



A MODEST FARMER

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That welfare State tiger may eat us in the end

Towards the end of last year Eccles was moaning about the devastating effects of the welfare State.

His message was that if we didn't get off the welfare State tiger it would eat us in the end.

I will give his figures again: Defence 8.9 per cent, the welfare group 50.4 per cent, payments to the States 22.1 per cent and interest in public debt 6.1 per cent. This makes 87 per cent of the Commonwealth Budget, so clearly, if none of these is to be cut, there will be precious little room for much economic manoeuvring in future.

However, it is not the economic effects of the welfare State that concern me most; far more important to me is the damage done to the spirit of self-reliance of which we used to be so proud.

We have now become like the bears at Yellowstone Park who become so dependent on handouts from passing tourists during spring, summer and autumn, that they are said to have died in large numbers when the stream of tourists dropped to a trickle in the winter.

But what is happening to us is better put by Professor Hartwell in the book *The Coming Confrontation* published by the Institute of Economic Affairs in Britain. I quote from page 119:

In Britain the responsibilities of government are continually expanding while those of the individual are continually contracting.

There has been, in consequence, a retreat from freedom: as the individual's responsibilities are taken from him, so his ability and willingness to accept responsibility decline, and government has to take over even more responsibilities.

As government grows more active, the individual becomes more passive and intervention becomes an imperative.

The process is a vicious circle, a responsibility or public trap that has led to the almost universal acceptance of a substantial and increasing role for the State in all our affairs.

Indeed, at a certain point the retreat from freedom becomes a fear of freedom, an avoidance of responsibility, a feeling of helplessness in the face of needs and problems, a willing dependency on, and a fearful servility towards, government and its agencies.

If you want to see examples of such servility at close quarters you should see the representatives of the various industry pressure groups fawning on Ministers [as though] they are [a] government cow.

Sometimes, of course, the fawning turns to blackmail, particularly if there is an election looming.

These groups will parade, with fitting eloquence, their belief that free enterprise is the best philosophy for Australia in general, but you should see them when they are after something for themselves in particular.

Professor Hartwell goes on:

Most increases in government have been achieved by offering inducements, almost invariably economic, and most of such increases have been difficult, if not impossible, to reverse: hence they are aptly described as traps.

The combined effect of such traps has been to produce the “they” complex, the prevailing attitude of mind which, when faced with a problem, expresses itself in the effortless phrase, “they should do something about it.”

If you do not admit that “they” are expected to fix almost everything these days, then you have not been to many political meetings lately.

I guess that Labor Party meetings spend most of their time begging or demanding that the Government “they” kiss almost everything better because this is their avowed philosophy.

But at Liberal meetings we spend most of our working time asking for some kind of government intervention or other.

It is true that we usually begin our meetings by making ostentatious obeisance at the private enterprise shrine but we seldom allow these formalities to distract us from our stern determination to buy popularity by sacrificing this principle on the altar of political power.

I have no inside information as to how the Country Party meetings overcome any philosophical problems of this nature they may meet.

But I have a shrewd idea that they would not waste too much time and effort worrying about such niceties; if the government cow was in the bail, they would just grab a big bucket and go to it.

They are a bit like Ginger, who when the retreat was sounded, said he didn’t want to be hindered by any plurry horse.