

ROBBERY BY CONTROL

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PREFACE

It was back in the 1960s when a man walked into our clothing store in Hobart, saying he represented the Australian government. He said that the government was worried; that it had reason to believe free trade was being interfered with. He went on to say: "free trade must be protected, because it is the only honest way to come by the true price of an article".

That was what the government was saying then, after a long drawn-out royal commission into restrictive trade practices.

The government opened restrictive trade law offices, supposedly to protect free trade. But when small traders had their stock controlled by monopolies, and went to these offices for help, they were told, "sorry, we can't help you; these laws were brought in all wrong. They are useless and we can't police them".

Why were these laws useless? Not to protect free trade, that's for sure. Maybe it was to protect monopolies, so they could continue to push their prices up daily, as they controlled our manufacturers and goods. One monopoly man had even bragged that he would be controlling our manufacturers - it was in 1969 when he returned to Australia from the U.K.; he was reported in the Australian news as saying, "we will take a leaf out of Marks and Spencer's book and we will control the manufacturers".

This is what has been happening in Australia ; our prices have increased ten-fold since this man bragged he would control our manufacturers and his profits have climbed from a few hundred thousand dollars a year to multi-millions, once he was allowed to control goods, kill free trade and charge exactly as he pleased.

My story begins when we opened a clothing store in Hobart. At that time, there were quite a few agents selling wholesale around the town. Not wanting to have the same goods, or interfere with other stores, I flew to Melbourne and sometimes on to Sydney, almost every week, searching for different goods, at the right price. Having had little capital myself, price was always a deciding factor.

Taiwan goods had not yet flooded the market in Australia. We still had hundreds of small and large factories, in and around Melbourne and Sydney, where thousands of people were employed, where one was allowed to search around for the right goods. If manufacturers didn't have what you needed, they would tell you where you might find them. Manufacturers and retailer got on fine, before goods were controlled in Australia - competition was a very friendly thing.

Soon after we opened our store, three men paid us a visit. They said they represented big business. They said that Big Business was about to put its profit margin up and would we do the same. "If we all do it", they said, "we will get away with it".

For generations, the profit margin had been $33\frac{1}{3}\%$, until monopolies began to grow in the mid 1950s, when it had been pushed up to 50%. Now in the 1960s, they were saying it should be 75%. Where would it all end !

What fools we were to talk to these men. We said, "we are quite happy with 50%, and surely it wasn't necessary to raise the profit margin again".

We soon knew we should have kept our own counsel, because from then on, when I went to some factories in Melbourne, they would say, "Sorry, we can't serve you..., mentioning other stores, wouldn't like you having our goods ; you cut their prices".

We were now accused of cutting prices, even though we still sold at 50%. By accusing us of cutting prices, it justified their high prices.

That visit around the small stores must have been very enlightening. They now knew who would join them in pushing up prices and if you were not willing to do so, you'd find your trading getting more difficult, and your goods hard to come by.

When bulky knits became the fashion, I knew I had to find something reasonable for my customers. Early one morning in Melbourne, armed with the pink pages of the telephone book, and boarding a taxi, we went on a search.

It was 4 pm when we arrived at a factory in Glen Iris. The door of the factory was opened and I was inside, saying "I'm looking for reasonable bulky knits, if you have what I need, I'll pay cash". The knitwear proved to be what I had been searching for all day.

When the new stock arrived at our store, we hurriedly filled the window. It was an instant success. We soon sold out and were on the 'phone for more. We sold at 50% - it was still the recognized mark-up.

A few weeks later, a bigger store bought some and sold at 75%. Then we received a letter from the manufacturers saying, "the big store is complaining ; you are selling too cheap. Put your price up or we won't service you". I wrote saying we were selling at the correct mark-up, but it made no difference. Our goods were cut off. I called to see this store that had stolen my brains and my stock. On entering the director's office, he shouted, "If you cut our prices, we will put you out of business". This was the new way of trading by bigger stores - control manufacturers and stock, kill competition, then charge high prices. It was just the beginning of monopoly control, high prices and big profits in Australia.

