, as formerly lush canefields were subdivided for housing.

The co-operative model is what cane growers want to adopt if CSR's seven mills come on the market.

"If growers are going to get a decent return from their farms we need to have some ownership of the mills as well," Mr Callow said.

"The whole way ahead is through value adding — through things like ethanol, plastics, molasses.

It's CSR who are gaining the benefits of that, not us."

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