



A MODEST FARMER

The Australian Financial Review, 13 June 1980

Once on a feather bed, what to do next?

Last week we discussed two aspects of feather beds and the behaviour of their occupants.

The first was that feather beds are only comfortable if not crowded and the second, if the beds get too comfortable, they become very attractive to rough and rude competitors who sometimes elbow their way on board.

This happened with Uniroyal and Ansett and it is always likely.

There are other attributes common to feather beds and their occupants.

One is that they usually receive the loyalty of the people who service them.

Now I have to choose my words with great care when I talk about the services rendered to people on feather beds.

The city slickers among you will not understand my problem but I can illustrate it best by telling this story.

Years ago, Mavis and I were travelling in a ship along the coast of W.A. As we were getting dressed in the cabin one morning I asked Mavis which day it was.

She replied that it was Sunday. "I wonder if the captain is having a service this morning?" I asked.

Mavis, being a country girl, snapped back, "It doesn't matter about his private life as long as he is driving the ship."

So when I talk about the people and groups who service the occupants of feather beds, I hasten to assure you that everything is conducted in a most proper way.

For instance, the Australian Shippers Council became necessary to counter the power of the shipping conferences.

The regulation of taxi numbers in Canberra has necessitated a staff of civil servants to do the regulating.

Keeping the two-airline policy on an even keel necessitates, or it used to anyway, the back-up of a large number of dedicated civil servants in the Transport Department.

So for the best of reasons, the feather bed occupants are cared for by a large number of people who have a vested interest in the continuation of the feather bed in their area.

They would not admit that it was self-interest that made them so attached to them but I guess that there is more of this than they know. And in many cases, most of the expertise in an industry is either in the bed, or in those who service the bed, so it is often unusually difficult to dismantle it or even pinch a few feathers out of the mattress.

And frequently the people adversely affected by the particular advantages given to the people on the bed are spread thinly through the community so their influence is not as direct and so not as politically powerful as the more concentrated group who benefit from the privileged position they have obtained.

The inbuilt bias of government departments towards the feather beds they serve is frequently transferred across to their political masters.

Frequently a minister stands guard over his department's organisation like a cow over its calf. Wal Fife did it with the Narcotics Bureau. Peter Nixon did it with his two-airline policy when he was the Minister for Transport.

I would be surprised if he does not regard it with a more jaundiced eye now that it belongs to another minister. And ministers are usually busy and harassed people, so I can well understand how a minister must be tempted to let his feather bed coast quietly along and how he must hate some sod who starts to rock it.

There is then an understandable tendency for politicians and civil servants to let sleeping dogs lie if they are allowed to do this on feather beds.

However, besides these worthy and dedicated supporters who serve the feather beds, there are other groups who stand guard over them, whose motives are not so pure.

For instance, I guess the Painters and Dockers Union would fiercely defend the privileged position granted the Australian National Line under the Navigation Act. The ANL cow might be more difficult to milk if she wasn't on her feather bed. (I seem to have got my metaphors a bit mixed!) And I suppose that Waterside Workers would do the same.

I am sure that the same kind of thinking influences the owners of quotas to import clothing and footwear.

In past years, these people used to fight valiantly to import more of the goods they were selling. But now that they have been given a licence to import a limited amount of goods that has been denied to their competitors, they happily go along with the system.

Their previous opposition has been purchased at the price of keeping their competitors out of their feather bed.

That is enough about the general attitudes of feather bed occupants and those that serve them for good reasons and bad. I hope that we will be able to have a quick look at the Canberra taxi feather bed next week.