



A MODEST MEMBER

The Australian Financial Review, 14 May 1971

Will help for farmers get votes?

There is talk about an election so I asked Mavis to take a quick survey of the electorate to find out if my people loved me.

“They don’t, dear,” she reported back. “All those articles about inflation and taxation have done you more harm than good — they make people more confused than they were before. And anyway, you don’t really know what you are talking about,” she said sourly.

That was not very kind of Mavis, but she always gets like that after Mother’s Day has gone by. The effort of keeping that seraphic smile in place as she reads the advertisements for Mother’s Day presents gets tiring. And as soon as the day goes past, reaction sets in and she is always a bit snappy for the next two weeks.

And though it may well be true that I don’t know a great deal about economics and taxation and things like that, yet I have never known ignorance to be a barrier to eloquence when MPs make speeches, so I don’t see why the same freedom cannot also apply when they write articles.

Still, Mavis is usually right in her judgment as to how I stand politically, so I had better beat a more popular drum. So back I go to “Farm Reconstruction.” I ought to be able to wring a few votes out of this — particularly as the Government has just announced the details of this scheme.

The subject has stood me in good stead for more than a year now. It has a nice rounded sound and up to now I have allowed my constituents to think that soon the Government would bring in a scheme and all their problems would disappear.

But now the scheme has arrived and I am not quite so sure that all our troubles are over. For one thing, the debt reconstruction portion is only to help people who can’t get help from normal credit sources.

The minister says in his second reading speech: “To obtain debt reconstruction assistance an applicant must be unable to obtain finance to carry on and thus be in danger of losing his property or other assets if he is not provided with assistance.” The people who are assisted under this heading will be paying about 4 per cent interest.

Now I will have a great many more farmers who don’t qualify, who are not in danger of losing their farms, but who are having a very difficult time and, if they could transfer their commercial interest loans to these 4 per cent loans would not be in trouble later.

These farmers will hate me — and not only are there a lot of them, but they are, by definition, our best farmers.

I thought I ought to warn old Fred that the millennium was not just around the corner. He is a good farmer and is not in danger of losing his farm. His trouble is that he hasn't got any money.

So I approached him with trepidation and was relieved to find that he wasn't particularly surprised at my lame explanation.

"Stop apologising, for goodness sake," he growled. "Any one can see that the Government hasn't got enough money to help everyone, the good farmers and the bad, the lucky farmers and the unlucky, the big farmers and the small.

"They would need \$2,000 million to do that. And everyone knows that governments are hopeless at helping farmers. They always help the wrong ones in the wrong way."

Then he went on to point out that if there was drought relief, it did not go to the man who conserved fodder but to the chap who had starving stock; if there was bush fire relief, no assistance went to the bloke who had insured against fire.

"Why you should expect it to be different this time, I can't understand," he said. "You really ought to take it as a general rule that governments are hopeless at helping farmers."

He then went on to give as a further illustration the results of the last Budget's payments to woolgrowers.

It is true that some of this money went to the right people, but a lot went to the wrong people, and a lot of deserving woolgrowers got nothing.

And I know from bitter experience that, if the idea was to make my woolgrowers love me, it failed lamentably.

Fred is often dissatisfied by the size of any help he receives, but he becomes really sour about a neighbour getting a bigger helping than he gets.

I'm afraid Fred has a rather cynical attitude about governments.

He admits we sound well and often we mean well. The only trouble is that we don't do well. His golden rule is, "Keep any government as far as possible from farming."