



## **A MODEST FARMER**

*The Australian Financial Review, 6 October 1978*

### **A rather crude man got stuck into me at the discussion**

Earlier this year, I was asked to talk about industry reconstruction following tariff reductions to a meeting of Labor Party economists, and I gladly accepted.

I don't get many opportunities to give tongue these days, and I knew that Eccles would do all the work, so there would be no great mental effort involved.

My speech went off all right, in a tired kind of way.

A chap sitting right in front of me went to sleep almost immediately but long and bitter experience has taught me how to handle such cases.

I stopped in my tracks and asked the man sitting next to him to wake him up and tell him it got better later. From then on no one was brave enough to go to sleep, no matter how much they wanted to.

During the discussion period a rather crude man got stuck into me and I have a suspicion that he had been practising at home because it kind of came rolling out of him.

But, as I explained to him afterwards in my fatherly fashion, I have been belted by the best people in the land and his efforts were rather feeble compared to experts like Jack McEwen.

But the rest of the audience treated me with kindness, as I knew they would, I being their guest.

After the conclusion of the tariff session they asked me to stay on for the rest of the proceedings, which was a privilege I appreciated. And I could not help being impressed with the idealism that many of the participants showed.

They are very different from Eccles who is a miserable man with a mean attitude towards life.

These Labor Party economists were different; they were brimming over with the milk of human kindness.

They had plans of many kinds, designed to improve the lot of the common man. But they came hard up against one fundamental problem, namely, where was the money coming from?

They were well equipped with figures which proved that the Australian rate of tax was not exceptionally high but they were only too well aware that it wasn't going to be easy to convince the man in the street of this.

But they had two pathetic hopes. One was that if only they could get close alongside the ordinary citizen and could explain to him in clear simple terms that if he paid more tax it would do him more good than harm, then he would accept it.

But their trouble is that explaining the tax rate structure in clear simple terms is not altogether easy.

I have often tried doing this to Fred but after listening for about five minutes he wanders away. My mind boggles at the difficulty of telling the whole country that paying more tax is really a good thing.

Others at the conference hoped that ways could be found to stop taxation evasion and avoidance. And I notice that the Treasurer has high hopes here also.

I am very much on their side because, if all the taxation bolt-holes were closed, it would be much fairer for the ordinary citizen.

And perhaps, if the exercise was as successful as I would like it to be, then we might even see a reduction in taxation as a result.

So I am all in favour of stopping the taxation bolt-holes, but I warn the Treasurer that it will not be easy.

If he had done as much rabbiting as I, he wouldn't be too hopeful.

I remember how, before myxo, I would spend a week getting the last rabbit out of a paddock until I was sure that I had the last hole stopped and every burrow fumigated.

Then I would go home and boast to Mavis that this time I had the sods beaten. And when I went out the next day all the holes would still be closed.

But the next day there would be one tiny hole opened from the inside but not a rabbit in sight, but three weeks later there would be rabbits hopping about all over the place.

Nothing clarifies a man's mind, they say, like the knowledge that he is going to hang in the morning. And nothing stimulates the inventiveness of the ordinary citizen like the knowledge that the Government is about to pinch too much of his hard-earned money.

Once the Government take approaches 30 per cent, the financial morality of people tends to disappear. I know it does with me.

The real trouble with the world is the people in it; there are too many of them like me.

Mavis has been dropping heavy hints about the dedication of my book.

"Most authors dedicate their first book to their wives," she said wistfully, "who are you going to dedicate yours to, dear?" I suppose she will win in the end.