



DAVE'S DAIRY

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Schemes fix market needs ... no more

Critical as Clarkson has been about other aspects of our marketing schemes, he evidently has been reserving the full weight of his disapproval for those schemes that are designed to produce what the market needs, and no more.

“We will make a realistic estimate of what the demand will be and then we will tailor the supply to fit the demand,” the advocates of these schemes announce to a respectful and bemused audience.

“And what could possibly go wrong with that?” you may ask. “Surely that is what big business does. They make a realistic market survey to find out what kind of product is needed and then they set to work to supply the demand. Why should farmers not get the Government or some marketing board to do the same?”

But then the troubles start.

The first problem is that the price for most of our farm products is determined overseas, and assessing the supply and demand situation in an overseas market is not an easy exercise if we were dealing with farms as factories.

But we can't do that just because farm production is so much influenced by the weather.

Now there will be some people who kid themselves on their ability to foretell the weather cycles in our district and in our State, and a few, but only very few, who think they can do so for Australia, as a whole.

But surely none can guess the weather right across the world.

And if you get the weather right, what about the politics which also influence the supply and demand for farm products? For instance, who could have foretold the influence on world trade of the actions of the oil-producing countries a few years ago?

Because of the difficulty in assessing the world-wide picture of the supply and demand situation for any farm product, Clarkson is always giving us a grim warning.

He says again and again that if any servant of the Government or of industry can correctly foretell the supply and demand situation for any product, then this person, no matter how dedicated he is, is not for long working for the Government; he is shortly sitting in the south of France with his feet in a bucket of champagne!

I guess Clarkson is right about this. Farmers are often inclined to credit civil servants with superior wisdom, particularly if they are working in some rightly respected group, such as the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE).

He said that these are indeed splendid people and more likely to be right than the rest of us, and may even average about 50 pc right if they are lucky and wise.

Even if these people are right, as they must be sometimes, the fact that their prophecies are made public tends to automatically make them wrong.

For instance, if the BAE were silly enough (which they aren't) to tell us that bacon is going to be dear next year, many farmers would set to work to produce more pigs, so bacon would be likely to be cheaper, not dearer.

I have a wise old farmer living near me who hasn't got a degree in economics or business administration or anything like that. Indeed, I don't know if he had any secondary schooling, but he makes a lot of money all the same.

One day I was telling him that I was thinking of going in for growing oil seeds, which is what the wise ones were advising farmers to grow that year.

“Well, Dave,” he said after hearing me patiently to the end, “you do what you think is best, my boy, but I have one golden rule that I follow in these things. When everyone else runs I walk, but when they walk I'm off like blazes.”

I would be a lot better off today if I had followed that wise dictum instead of chasing frantically each fresh hare put up by well-meaning marketing experts.

Farmers in our district ought to be more aware than most of the danger of taking as gospel the marketing advice of the experts.

After all, we have Clarkson in our midst and we know that he, because he is a Member of Parliament, has access to all the wisdom in Canberra.

When he first became our member, we used to watch what he did, hoping to ride in on the waves of wisdom acquired by Clarkson.

But now, when he sells his cattle, we buy. Long experience and careful watching over the fence and close questioning of his staff have taught us that he is more likely to be wrong than right.

Yet the old coot has the nerve to lecture us about marketing!