



A MODEST FARMER

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How many does it take to crowd a feather bed?

The feather beds that I wish to discuss over the next few weeks are the particular advantages given by the Government to particular people or firms, so making things comfortable for the people on the beds.

We have many such feather beds, some float (shipping conferences), some fly (two airline policies) and some drive on roads (Canberra taxis).

There are quotas for clothing and cars to look at and we may even get around to some of the producer marketing boards.

This will take some time but there is no panic. There is one quality common to most occupants of feather beds and that is they are not usually in a hurry.

That is what feather beds are for, being indolent on, so their occupants are unlikely to rush off into the undergrowth as I plod painfully after them.

In the first two articles, I will spell out some of the qualities that are common to most feather beds and their occupants.

One of these is that all feather beds have someone lying comfortably on them.

When I mentioned this surprising fact to Mavis, she snapped back that she could not remember what else feather beds were for. I did not answer her back.

However, though the occupant of the feather bed may be seen to be lying back to somnolent comfort, you will find that he (or they) will be awake in a flash if there is any suggestion that other people might be about to join them there.

Feather beds are only comfortable if not crowded.

It is certainly not a case of “the more we are together, the happier will we be.” All feather bed occupants take an active and urgent interest in keeping other people out.

The second aspect of feather beds is not so well known.

They offer a powerful temptation to rough and rude rivals who, if they see a feather bed gliding by with some of their competitors on it, they know that life will be comfortable there if only they can get aboard.

So, if they are strong and cunning enough, they will, at the expense of a bit of their own skin, and their competitors' also, often be able to clamber aboard.

This may mean that one or more of the others may be squeezed out of the other side. Feather beds are only comfortable if not crowded.

One of the advantages of being retired is that I have both the time and the inclination to listen to the reminiscences of Sir Thomas Playford.

On one occasion, Sir Tom was in America trying to induce more industry to come to South Australia. There was almost certainly an element of political or poetic licence in his description of how he found himself in the boardroom of Uniroyal, the giant American tyre company, but at last he got an appointment with the president of the company Mr X.

But Sir Tom found it hard to keep the great man's attention. He kept forgetting Sir Tom's name and where he was from.

However, once Sir Tom starts to chew an ear, he does not easily let go, as indeed I know.

Eventually, Mr X took evasive action by calling in one of his henchmen and asked him to find out if Uniroyal had any intentions of setting up a tyre factory in a place called South Australia. The man came back with a file and confirmed that the company had no interest at all in founding a factory in such an out-of-the-way place.

Mr X then said to Sir Tom, "There you are, Mr Samford, I knew we would not be interested. Sorry, but I am rather busy. Good afternoon."

Then Sir Tom says that he said, "You have been very kind, sir, and I thought that you would not be interested because there are other tyre companies in Australia and they operate under the tightly controlled cartel that keep prices high and other people out. (That was before we had our restrictive trade practice legislation.) So I can understand that you would feel diffident about tangling with them."

Mr X, who was halfway to the door, swung around.

"Is the ring tight enough to be tough?" he asked Sir Tom.

On being assured that it was Mr X said to his offsider, "On your way back from Hong Kong, you must call in and see Mr Ramford, and this place of his. If there is indeed a good strong feather bed there, I would rather like to be on it. And I don't think that they will keep Uniroyal out."

So that's how Uniroyal came to Australia and incidentally gave us some of the over-capacity that made the very high duties necessary. And as the duties were lowered, the feather bed became too crowded and Goodrich had to get out the other side.

The moral of the story is that, if feather beds become really comfortable, they become attractive enough to tempt people like Mr Murdoch to clamber aboard.

They then take up so much room that people like Sir Reggie have to get out the other side. Feather beds are not comfortable if crowded.