



A MODEST FARMER

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Planting compassion on the Apple Isle

In October I heard Senator Wriedt say on the radio that he would fight for the continuation of the present subsidy for Tasmanian apple growers.

When pressed as to whether he expected this subsidy to continue indefinitely, he replied that it should continue until the IAC could tell the apple growers how else they could profitably use their land.

Now this is the kind of statement I used to make when I felt an election looming. By so doing I hoped that people would remark on my compassion. "What a nice man is our Modest Member," I imagined people saying. "He is so kind, so considerate. We wish there were more like him."

This, then, was the kind of nonsense that I used to spout in my desperate urge to be popular at any price, but I am surprised to find Senator Wriedt behaving in the same way.

After all, he has been through the ministerial mangle and this, I thought, would have squeezed that kind of nonsense out of him.

But I hear that he is now going to stand for a Reps. seat, and this, I suppose, has brought him down to lower levels.

This is a pity, because I always held him in high regard, but now he is evidently going to behave like the rest of us, determined to be popular even at the expense of the industries we pretend to defend.

What do I say that? Well, way back in 1960, when the McCarthy Committee recommended phasing out the butter bounty and using the butter bounty money to ease dairy farmers out of dairying, instead of encouraging them to stay in it to produce more and more butter which we had more and more difficulty in selling, the Government would not accept this unpopular advice.

We all knew in our hearts that the long-term future for butter was bad, but it would have made us unpopular to say so.

So we kept the butter bounty going, and so got the industry into a bigger mess than ever. And all the time we preened ourselves on our compassion.

The apple industry can claim that, if other industries get help, they too should get handouts.

This may be true, but it will not help the industry in the end, because it will encourage people to stop in the industry when they should be leaving it, not for the economy's good, but theirs.

When we claim that help should be given to a particular industry for the sake of equity, we should remember the cartoon in *Punch* of the chap being rushed to the hospital in an ambulance after an accident and saying to the nurse through his muffled bandages: “Well, I was in the right anyway!” But he was still going to the hospital!

Most of the industries we try to help for equity’s sake we hurt in the end.

The senator can defend himself by saying that he only wants to subsidise the industry till some arm of government can tell apple growers how else to use their land.

But here the senator must know he is talking nonsense.

First, long and bitter experience has taught me that, if the Government tells me to grow something, then I should immediately grow something else.

And never follow farming fashions either. I remember the advice that a wise old farmer gave me years ago: “When everyone runs, you walk, but when they walk, you take off like blazes.”

So if the IAC was foolish enough to tell me to grow some crop other than apples, I wouldn’t touch that crop with a barge pole. Indeed, I would probably start planting apples.

But even if the Government was right in its assessment of what crop should be grown, it would still be foolish for the Government to tell farmers what to grow.

About a third of farmers are good, a third average and the rest are messers. But when the messers get into their inevitable mess, they will blame the Government.

You will hear them whine: “The Government got us into this mess, the Government must now get us out of it. Surely we too are entitled to the cost of production!”

So the silly old Government will have to do foolish things, and will get the industry into the mess that is the fate of almost all industries that the Government helps.

But Senator Wriedt must know these things. There must be an election looming.