



A MODEST FARMER

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How a well meaning Government can be so stupid

There is a nasty, mean streak in both Fred and Eccles that has surprised and disappointed me.

Eccles, being an economist, is always miserable but he has never been really nasty before. Fred has many reasons for being miserable, but just because he is nearly broke is no reason for him to be mean also.

Now that Eccles has tracked me down, he is likely to suddenly appear, particularly on weekends.

Fortunately he doesn't stay with us; I suppose he has heard over the mulga wire that Mavis has a powerful bait ready for him.

He usually stays with Fred and I am afraid they have an unhealthy influence on each other. They spend most of their time plotting how to make members of Parliament face up to the tariff problem; how best to twist their ears so that their smart footwork does not enable them to dodge the issue.

I help them in this as best I can, and we often have informal little meetings to prepare our stratagems. But at our last meeting there was an unpleasant little scene which showed up the nasty streak in both Fred and Eccles.

Perhaps I unwittingly began it all by saying that I could not understand how our well-meaning Government, with such a well developed sense of responsibility, could behave in such an economically primitive manner about tariffs.

I reminded them that even Mr Sinclair now recognised that the tariff burden is borne by exporters in the end, yet almost daily the Government increased this burden.

Then I reminded them that increasing tariffs did not mean an automatic increase in employment as the lavish protection for the car industry shows.

Then warming to my work, I pointed out that it was odd for the Government to encourage installation of labour-saving machinery by giving investment allowances and at the same time to refuse to lower tariffs because doing this would encourage the use of labour-saving machinery.

You will remember how critical Mr Fraser was about this technology last year.

But the most weighty condemnation of the Government's tariff policy was made by Sir John Crawford in his closing contribution at the recent Outlook Conference.

I would like to quote it all but I must be content with this pregnant paragraph:

We really cannot have, on the one hand, major policies that are inward looking — as it were for home consumption only — and on the other, expect the world to give us freer access to their markets without the reciprocal entry such a demand invites.

You will remember the Prime Minister's recent condemnation of EEC countries for "adopting policies inimical to the freer flow of world trade" while in almost the same breath announcing the imposition of even higher barriers against the importation of foreign cars.

Now I was rather pleased with the way I was handling the subject but I thought I should give the others a chance to say how much they had enjoyed my contribution, so I ended by saying that I could not understand how such a splendid well-meaning Government could be so stupid about tariffs.

This is where Eccles and Fred disgraced themselves. Fred said there could only be one explanation of the Government's reprehensible tariff behaviour and that was that the captains of secondary industry must be making generous contributions to party funds.

I was naturally horrified at this suggestion and appealed to Eccles to back me up. But he wouldn't, he said that that was the only reason he could see for the Government acting as foolishly as it did.

Then the meeting broke into an uproar but fortunately the majority of the meeting agreed with me.

But what Fred and Eccles said, and the nasty way they said it, has made me review my opinion about the Labor Party suggestion that we should make it compulsory for all large contributions to political party funds be made public.

I have always opposed this in the past but I wouldn't now.

If such legislation was enacted, the scathing comments of Fred and Eccles could easily be dismissed. But now I am desperately searching for some reasonable explanation of the Government's queer behaviour.