



A MODEST FARMER

The Australian Financial Review, 22 December 1978

Farmer gave the parson a very sour reply

Recently I queried the way the Government was using taxpayers money to help Mt Lyell when the main shareholder, Associated Goldfields, either would not, or could not, use its very liquid funds for that purpose.

Since then the company has given me more information, but I still question the Government's action.

One defence has been that, as Mt Lyell is in Tasmania, it should be looked after because Tasmania has to bear more than its share of the tariff burden.

If that argument is sound, every mining show in WA should receive the same treatment.

Eccles, being a cynical sod, says the Government gives its milk down every time the Tasmanian bucket is rattled because there are five House of Representatives seats held by the Government in Tasmania.

The Government's public defence is that something had to be done to protect employment in an isolated area. But little farms, industries and mines all over outback Australia would qualify on those grounds.

Or is assistance only to be given to big companies which have made a lot of money in the past?

The benign Government, while it was in the bail and in the mood, also gave its milk down to the Chrysotile Corporation of Australia (CCA) which mines asbestos near Barraba in NSW.

This mine has been losing money for some years so the Government asked the IAC if short-term aid should be given to the mine.

That body recommended against it and the Government accepted the recommendation.

Then the NSW Government called a general election and immediately promised to help the mine.

The Commonwealth, not to be outdone, promised to do the same, in spite of the fact that CCA is mining poor quality asbestos at a cost too high for the export market.

Eccles used to say that, at each election, he could feel a dam coming on. Are we now going to do the same with mines? If not, what guidelines are we following, if any?

Eccles warns that any government action that hinders change is bad for an industry in the end.

We hurt dairy farmers by continuing the butter subsidy in the early 1960s, thus encouraging them to produce more butter when the world needed less.

So when the inevitable readjustment problems eventually had to be faced, they were more serious because government action had inhibited change. I have an uneasy feeling that we are doing this in these two cases.

This brings me to my main concern, which is the attitude of too many people to mining.

Miners are continually criticised because they are said to be digging up and exporting “the people’s heritage.”

Long association with politicians has made me suspicious when I hear people sounding off about “our heritage”: it is usually a sign that they are running low on logic.

The opponents to the export of merino rams say that merinos are our heritage, as if they were handed down from On High instead of being evolved with infinite effort and money.

Farmers who crop or graze the surface of their land do not recognise that the ordinary citizen owns the land if he, the farmer, has paid for it, cleared the scrub, picked the stones, and destroyed the vermin; he reckons it belongs to him.

Similarly, a mining company, which, after many failures, at last finds a show that looks hopeful and which then pours a lot of money into it, and takes all the risks, resents hearing that the minerals it has dug up are the heritage of the people.

It reminds me of the parson who, after visiting a successful farmer who had carved his place out of the scrub, said when leaving: “The Lord has been very gracious to you, my son, giving you this fine property.”

The farmer grunted and said sourly, “You should have seen it when He had it on His own.”

Fred says that too many miners seem ashamed of being miners. They do, indeed, seem to keep their heads well down below the parapet, making sure that they escape criticism from governments or anyone else.

They leave the tariff battle to the farmers though they know that, as exporters, they are carrying their share of the tariff burden.

“Anything to keep out of trouble” seems to be their watchword. “Let the cockies carry the can. We must be careful not to offend the Government.”

I think the miners should encourage one of their number to write a Modest Miner column in this paper so that their case could be put with sympathy and understanding. But perhaps they are too ashamed of being miners.