



ECONOMICS MADE EASY

Foreword

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As I was learning to read and write as a boy in southern New South Wales, Bert Kelly was teaching his own family the same lessons on their struggling property in South Australia. By the end of my university years, C. R. Kelly had become the Liberal Member for Wakefield, and had begun twenty memorable but often lonely years of politics in Canberra.

Just as sunlight is the best disinfectant, so laughter is the best medicine for our ills. For all and more of those twenty years, Bert Kelly has made people laugh so that they can see things seriously. But his writing, even at its most pointed, has never had the cruel edge of satire. “The Modest Member” has made his point by gentle whimsy, with an absence of malice which had endeared him even to his opponents.

Or, at least to most of them: in every community, those who peddle shallow logic leading down the wrong track are often those whose skins are thinnest. Bert Kelly has not been popular with every bureaucrat or economist or farm lobbyist or businessman, because he has always had the courage to point when the “Emperor has no clothes”.

“The Modest,” whether as Farmer or Member, has always tended to undue modesty about his pieces. Yet they have been the reverse of the most common tendency in politics — for the speeches to be full of air, and vice versa.

No assembled battery of economists could ever have had the impact of his phrase about the easy “development” promises of Australian election campaigns — “My gawd, I feel another dam coming on!”

Why is Bert Kelly worth reading again and again and again? Partly, it is because of his gentle laughter about the way all of us do things. Partly, it is because, in an Australia increasingly citified, he has been able to preserve some of the man-on-the-land awareness of the realities.

Not everything can be done at once. What you did to the bottom paddock last year controls your choices about what you plant or graze in it next year. The customer is often remote, most of the time right, and is not interested in your complaints anyway. When a kindly government offers “to help you”, it is *your* money they are spending, and their advice may not be to your taste or your benefit. If, in that memorable phrase, the bureaucrat can really foresee better than the market, “why are there not more bureaucrats sitting in the South of France with their feet in a bucket of champagne?”

Bert Kelly uses country words and country ways, and we do wisely not to forget their meaning. “Pull the other teat” is a highly practical instruction, for someone who struggled to have a heifer let down her milk, not simply a rude piece of Strine.

In every western democracy, the main current of the last thirty years has been to denigrate people in public life. Politics is said to offer yesterday's answers to today's problems. The politician is said to approach every problem with an open mouth, while sitting on the fence and keeping an ear to the ground.

Bert Kelly has written wisdom, not cynical wisecracks. In making politics both human and funny, he has as in so many other ways gone "against the tide". Even in business, he has had critics who found his defence of free market principles incompatible with short-term profit. He has done more for private enterprise than all the sermons and White Papers in the world, with his homely point about governments meaning well and going badly:

An economy is like a bucket of worms,
It is changing and turning all the time,
And if it isn't changing it dies,
And the smell is awful.

I hope many younger Australians will come to these articles with delight, for the truths concealed in their earthy and gently whimsy. Each of us, if we are honest, will recognise parts of ourselves in Mavis, Eccles, and the rest of the cast. When confrontation and namecalling are stock forms of debate, it does us all a service to learn — and re-learn — that shouting loud and long need not be as effective as gentle persuasion.