We were busy in the store when the Australian government's representative appeared. Apart from telling us about honest and true prices, he said that the government needed help. They were afraid free trade was being interfered with. He asked whether I had had trouble with free trade. I most certainly had. He said, could he make an appointment to discuss it with me. I asked him to my home. I was only too willing to help the government because I had been refused stock so many times this past year. I had recently read how America was dealing with greedy companies who wished to control goods to sell at high prices. America had fined a big company \$200,000 ; they hoped this fine would deter other companies from controlling goods. I was led to believe

by this government man that the Australian government was also out to stop powerful retailers from controlling our goods. When the government man arrived at our house, he, my husband and I talked well into the night. He didn't just receive hearsay, but written proof of restrictive trade.

It was much later when we heard from the government and were called to give evidence at the Royal Commission on Restrictive Trade Practices, held at the University of Tasmania. Along with 50 other retailers, I gave evidence of interference with free trade, of goods being controlled so they could be sold at high prices. There were printers, electrical stores, clothing stores, leather goods and food. Indeed, just about every retail trade was represented. I knew only too well what was happening in my trade ; by controlling goods and killing competition, monopolies were charging as they pleased, but food ! If the government allowed it to get into monopoly hands, prices would soar. And they have. From 1975 to 1980, our people's staple food, the potato, rose from 6¢ a kilo to 69¢ a kilo ; and a loaf of bread from 15¢ to more than 70¢, now that it is in monopoly hands.

At the Royal Commission, it was proven that goods were controlled so they could be sold at high prices. It remained for the government to protect its people from being robbed. These small traders, like me, who had been asked to help the government, had each put themselves on the line, and had exposed themselves to abuse because the government had asked them to. God help them, if what happened to a colleague and myself, after the Royal Commission is anything to go by.

Every morning during the Royal Commission, there would be evidence printed in the local paper. The morning after I gave my evidence - you had to be very clever to read it - the top line was at the bottom, the bottom at the top, in fact it was a jigsaw puzzle. In my evidence, the name of a local store had been mentioned, as having sold goods dear, but my evidence in the paper was a jumble and none of it could be read. Along with another witness we called to see the editor, saying that there was not a word of truth in their report. He replied that that was something we would have to prove.

At the same time, there was a little paper trying to start up in a local suburb. A representative came into our store and asked if we would advertise with them. I said, "yes, if you will print this report correctly".

He replied, "If I print anything they don't like, I won't get my newsprint ; they control the newsprint". I wonder who it was who once said, "the truth will out" ? Whoever it was knew little about monopoly control.

A few days after the Royal Commission hearings, a colleague and I flew to Melbourne to buy stock. We first called on a blouse factory that had served us before. We knocked on the door and were about to go in, when the owner came running to the door. He was yelling at the top of his voice, "You can't come in here ; you've been helping the government", and slammed the door in our faces. Did I forget to mention when the government had asked for our help, they said we would be protected. Yet this happened all through that day.

Even so, we didn't blame these little factories. Hundreds of them were fighting for their very existence. With the great growth of these powerful monopolies, the manufacturing trade in Melbourne was in chaos. Factories were losing their customers (old family retailers) to monopoly take-overs. Factories didn't know how they stood, or if they were to be allowed to stay in business. Hundreds of them were closed eventually, when monopolies and even some factories, began bringing goods produced by cheap labour from Taiwan, to sell at bigger profit.

Each spring, I'd go to a factory to buy spring blouses. This spring, when I walked in, it was very quiet - no usual worker's chatter ; no machinery humming. I thought, not another factory closing down ? I called "anyone here ?". One of the partners came running. I said "are you closing down too ?" He replied, "Oh no, but we don't make blouses here any more ; we send our patterns to Taiwan, where the women work for 20¢ an hour, not \$2 an hour". This manufacturer was trying to protect his business. If monopolies were getting goods made in Taiwan, he must do the same, in order to compete.

This was happening all around Melbourne. Need you wonder why Australia has so many unemployed, with our factories closing down, while cheap goods are imported from Taiwan, to be sold at bigger profit ? When I paid for the cheaply-made blouses, they cost me the same price as Australian-made goods.

