



## A MODEST MEMBER

*The Australian Financial Review*, 11 September 1970

### **Compulsory voting — new lesson in letting sacred cows (like sleeping dogs) lie?**

Mavis has done her best to see that I never disobey her wise injunction about sacred cows. “Never disturb them, dear,” she advised. “Pat them if you like, or milk them if you can, but never irritate them.”

She was quite right, of course — she usually is.

So each time I find a sacred cow lying down, chewing its cud quietly in the political field, I walk round it in a wide arc.

It is true that it may be chewing its cud contentedly and making milk. It also may be making a mess.

The trouble is you can’t tell until you make it stand up.

And a cow, when disturbed and made to stand up, always does something almost immediately which I couldn’t mention in such a dignified journal as this.

It is true that the cow can’t throw it, but politicians and other people might. So I am now careful to let sacred cows lie.

All the same, I wish I could disturb the compulsory voting cow.

People are always asking me why we have compulsory voting, and I look wise and say in an off-hand way that I thought everyone knew the answer and they ought to be ashamed of themselves for asking such a silly question.

This usually forms a smokescreen behind which I can retreat.

I tried this out on old Fred, but it didn’t work. After the smoke had cleared away, he was still there.

“The only reason you politicians think compulsory voting is good,” he snarled, “is because you got elected under this system, so you think it must be good. In actual fact, this proves the system is bad.”

I don’t think Fred likes Members much.

I had a talk to Eccles about it.

He told me that compulsory voting was brought in and could be justified in the days before cars were common, when rich people with cars could carry people to vote, and so could expect to collect votes that way.

However, as voting is secret you couldn't really count on this.

A friend of mine stood for election at a district meeting 60 miles away. He took the precaution to take along a carload of friends to vote for him.

When the votes were counted he found he only had one vote. He said it was a long, silent and pregnant drive home.

But the argument that rich candidates have advantages over poor candidates is now only academic with cars so common. So why do we make people vote?

No political candidate who has knocked on doors in an election campaign will ever forget the reception of some people who come blinking out into the sunlight, stare stupidly at you and then say, "Do we have to vote?"

When you say, "Yes," they usually explain that both parties are crook anyway, or that they intend to vote informal.

Everyone knows that the position of a candidate on the voting paper is important in attracting the "donkey vote," particularly in Senate elections.

And all this fuss about How to Vote cards at election time would be unnecessary, as you would assume that if people were interested enough to come to the polling place, they would know how to vote.

Eccles says that democracy is a very difficult system to make work even with an educated, interested and intelligent electorate.

To drive the uninterested elector to the poll to express an uninformed opinion is, according to Eccles, to be handicapping the democratic system unnecessarily.

And, as you can so simply draft the electorate into two groups, one interested enough to want to vote, and the other not interested, it seems silly not to do it, in this painless, pleasant and popular way. When I mentioned to Mavis that I was worrying about this question she begged me not to say anything about it.

"It's not for us to question things, dear," she said. "Let the sacred cow lie. Look what happened when you disturbed the immigration cow."

So I won't say anything about it. But I do wish someone would take pity on me and tell me, in simple terms that I could understand, why compulsory voting is necessary now.

Not why it was brought in — I can follow that. But why now?

Perhaps it is a bit like immigration — we don't know how to stop.