



A MODEST MEMBER

The Australian Financial Review, 9 October 1970

Should we continue to educate the unwilling?

The last sacred cow I tentatively disturbed was the compulsory voting cow. I got no votes by so doing, though a lot of people have again written in to ask if I found out why we do things this way, would I please let them know?

I am now worrying about the education cow. This cow is not only sacred but she has a very loud and penetrating bellow. She is certainly not a cow to be lightly irritated, or indeed quietly milked.

It was Eccles who started me off on this profitless path.

Mavis has felt for some time that I do not put enough sentiment into my speeches, that there should be a heart throb or two stuck away in all the solid stuff about wheat and wool and tariffs.

So I made up a speech entitled "Our Heritage" and high on the list of the benefits bequeathed us in our heritage is "our inalienable right to a free education."

Eccles, when he heard me use the words "free education," said sourly that there was nothing in this world that was free, whatever may be the position in the next.

Far from being free, education was becoming increasingly and frighteningly expensive and was only free to some people because other people worked like galley slaves to make it all possible.

I could tell that Eccles was getting worked up about taxation so I asked him whether there was anything else on his mind about education that he wanted to unload.

There was.

What is really puzzling him is why we make education compulsory after a child turns 14 years.

He can understand that it is compulsory until 14 because up until that age most children really cannot be expected to want to go to school.

And too often the parents may want him to leave school for economic and other reasons. And, up to that age, if he is forced to stop at school against his will, he is young enough, in most cases, to be amenable to discipline.

But after that, in this permissive society, a child who is forced unwillingly to school can be a very grave problem to the majority of the class who want to learn, and even more of a problem to the teachers, and particularly to young girl teachers.

I must agree with Eccles in this because I know of many cases where 20-year-old teachers had nervous breakdowns because of the treatment handed out by louts driven unwillingly to school to while away the time until it is legal for them to leave.

A private school is at a great advantage here. If a boy becomes a disciplinary problem a private school can expel him so that he doesn't pollute the whole school. But not so the government schools.

What is the good of expelling a boy if he is forced to come back next day to either that school or another government school somewhere else?

I suppose the theory of compulsion is that some students may gain by being forced to drink from the trough of learning by having their heads held under, as it were.

But the splutterings and commotion caused by so doing will certainly distract the attention and adversely affect the performance of those who come willingly to the trough.

That the position will get worse there is no doubt, as the canker of the permissive society eats into the morality of our people. And the pressure to learn will be more insistent with the rise in the level of technology, so the student who wants to learn will feel the distraction caused by the unwilling students all the more.

There is no doubt that the position is serious. The solution seems so simple but there must be good reasons why we do as we do. Perhaps someone will tell me what it is, otherwise again I will conclude that like immigration we just don't know how to stop.

Old Fred the farmer wants me to say something about universities. I will too, but I will wait until just before I go overseas, or something.