



A MODEST MEMBER

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Giving the States cash — and power

Mavis says that I should get on the “State” bandwaggon while there is still room.

It is true that I may be a member of the Commonwealth Parliament but I’m not a member of the Commonwealth Government. (Mavis wept a little here.) So I am free to kick the Commonwealth Government if it helps me become popular again. I know that my fellow citizens see their State as a poor little helpless person being clobbered by a big, callous Commonwealth. So surely kicking the Commonwealth ought to be a good thing for me to do.

I suppose the first thing to press for is a return of more taxing powers from the Commonwealth to the States. This is what the State Premiers are always asking for. But my previous experience of trying to help them in this has saddened me. This is what happened.

Before I was elected I had a very limited knowledge of things political. I was only really sure of two things: one was that MPs were all grossly overpaid. The other was that the poor little States ought to have their taxing powers back. So, soon after my election, I presented myself before my State Premier and reported that I was his eager ally in his bitter battle against the Commonwealth. I expected him to be excited — he wasn’t — only startled.

After making sure that he had heard me right, he admitted rather shamefacedly that I shouldn’t take too literally all he said publicly. He said in his friendliest tones:

To tell the truth, my dear fellow, the present system rather suits me. The Commonwealth gets the odium of raising the money and then I get the money from the Commonwealth, complaining all the while that it is not enough, and then I give it back to the citizens and they love me for it. If there is not enough I blame it all on you. If you don’t mind, I’d rather leave the present system as it is.

Then he went on to tell me that if he thought he wasn’t getting enough from the Commonwealth, he used to go round and see the State newspaper and get it to twist the Commonwealth’s tail. This the editor always did with cunning and enthusiasm because he knew his readers hated the big Commonwealth and sympathised with their poor little State. Then the infuriated citizens usually turned on their Federal MPs and made their lives hell and so often more money was forthcoming.

This private view of a public problem was the first shock to my political purity. However, since then I have found that other people have had the same sad experience. I found a piece of poetry written some time ago, when the States were even then asking for more taxing powers. With a State official purporting to talk to his Commonwealth colleagues, the verse went like this:

*We thank you for the offer of the cow
But we can’t milk, so we answer now,
We answer with a loud, resounding chorus
You keep the cow and do the milking for us.*

Eccles says that it is clear that there is a big problem in the financial relationships between the States and the Commonwealth but it is not the one that Premiers are always sounding off about. He says that it really centres around the fact that money is more likely to be well spent if the chap that does the spending does the collecting.

The present system is working badly. The States get their money from the Commonwealth, spend too much of it on questionable housekeeping, on doing things that make them popular but which are often unnecessary or luxurious. They then complain that they haven't enough to spend on hospitals or schools or other emotive matters.

I was just working myself up into a lather about the low cunning of the States, how they were unwisely spending the money that the generous Commonwealth had selflessly collected for them, when Eccles said that we were just as bad. He complained:

Look at the Ord scheme. The only reason you could be silly enough to throw money around like that must have been that you thought there were votes in it. Before each election I can always feel a dam coming on. You give money to the States for silly things just because you think it will make you popular. The truth is, the present division of financial power leads to a lot of wasteful spending by both State and Commonwealth. You ought to stop it.

Cripes, it's a hard world. All I intended to do was to go out and painlessly pick up a few votes!

government as far as possible from farming.”