



A MODEST MEMBER

The Australian Financial Review, 13 August 1971

Is the Budget a cargo cult?

A month or so ago we were told of a gathering of thousands of people in New Guinea who believed that if they went to a certain place at a certain time and did certain things, great wealth would suddenly be showered on them.

Many wise and or educated (there is a difference) people were either amused or sorrowful at this exhibition of placid trust by these primitive people in the “cargo cult.”

But are we much better? At this time of the year, everyone is expectantly looking to Canberra because “The Budget” is coming soon. People seem to think that if they do certain things, like marching up and down, or saying certain things, such as “making strong representations,” then the good Government will suddenly shower them with nice things.

But if it does do this it will be only because it has previously taken nice things from other people. We should not imagine Mr Snedden as a rather glamorous, whiskerless Father Christmas. He’s not like that at all, although he has indeed, a lovely, generous nature. The only thing he lacks is money. I am sure he would throw it around by the shovelful if he had any of his own. But he hasn’t. All he gives away he has to pinch from other people.

When I was young we used to grizzle at the Government (whichever Government it was). But we didn’t have radio or TV then, and we mainly grizzled for fun. But not now. We really mean it now. In those days we used to cast our burdens on the Lord. Now we cast them at the Government.

Surely we must be the most over-governed people there are. We seem to have a pathetic belief that you can fix things by passing laws. We think, in our muddled way, that we help the cause of education by passing laws forcing unwilling youths to stay at school where they become disciplinary hazards and so make it more difficult to teach those who want to learn. We pass laws making voting compulsory and think that we get a better democratic result by so doing. We pass laws stopping the export of galahs so that we have to shoot them instead to stop them eating our crops. As long as we are passing laws, we think we are solving things.

When I was a lad we had a lot of thistles on our farm. A law was gazetted declaring them to be noxious. Having heard this from my father, I went out early the next morning expecting to find the thistles wilting. They weren’t. And even now the place is still infested with thistles.

Declaring thistles noxious might well have been a necessary first step to getting rid of thistles. The next step is to get after them with a hoe. This is harder and takes much more time. It is far easier to pass the law, but not nearly so effective.

Fred perhaps would take things to the extremes. He watches the actions of all these capable and dedicated people from Mr Chipp downwards, who wear themselves out in a vain attempt to prevent people getting access to drugs. Fred is a keen student of genetic principles on his

farm and he thinks the same principles should be applied to the nation. He advocates putting a 44 gallon drum of drugs on each street corner with a notice in large letters. THESE WILL KILL YOU, BUT TAKE THEM IF YOU MUST.

Fred's idea is that you have to cull the herd somehow, and this would be the cheapest and most effective method he knows. He says that the idea of having the drugs in 44 gallon drums is to stop little kids reaching in for them. He's not stupid, not Fred!

But going back to our subject. I suppose the main reason we look to the Government for everything, far more than we used to, is that many people have paid so much income tax in the past and this money has been used to look after other people. Now these people themselves expect to be looked after. This might indeed be just and right, but it doesn't say it is the best way of governing a country.

However, going back to New Guinea and the people gathering on the mountain top awaiting the arrival of the cargo plane: they at least had the excuse that they were ignorant. We don't usually admit this as our excuse for behaving in a similar way. I suppose if we were pressed, we would admit to being more sentimental than realistic. But we all mean so well!