



A MODEST FARMER

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Yes ... the Wheat Board has a feather bed, too!

This last of the feather bed articles centres around the position the Government has given the Australian Wheat Board by making it the only organisation allowed to handle the Australian wheat crop.

I guess the Wheat Board members would smile wryly at the thought that, just at the moment, they could be said to be living on a feather bed.

What with the unkind remarks of the Senate committee and the Auditor-General, it may feel its bed to be half full of plough shares. I am not going to kick the poor sods when they are down; everyone else is having a go at them because of their book-keeping aberrations.

Being rather a messer in this regard myself, I am not in a position to throw stones at others.

I mentioned last week that during the period when the wheat quotas were in operation, the quotas were allocated on the basis of a farmer's past production. This acted as a brake on change, discouraging the young battler on new land from growing wheat, while encouraging the traditional wheat grower to do so. So the quota system encouraged conservatism in wheat farming.

There are other conservative forces working in the industry, aided and abetted by the monopoly position the Government has given the Wheat Board.

For many years, the board adamantly opposed any departure from the old, and discredited "fair average quality" method of classifying wheat.

The FAQ was strongly criticised by industry leaders such as Sutton and Callaghan, because they felt that the new grades would open up new markets.

But the board evidently felt that the new methods would have complicated wheat handling and marketing.

When the new wheat variety, Wren, was bred, it too was discouraged. It is true that it was of poor milling quality, but it was an ideal fodder wheat for the local market.

But it would have complicated the board's system had it been allowed in. The board's resistance to the introduction of Wren is an illustration of why it would have been a good thing to have others besides the Wheat Board handling feed wheat for the local market, as the IAC recommended, but which was opposed by the wheat grower organisation with a violent knee-jerk reaction.

There are other conservative forces in operation in the wheat industry which we should watch critically. For instance, most wheat breeding in Australia is under the influence, if not control,

of wheat growers. This is done through the various committees in the states and Commonwealth which are made up mostly of farmers, people expert in the industry.

This is not surprising, because wheat growers pay a research levy to encourage research, so why should they not have a large say in how their research money is spent?

However, there are dangers hidden away in doing things this way. For instance, we should ask ourselves why is it that almost no wheat is grown in the Western District of Victoria, on the Naracoorte plain in SA, and in the lower southern district in WA?

Some of this land may not be suitable for wheat because of drainage problems, but I have an uneasy feeling that another reason may be that we have not bred a wheat variety suitable for these districts.

It cannot be that the rainfall in these districts is too high, because English farmers grow tremendous crops on even higher rainfall.

I can understand the tendency for wheat breeding and other wheat research to gravitate towards those areas at present growing wheat, but we should be careful we do not go too far along that road. For instance, the new techniques of growing crops with chemicals and not cultivation is likely to open up new areas for wheat growing.

In the wetter districts, the problem of getting a proper kill of weeds before the soil gets waterlogged is a real one now, but probably such land could be treated with chemicals to kill the weeds, and then the wheat crop sown earlier.

The ability of our present wheat breeding system to breed varieties suitable to the wetter districts is limited by the supply of plant breeders and money.

Perhaps we should have another look at the question of plant breeders' rights. I know that the wheat grower organisations are against the projected plant breeders' rights legislation being applied to cereals, but this may be the natural reaction of people on a feather bed who want the present position left undisturbed.

But I understand that in the U.S. and the U.K., the breeding of cereal varieties to suit particular locations is encouraged because private industry groups can be financially rewarded for doing this because of their plant breeders' legislation.

There is evidently very effective co-operation and competition between the private and public plant breeders. Perhaps we could do more of that kind of thing in Australia.