



A MODEST MEMBER

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Mavis wants me to get in for my chop

Mavis takes an overweening and proprietary interest in me. As you remember, she could never see why I wasn't at least a Minister when we were in Government, let alone Prime Minister!

Now that we are in Opposition, she still nurtures this long-term aim, in the furtherance of which she plots ceaselessly and in secret.

But for the present her immediate ambition is for me to obtain a large and munificent recognition (in money form for preference) from the Government for my literary endeavours. She has discovered that large amounts of money (\$366,000 last year, and \$1,080,000 will be the figure for this year) are spent on helping other authors. She complained:

Why not you too, dear? There don't seem to be any known standards which decide who gets grants. You have been in Canberra long enough to know who are the good and great. Why don't you get in the queue too?

You may have to change your style a bit and use longer words and wean that wretched Eccles. But I am sure you could do it, if you tried. It would mean so much to me.

But as you know, one of my many failings is an excessive modesty, and this will prevent me edging myself forward. But I am inclined to agree with Mavis that there don't seem to be clear guidelines as to how this money is handed out.

So, knowing that laying down guidelines in this area would not be easy, I put the problem into the too hard basket and went back to worrying about really important things like tariffs. And goodness knows there is plenty to get steamed up about. Eccles says he hasn't slept properly for months.

But all the same I couldn't help wondering, in a quiet way, about all this money that was being spent on culture, and was somewhat startled to discover that this financial year the estimated expenditure for the Australian Council of the Arts had risen from \$7 million to \$15 million. It seemed a pretty solid increase.

And I received no comfort from learning that the rules which govern staff appointments in the Arts Council area are different from those for other civil servants. Evidently an officer was recently appointed to the council at a salary of \$20,000, yet the position was not advertised. I wonder who got it and why?

But, then, by some mischance, Mavis saw a TV program disclosing that the Arts Council had shelled out \$12,000 to the Nimbin Rock Festival, that notorious gathering in New South Wales that attracted so much police attention because of drugs and other goings on. Since then she has been merciless in urging me to get in for my cut also. "They must have money running out of their ears," she says.

If Fred gets to hear this the heavens will fall. He has a proper contempt for these gatherings of queer people who congregate in herds and perform in odd ways and who are often a problem for the police for discipline and drugs.

But he is old fashioned, as indeed I am also, although I try to hide it from my constituents, so I don't suppose our condemnation of the Nimbin Rock Festival will worry many people. But if Fred finds out that he is helping to pay for such goings on by subsidising them with his hard earned income tax money, then he'll go berserk.

Eccles is puzzled by what is going on. When the Coombs Task Force report came out he went crazy with excitement, and he has adopted it as his economic bible, as you would expect a person with his arid economic outlook to do. He's always pointing an accusing finger at this and that hidden subsidy and his condemnation is terrible to hear.

But you can imagine how startled he was to find that the person who is reputed to be the guiding spirit for all the blind generosity to almost everything that moves on the cultural front is the same person whose name adorns the Coombs Task Force report, which measures with pitiless and astringent exactitude any tiny departure from economic rectitude. To Eccles it must be the same as catching the bishop burgling.

I hope and pray that Fred doesn't get to hear of these goings on. He has queer ideas of how the Government should spend his money, and he thinks that Governments aren't good at culture, even agriculture.