By this time, most of the small retailers who had given evidence for the government were closed. We could only think that they were unable to weather the bad times we had been given for helping the government. It is a thankless task helping a government to prove things

are bad and getting clobbered, while you wait so long for the government to do something about it. There are no longer free trades, no fair profit margin, or suggested price, as it had been for generations. Goods were controlled more and more, and prices were going up and up. Retailing became so bad in Hobart that it became the practice of one big store to send out snoopers every day to check the prices in the monopoly stores (the big stores didn't want to have their goods cut off, if they weren't charging enough). The monopoly store became the yardstick for all the high prices. On one occasion, I caught a young girl sneaking down prices and names of suppliers in our store - I sent her away with a flea in her ear.

The next day, the girl's mother came to see me. She said "I'm real sorry about the snooping, but my daughter has to come snooping if she wants to keep her job at the big store".

What a dirty business retail had become since monopolies came on the scene. No wholesaler asked you a few years ago "where is your store? Sorry we can't serve you - you're too near this monopoly, or that big store". When free trade existed in Australia, any wholesaler would be only too glad to serve you, providing your credit was good. But today he is no longer a free man, not when trade is controlled.

Thank God we had at least one freedom-loving and friendly manufacturer. He had been serving us knitwear since we first opened in Hobart. We were lucky to still have him. He was still running his own business. He had said "Monopolies will never control me". I used to walk around the shelves in his factory with either Vince or Joe, picking out anything I needed, and pile it high on shelves or tables. One particular day, I remember the owner peeping around the corner, and on seeing my pile of stock had said, "I know who that is, it's that angel from Hobart". An angel he called me then; that was before he too came under monopoly control.

It was by now a long time since the Royal Commission had sat. We had waited so long for the government to protect honest traders and free trade. Our stocks were becoming more difficult to buy, yet Australia was still referred to by our Prime Minister as a free enterprise and free trading country, even though free trade was being stifled every day.

At the time, there was an agent in Hobart, where I had been buying bulky knits. This year when I called to give him my order, he said "I have been ordered by the factory not to serve you, because you have undersold the local monopoly". How could any honest retailer keep up with monopoly prices, with their controlled goods? They were pushing prices up every day. This agent was a decent enough man and would have served me if he could. I needed those bulky knits, so I went to the Melbourne factory and had the usual door slamming a couple of times. So the next time, I took a friend who worked on television in Hobart. I knocked on the door and when it was opened, I hurriedly said, "this lady is a representative of Hobart television." It was an open sesame - the doors were flung open and we were conducted to the boardroom, where there were four or five men who pretended they had no idea that we had been refused stock (they didn't know how they stood on restrictive trade, as the government had still not made a move). They made a show of taking an order in front of the television person. Can you believe I had to go to such lengths to buy stock, in our so-called free trading Australia?

Eventually, they did send an order - too late, all last year's colours, and every garment was faulty. They must have heard they had nothing to fear from the new restrictive trade laws, because it turned out that they would prove to be ineffective. For this kind of dirty work, this factory received fat orders from monopoly, for having killed the local competition. We saw these goods sold at more than double the cost price, now that they were controlled, and free trade had been killed once again.

There was a lot of controversy over stocks. The big guys were standing over the little guys - old time Chicago had nothing on Hobart and Melbourne. It seemed that since the Royal Commission's hearings, the powerful monopolies had become more powerful. Decent traders were going out of business faster and prices were climbing faster.

My family and I decided we'd had enough of this dirty thing, that the Australian government still insisted on calling free trade and free enterprise. We parted from our shop and fine staff, who had been with us through all those battling years. We hoped better times would come, if and when free trade was allowed back into Australia.

I'll begin the second part of my narrative, but I must remind you, I am no writer. Neither, though, was Charles Dickens who first wrote because of the bad things the government allowed to happen in his day. I write because of the bad things that have happened and are happening in Australia today.

It was some time later, when we heard that the Australian government had passed restrictive trade laws, and when we saw the impressive trade law office in Hobart, we nearly believed free trade was back in Australia. What fools we were ; we only knew how to run an honest business. We were no match for controlling monopolies, whom we found were still allowed to operate in Australia and if there were any genuine restrictive trade laws inside these government offices, the Australian government would not make them work for us - as we were soon to find out. However, my family and I believed at the time that we now had laws to protect free trade, so we decided that we would do what we were good at, namely selling "reasonable and fair".

