



A MODEST FARMER

The Australian Financial Review, 31 March 1978

When I buy cattle, why does Fred start to sell?

In these disagreeable days it is nice to find a subject about which everyone agrees.

We all admit that there is need for considerable readjustment in secondary industry, that if some groups continue in their present shape and location this would impose too great a burden on the community in general and on the exporters in particular.

Both the Green and White Papers recognised that there had to be a general shift away from the present dependence on high tariffs.

But it has now become recognised that it would be too traumatic to expect industry to readjust too quickly because of the human as well as the social costs involved.

So it is with general satisfaction that we saw a committee set up under the chairmanship of Sir John Crawford to advise what machinery should be set up to help industry readjust.

Groups all over Australia will be busy preparing submissions to the committee and Eccles thinks that our small unofficial farmers' group should also prepare one.

He is always nagging us that we must do more thinking for ourselves, instead of leaving everything to our producer organisations.

So we set about doing this — and without any help from Eccles, who disappeared into his ivory tower as soon as he had finished lecturing us.

We realised that we must limit ourselves to a narrow area of interest and preferably one of which we had some knowledge.

Fred said sourly that while ignorance had been no barrier to eloquence while I was in Parliament, now that I was an ordinary citizen again public displays of ignorance would be frowned upon.

Our submission centred around one important point.

We had noticed that many secondary industry leaders had often said that they would accept that there was a need for high-cost industries to shift into other kinds of production, but the Government should tell them into which other industries they should shift.

This sounds a logical and sensible suggestion until you examine it closely and then you can see its inherent dangers.

And farmers should see them clearer than most people.

Each year the Bureau of Agricultural Economics puts on the Outlook Conference but it is careful not to tell farmers what we should produce.

It marshals all the facts and figures and presents them to us so that we can make our own decisions in the light of this advice.

The last time the Government told farmers what to grow was way back in 1929 when they told us to grow more wheat — which we did.

Immediately the bottom fell out of the wheat market and the Government and the farmers have been licking that wound ever since.

When I became an MP, Fred and his fellow farmers used to watch what I did because they knew that I was close to the foundations of wisdom in Canberra, so would get inside information from the wise ones.

If I bought cattle, so did they. And 19 years later they were still watching me, but when I bought cattle, they sold.

They learnt the hard way that governments are just as likely to be wrong in making judgments about future market movements as us ordinary citizens.

But if the Government were foolish enough to tell farmers what to grow, they would be right sometimes, but even then dangers would loom. Even in our small group there are some farmers who seem to always make a mess of everything.

If they were told to grow barley they would not recover their costs of production, so they would go whingeing to the Government, saying “You told us to grow barley, now you look after us.”

And most governments would be silly enough to do so.

This tendency to expect governments to “kiss it better” was noticed way back in 1929 by the Brigden Committee when reporting on the tariff. I quote from the report:

The most disquieting effect of the tariff has been the stimulus it has given to demands for government assistance of all kinds, with the consequent demoralising effect on self-reliant efficiency throughout all forms of production.

If that was true in 1929, how much more would it apply in 1978? We have now become a nation of leaners.

All sections are far too ready to ask the Government to tell them what to do next and then to complain to the Government that the results have been disappointing.

And all the time we preen ourselves about our belief in free enterprise ...