



A MODEST FARMER

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The sacred education cow has had her day

For most of my political life I have been careful to treat the education cow as sacred and to pat her ostentatiously whenever possible because, until recently she had many admirers.

But she has now gone off her milk somewhat and patting her is no longer fruitful.

I once said rather sourly to a rather rabid education group that, if it was popularity I was after, I would gain rather than lose by advocating a cut in the education vote.

I suppose there is no more waste of education money in the country than in the city, but it is more visible in the bush.

My electorate was latterly very keen for the biggest cut to be made in university expenditure. From now on, with a superfluity of graduates in some disciplines, the pressure to bear down on university expenditure will be even stronger.

And if the Fraser Government sticks courageously to its policy of sitting on the head of the government spending horse, then the pressure to kick the universities will be hard to resist.

If I were still after votes, I would mount the “cut the university vote” bandwagon. But now I can take a more lofty, objective national outlook, I will content myself by giving the universities some fatherly advice.

I wish we could revert to the previously policy of university students paying at least some of their fees instead of having them paid by the taxpayer. I am careful not to use the term “free university education” because we all now know that nothing in this world is free — someone always has to pay.

And with university fees, most of the paying is done by the average taxpayer, probably by a shearer or truck driver with two or three kids, who is expected to work a bit harder to ensure that the son of his boss can go to a university without paying fees and have exciting adventures during vacations instead of having to work his way through as his father had to.

When I talk at universities, I go out of my way to say that we made a great mistake in making the taxpayers pay the fees and I used to anticipate an angry reaction. But I have been surprised to find that a large number of people agree with me.

I wish we could put an end to the tenure system whereby a bad staff member, after he gets a few rungs up the university staff ladder, is assured of a safe position until he retires, and with annual increments. The same situation applies in the civil service and I suppose is a relic of the days when both groups were paid less than in private industry.

This position is now reversed but permanency of employment still persists. Australia would be better served by its civil servants and universities if this were not so.

Because of the permanent employment link between civil servants and university staff, the position will be not easily altered, if only because both groups now pack a lot of votes.

But at least with university staff it surely should be possible to grade people on merit. The number of research papers published should be a guide as to the quality and quantity of a person's research.

The teaching side presents more difficulties but I have seen a Yale pamphlet in which the various courses are described and also comments made on the quality of teaching in each course.

The information on which the assessments were made was obtained from a questionnaire filled in by the students of the previous year. Some of the comments were devastatingly frank and others were quite heart-warming.

I can well imagine that a lazy or incompetent lecturer would make heroic efforts to get better assessments after his peers had seen what his students thought of him.

If this method is good enough for Yale, surely it should at least be tried here. And until some effort is made to separate the university sheep from the goats by some kind of drafting process, the amount of money and goodwill going from taxpayers to universities will be limited.

The education cow is no longer sacred, particularly the university cow. There will be more votes in kicking her than patting her from now on.

This is said not to frighten her but to make her more careful not to put her foot in the bucket.