



A MODEST FARMER

The Australian Financial Review, 5 October 1979

Economic understanding will triumph in the end

I am well known for my modesty, but even I cannot resist looking back with modest pride to some past articles.

I recall one that appeared in middle of June, 1978. It described how King Mal took his courtiers to the beach so that he could demonstrate his ability to turn back the tide of unemployment in the textile, clothing and footwear industries.

There were three main planks to the article.

One described the interest of those importers who had the good fortune to be quota holders which gave them an unfair advantage over the other poor sods who had not got quotas.

You may remember how the quota holders took only a passing interest in the policies that King Mal was advocating and no interest at all in the politicians who carried his throne.

The cunning quota holders kept close to the bureaucrats because these allocated the quotas and that was where the really money was.

The second plank was that, in spite of the awful price we were paying to protect these industries to create employment, the employment in the group was falling.

It was when this became known that King Mal disappeared in a blaze of glory to a very important international engagement.

The third plank mentioned the bullying tendencies that Mr Fraser was then exhibiting, if any civil servants or commissions had the hardihood to tell him what he did not want to hear.

You will remember the story of the emperor who was wearing no clothes but no one was brave enough to tell him this, except a little lad who was not old enough to know the importance of footwork.

When the draft report on textiles, clothing and footwear was published in August this year it spelt out yet again the unpleasant fact that some of parts of these industries would inevitably phase themselves out whatever the Government did.

I hoped that Mr Fraser had learnt his lesson and would not this time act like a Roman emperor and clobber the IAC for telling him the truth.

I am glad to say I have not heard of any such comments from him this time but I notice that Mr Bowen, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, could not resist the opportunity to buy some cheap popularity by clobbering the IAC which was criticised because it had not spelt out the possible effects of its draft recommendations on employment.

Yet it said in the draft report that these would only become known when the hearing was resumed, when the draft report was being considered.

To clobber the report in its draft stage was silly and irresponsible. I have long known that Mr Bowen was light on economics but, up till now, I have always credited him with some common sense.

But when it comes to bullying, Mr Ray Aitchison, the spokesman for these industries, is the real expert. He has demonstrated a frightening capacity to kick in the ruck, particularly if an election looms.

I think that this is what made Mr Bowen so subservient.

Some people are sceptical about my confidence that, though the cause of economic logic will lose many battles along the way, we are certain to win the tariff war in the end.

People are becoming better educated all the time and what passed for logic a few years ago is seen to be silly now. And even Mr Aitchison will not last forever, even he one day will pass to his reward.

And I know where he will go. I know that my chances of going to heaven are remote because I was for nearly 20 years a Member of Parliament which will rule me out.

But I have no doubts about where Mr Aitchison will finish up.

Even if his personal qualities were such as to deny him admission to the pearly gates, I know from experience that even St Peter would not be brave enough to keep him out.

And when he got there he would soon have the arrangements altered to suit him.

I can imagine him quickly demanding a leading place in the band and St Peter explaining that they only had orchestras in heaven, not bands.

“Well, I want a prominent place in one of those,” I can imagine Mr Aitchison saying quite crossly, “I am an expert at plucking heart strings.”

“It is harp strings we work on up here,” St Peter would have to explain but I don’t suppose Mr Aitchison would listen.

The best part will come when Mr Aitchison sidles up to St Peter and explains that he wants to find out where the Luddites are billeted.

“They must be around here somewhere,” I can imagine him telling St Peter.

“They too wanted to stop change, they wanted to prevent the use of labour saving equipment. So they must be here somewhere. I would like to be placed near them so that we could hold hands when we were not plucking heart strings. I am sure we will have a lot in common.”

But I take comfort in knowing that Mr Aitchison’s successor will inevitably be different.

Economic understanding will win in the end.