We visited our friendly knitwear manufacturer, and asked if he would serve us again. He said "Of course we will serve you". We couldn't imagine running a knitwear business without his fine knitwear. So we bought back our shop and opened with a sale. It was a great success - people came into our store and shook hands with us, saying we were needed in Hobart. Our former staff were all back ; we were once again a great team. I began flying to Melbourne in search of that reasonable stock to suit our working customers. It was not so easy now. Many of our factories had completely disappeared and we had to rely more and more on our local friendly manufacturer.

It was just before Christmas 1969 when the monopoly man flew back into Australia and bragged in the Australian news that he would be controlling our manufacturers. Once more we were worried, especially when we saw no sign of the Australian government reminding this man that Australia now had restrictive trade laws. We had laws that had taken so long and cost so much to legislate, but they didn't seem to worry this man who was threatening to control our manufacturers.

There were many ways of controlling manufacturers and some of them could be mean and dirty as the following story indicates : We were buying reasonable terylene skirts from a skirt maker. He had typically had plenty of customers, small traders like me, who came and went

every week. We were keeping him fairly busy when he was approached by a monopoly who told him that they had chosen him to make their terylene skirts and would take a thousand skirts a week. This manufacturer was elated by the promise of what he thought would be safe, big orders, so he dropped all his regular customers like me, to make solely for monopoly.

When he had lost all his regular customers, monopoly began to squeeze him. They said, "we want these skirts cheaper now". Later, they demanded them cheaper still, until the poor devil was working for nothing. When I next saw this manufacturer, he said "It shouldn't happen to a dog, what that monopoly did to me". He went on to say. "At my age (he was no longer young), I have to travel around Australia trying to get back customers." Needless to say, he didn't make it. This was only one of the dirty tricks that killed decent Australian manufacturers and put Australians out of work, but it didn't hurt monopolies - they were now buying from Taiwan.

We were still doing good business with our friendly knitwear manufacturer, but we were worried having so many eggs in one basket. The last order we gave this firm was for \$40,000 - it being our main opening order. We couldn't place that order anywhere else as the goods were all Australian made woollen garments. I didn't think we had too much to worry about though, as my manufacturer had explicitly said "monopolies will never control me".

He had started a new factory, making cloth to make long sleeve blouses. I was thrilled when I saw them - they cost us \$5.30, we sold at \$7.95, monopoly sold at \$12.00. I didn't interfere even though I knew they got them much cheaper.

My friendly manufacturer's main customer was a chain of about 26 shops throughout Victoria, all selling his fine goods. Like us, they always sold at a fair price. He had served them for years; they had grown up with him, as we had been privileged to do.

We had three shops now as we had recently bought our third lease and had spent a great deal of money, enlarging, knocking two shops into one. We had no reason to suspect that our manufacturer was about to be controlled. We still foolishly believed that we had laws against the control of free trade.

We awoke one morning to read that the monopoly man had taken over our manufacturer's main customer, those 26 shops throughout Victoria. That was one way of controlling him - even he needed the custom of those 26 shops. Well here it was again, our main supplier had been controlled. What would happen to us now? Would the monopoly allow us to be supplied?

At one time when this had happened, there had been hundreds of little factories around Melbourne to buy from. These factories had since been closed, when monopoly took over in Melbourne, then went to Taiwan, looking for cheap goods, that they could sell at double and treble the profit of Australian goods. Where could we place an order for \$40,000? Nowhere that I knew that wasn't closed, or under monopoly control.



It was about a week later, when we received the dreaded letter from our manufacturer. It was much the same as the other one - it said "Two firms in Hobart are complaining that you are selling too cheap, so put your price up". If 50% was too cheap, then we were guilty. Mind you, we were not making millions, as the monopoly was now doing (since they decided to control Australia), but we made a good living and employed almost a dozen of us. We had been selling for years at 50%, since monopolies came on the scene. We didn't interfere with their 200% profit, so why should they be allowed to interfere with honest traders ?

