



A MODEST MEMBER

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Will we end up subsidising one another?

I am writing this before the Budget is presented, but it will appear after the Budget. I know this is risky, because if I guess right, people will think that I was in the know, but did not tell them, so that they could buy in large amounts of grog.

Yet if I guess wrong, I will give people cause to sneer at me.

So I suppose I should say nothing about the Budget at all, but press on with high-sounding platitudes about national development or something.

And Mavis is getting very nervous about my continuing to write these articles at all. She does not think it is a safe occupation for members of Parliament these days.

I know from past experience that everyone will grizzle at the Budget, saying that it is either too mean or too generous or find some other fault.

And I know the Labor Party will launch the usual censure motion; they always do. And I know that Mavis will whimper that we could have been more generous with pensioners. And Fred will say the wool subsidy is a bit mean.

So I am not really dreading the reception that this and other Budgets will receive from the public.

And I am not really so much worried about Eccles' angry reaction. He is always miserable about something and he might as well be miserable about the Budget as something else.

The censure I dread is my own. I now realise that I have taken a passive part in a gradual process of handing over to the Government increasing responsibility for running the economy of the country.

We now have something just under 25 per cent of our work force employed by local, State or Commonwealth Government.

We have 27 per cent of the work force employed in the manufacturing industry, with about 60 per cent of these receiving tariff protection, the amount of which is decided by the Government.

Now we are in the business, in a big way, of subsidising farming as well. So this section of the economy is also being guided by Government decisions.

This means that about half of our work force is either directly employed by the Government, or directly influenced by Government decisions.

And each year we wander a little further down this crimson path of Government control.

I know it is all wrong, but I just make nice speeches about “free enterprise” and sit back and admire myself.

Governments always talk well. But it is the “doing well” that is important and hard.

To make the right decisions to guide so large a section of the economy needs not only wisdom to know what should be done, but even more important, courage to carry out the decisions.

But politicians only get elected if they are popular and popularity and courage do not often march together, at least not in the short term.

Yet not to give clear, courageous decisions as to how this large section of our economy should expand or contract is to damage the economy in general and will, in the end, damage the particular industries also.

It is easy to justify the wool subsidy and all the other farming subsidies that preceded it by saying that, if it is right for secondary industry to be subsidised by tariffs and so carried on the farmers’ back, so it is right for us to climb on to other people’s backs now that times are hard.

I am not denying this; it may indeed be equitable. What I am worrying about is where it leaves us.

We will end up as a people devoted to subsidising one another, to taking in each other’s washing, with the Government standing on point duty directing a bit more or less washing to this laundry or that.

And trying to keep its ear to the ground at the same time to catch any changes in the ground swell in the popularity ratings. This is not a picture that fills one with confidence.

So I am not really proud of myself at the most. I think, like Pontius Pilate, I will go and wash my hands.

Perhaps I ought to give myself an increase in salary after all that I have been through.