



A MODEST FARMER

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Being loved by all is not always a good thing

When I was a Member of Parliament I had to be careful what I wrote in these articles.

I had the politician's natural urge to be loved by all, and this was reinforced by Mavis's grim determination that I did not miss a step on the ladder of political advancement by saying something irritating about anything.

But now that I am washed up on the political beach I can now say what I think, and the only problem I have is my appointment as ambassador to Outer Mongolia. But I am not really keen to go there, so I will take a chance and write about our treatment of Aborigines.

No one could say that we are being miserable with our money as far as Aborigines are concerned.

Besides the cost of social services that everyone receives, such as aged, invalid, unemployment and similar benefits, the 136,226 people who claimed to be Aborigines received, in addition, \$161,537,000 in the last financial year, or \$1,185 per person. So clearly we are not being mean. But are we being wise?

It would be easy for me to stand on the sidelines and criticise the many past examples of administrative extravagance, but having seen some of the immense difficulties of spending money wisely on Aborigines, I will resist the temptation to pick holes in the way the money is being spent; rather, I want to discuss what we are spending it for.

Most people say that we are spending money to make Aborigines happy. Well, if that is so, I don't think we can claim that we are getting much Aboriginal happiness for every dollar spent.

But I have an uneasy feeling that we mostly spend this money to make ourselves, not the Aborigines, feel better.

There are two reasons for us wanting to feel better about Aborigines.

First, there is the pressure from the United Nations and similar bodies who are always waiting to tip a bucket of criticism on us for our neglect of our native people.

But I can't help thinking, rather wryly, that these criticisms sound a bit thin coming from some African States who have lately been busy carving up both Africans and Europeans into small pieces.

Evidently we are prepared to spend a lot of money to dodge this criticism, even if it is not well based.

However, the main reason why the expenditure of large lumps of money on Aborigines makes us feel better is that many people have acute feelings of guilt because of the way some of our ancestors treated Aborigines when the country was first settled.

So in order to quieten these feelings we are prepared to squander a lot of money, much of which we know in our hearts is bad for Aborigines because it encourages them to sit around waiting for handouts.

But placating this feeling of guilt is not a good reason for spending money unwisely.

It reminds me of the story of George, a large ignorant man, who went some years ago to see the film *Quo Vadis* which told the story of the Crucifixion.

He was so moved by the film that when he came outside he belted the daylights out of a Jewish friend of his.

When he had finished the Jew said through his bruised and battered lips: "What's wrong with you, George? Why are you behaving like this? I thought you were a friend of mine."

"It's because of what you Jews did to Jesus," George explained.

"But that was 2,000 years ago," the Jew said angrily. "Why pick on me now?"

"Because I've just heard about it," was George's reply.

Doing foolish but generous things to placate our feelings of guilt for what happened in the distant past seems about as sensible as George thrashing the poor Jew.

I also have an uneasy feeling that there is at least some nonsense talked about the Aborigines' attachment to their land.

I know that it is difficult for a European to measure the depth of this feeling and there may be many occasions when it is sincere.

But I know that there are a lot of cunning Aborigines, as there are many cunning white people.

Now that land rights is so often talked about in the Northern Territory, there is a considerable movement away from settlements to what they call outstations.

And at least some of this movement is thought to be activated by the thought that such an Aborigine might have a stronger claim to outstation land for which he has suddenly discovered strong bonds of affection.

Foolish people think that Aborigines are not as cunning as we are, but they are like the rest of us; if the Government cow is in the bail, we all quickly arrive with a bucket.

Summing it all up, we spend large amounts of money on Aborigines, but we certainly are not making large numbers of them happy. But I am afraid that this isn't the object of the exercise.