



DAVE'S DAIRY

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Keen to see northern Australia develop ...

Clarkson is all excited about the new Ministry formed by the new Prime Minister, Mr Holt. He's probably a bit downcast because he wasn't made Prime Minister himself, but he won't admit this. Nevertheless, he is very pleased that Dr Forbes has been promoted to Minister for Health.

When he told me about this I agreed that Dr Forbes would be the man, particularly as he is a doctor. But evidently he is not a health doctor, he is a Doctor of Political Science, whatever that may be.

Clarkson proceeded to give me a description of his recent trip to the Ord River scheme in northern Western Australia. He went up there to have a look at the scheme because the Commonwealth Government has been asked by the Western Australian Government to assist it to the extent of 130m. of the taxpayers' money.

So Clarkson thought he ought to go and see whether he thought this was a good thing to do.

The trouble evidently is that the only crop they can make out of growing in the area is cotton. They can grow sugar cane and they can grow grain sorghum, and perhaps they might be able to make money out of these in the future. But the only crop they have economically proved they can make money from is cotton.

And it seems it is quite possible that the people in northern New South Wales can grow cotton cheaper than they can on the Ord River.

As Australia only needs the production of around about 100,000 acres of cotton to supply her own requirements and as there are probably 50,000 acres that can be grown cheaper in other parts of Australia, then it looks as if the Ord River would only have a potential to grow about 50,000 acres.

And, as there will be at least 150,000 acres to be used for irrigation if the big dam is built, then it is desperately important to do one of two things, either to find other cash crops which are profitable, or to find out if they can produce cotton profitably at export parity prices.

There does not seem to be much sense in spending £30m in building dams to grow sugar when we cannot sell what we grow now. And it seems a bit risky to concentrate only on cotton, particularly in an area which grows naturally the natural host of the pests of cotton.

This is evidently the reason why the Ord spraying costs are so much higher than in northern New South Wales.

To produce profitably at export parity prices, Clarkson says that the farmers would have to increase their yields from about 2,000 lb of seed cotton per acre to about 3,000. The farmers

are optimistic about doing this, but farmers are always optimistic, and I think Clarkson thinks they ought to wait until they have shown they can do this, and not just in one year either.

Clarkson is emphatic that the people of Australia are very keen to see northern Australia develop. I am, too. I'm all for it. But I don't want it done at my expense.

I get pretty angry about the Government using my money subsidising the clearing of Brigalow land in Queensland, when they wouldn't help me clear mine. And although I would like to see the Ord scheme go ahead, I don't like having to use my income tax money to do it.

And even if the most optimistic yields are received, it certainly seems as if the farmers will be getting their water for nothing, at my expense. What particular virtues irrigation farmers have that dry land farmers have not, I have yet to find out.

And in any case, if the Government has £30m of my (and your) money to spend on northern development, and if it is important to spend it to make themselves popular (which I doubt), then I have a rough idea there are a lot better ways of spending it in northern Australia.

Clarkson agrees with this, but he says politicians like building dams, probably so they can declare them open with fitting phrases, such as "the desert will blossom as the rose" and so on. The temptation to make good fellows of themselves by doing this will probably mean that we will build the dam and grow a lot of cotton we can't sell, except at a loss.

There may be some sense in this but I can't see it. And, even if there is, I wish they wouldn't use my money to make good fellows of themselves doing it.