



A MODEST MEMBER

The Australian Financial Review, 11 January 1974

Can't pull the wool over Farmer Fred

I quickly learnt, soon after becoming an MP, that if my electors questioned the accuracy of any of my statements, to reply that my opinion was the result of "research in depth."

This immediately gave the impression that I had been poring over masses of literature while locked in a garret.

"Research" by itself is eminently respectable, but "research in depth" is quite irresistible.

My audience were usually unaware that the facts that I had been propounding had often been gleaned from some half-digested information gathered by some ill-informed journalist like myself.

But if I claimed it to be the result of "research in depth" then it took real courage to contest it.

But my particular personal problem is Fred who knows me all too well, having farmed alongside me long before I became an MP.

He knows too much about me for my comfort.

The first time I tried this "research in depth" gambit on him he didn't say anything but I could see his slow, cynical mind grinding away.

The second time he just snorted.

But the third time he was bold enough to get up in the back of the hall and say that he thought I was talking through my hat.

This saddened me but when I explained my problem to Mavis, she, as usual, had a ready solution.

"The next time he questions your opinions, dear," she advised, "say that your facts are based on research using a computer. That'll fix him. Even Fred will not question the decision of a computer."

This seemed an eminently sensible and simple solution. Few of my constituents, and particularly myself, know how a computer works.

We know it murmurs away wisely in a dignified way if you feed it cards with the correct writing on them.

Every now and again it takes a big breath and squirts out of a lot of information into a metal basket standing attentively by.

We know if you feed it wrong information it is likely to get sulky and refuse to give its milk down. But we don't really understand it so it frightens us.

The awe with which we hold computers is compounded by the veneration with which great intellectuals like Eccles regard the animal.

I have a sneaking suspicion that even Eccles doesn't know how the thing works, although of course he wouldn't admit this.

Eccles genuflects if he is in the presence of one and I always expect him to take his shoes off in its presence or back away when leaving.

So I thought Mavis' advice to get a computer into the act to support my rather shaky arguments was sound. And it worked, too.

The next time when Fred expressed disbelief at my arithmetic, I trotted out the computer and that fixed him.

And it worked the second time, though I could see he wasn't going to continue to take this lying down. I should have been more careful.

At my next meeting I was laying down the law about the price of wool.

I admit my arithmetic has always been weak but the position had been made infinitely worse by all these newfangled metric measurements.

But when I stated that 210c a kilogram was equivalent to 123,73265 pence a lb, I could see that Fred was not going to take this as gospel, so I quickly added that my statement was backed up by research in depth and the final result had been obtained from a computer.

There was a general murmur of approval and respect at this statement so I went eloquently on, but Fred got out his notebook and a stub of pencil and went laboriously to work.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye and my apprehension did nothing to help my eloquence.

When I sat down there was general, if restrained, applause and some questions which I answered with the fast footwork which a politician acquires.

But all the time Fred was doing his sums, muttering away at his tables and wearing a worried frown.

Just before the vote of thanks he got to his feet and said that 210c a kilogram was equivalent to 114.305184 pence a lb. and either the computer or I was telling lies, and if I was wrong on this occasion, I was probably wrong on others.

Then he said truculently that he hoped he wouldn't ever again hear me mention research in depth and invoke a computer as an authority either.

But it was good while it lasted!