Our manufacturer's prices had altered little over the last 14 years, yet he had expanded. He had four or five factories now. When I first bought from him, he had only one small factory ; there was no need for either he or I to raise our prices. Those 26 shops he had served for years were noted for being reasonable. They had built a colossal business on a very small markup, much smaller than ours. Our manufacturer hadn't objected through all those years, so we knew it wasn't him talking. One big store in Hobart had been complaining to him for a couple of years because we sold at 50% but he hadn't taken notice of them. No, it was the hungry powerful monopoly manipulating him now. Taking a witness we went to his factory, and found him sitting at his office desk. We put the letter on it and asked for an explanation. He looked up and said "They are pushing me, they are pushing me". He didn't have to say more, we had gone in there to have a piece of him. Now we could only feel sorry for him. We had come a long way with this man. He had managed to run his business in his own way through all those years. All that time he had kept his goods at a fair price, but now the monopoly had him controlled. My companion and I were still in his office. What could we say to him ? He didn't seem to know if he was "heads or tails". We left him and went down to the stockroom as we had done since 1959. We usually bought two, or three thousand dollars each visit of late - it was this kind of buying that had helped him to build those extra factories over the years. Looking round the vast stockroom, every shelf now had a notice on it, saying "Don't touch, only", giving the name of the greedy monopoly who now had him controlled.

One sees in the papers almost every day "Thugs hold up businesses !" Well, what would you call these thugs, that go under the name of retailers ? Not free traders, that's for sure ; they had made sure there was none of that.

Now don't get me wrong. These goods had not been made especially for this monopoly. This manufacturer always sent out a catalogue of goods, that he would have on his shelves for each season - I carried it with me. The goods were there, but controlled - exactly as the monopoly man had bragged he would do. These goods would now be sold at anything from 200%, now competition and free trade had been slaughtered.

You can see who made our prices go mad these last few years - not the decent manufacturers, or smaller traders - monopolies have played "ducks and drakes" with them. Do you wonder that today Australians are out of work, when our factories are either controlled, or closed, and monopoly buys from Taiwan at cheap prices to make millions? Since 1969, when the monopoly man bragged he would control our manufacturers in no time, his profits went from a few hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, to millions, once he was allowed to control manufacturers and stock, to close shops like ours and to cut out competition.

For years, both the monopoly and our store sold our manufacturer's famous wool jacket at 50%, until 1969 when monopoly got the idea of controlling manufacturers and goods. Then they put their profit up to 130%. Just a couple of weeks after they had our manufacturer controlled, they pushed their profit up to 190% but this was only the beginning. This marked a lot of difference to the 33 ¹/₃% that had been the profit markup for generations until monopoly was allowed to take over Australia.

The little blouse was a good example. It had cost us \$5.30 ; we sold at \$7.95, monopoly sold at \$12.00. Our shop was in the same street as monopoly.

They wanted to stop us selling at an honest price so they had simply cut off our supplies. Now they could sell exactly as they pleased, having killed the local competition.

We were still in the factory stockroom of our friendly manufacturer, and were only allowed a handful of stock, and me with a staff of 10 or 11 waiting in Hobart to unpack all the crates that wouldn't arrive this time. What would they say - their jobs depended on me bringing home the bacon (as it were). How many times had this happened to other retailers ; how many workers had lost their jobs this way? It is well known that the thousands and thousands of small traders traditionally employed more people than any other section of the community. Where would my staff find jobs?

Monopoly stores used to employ hundreds of sales people when there was competition in trade. But now they controlled our goods, they needed few sales people. The chances were that you couldn't buy certain items anywhere else ; not in our store, that's for sure - they'd seen to that.

I next called on the government's restrictive trade office ; it was the first time I had tried to get help from them. I showed the officer-in-charge the letter, ordering me to put my prices up, and told how my goods had been restricted. The officer said, and I report "sorry we can't help you, this law was brought in all wrong ; it is useless, we can't police it". What was he doing in this office, if he couldn't police the law ? If the restrictive trade laws were useless, why was he here ?

My God, what all those 50 traders had gone through to bring in useless laws. Why had he been allowed to sit here ; was he just putting on a front, while monopoly took over Australia ? Like most Australians, I had truly believed that these offices were there to protect free trade, to stop restrictive trade. Now it seemed, not only were our goods being restricted, but the laws to protect free trade were also being restricted.

I next called to see my parliamentarian - told him my story, begging him to help me save our business. He passed me on to the Premier of Tasmania. I saw him once and repeated my story. He passed me on to the Tasmanian Attorney-General Mr. Everett. I saw him twice, each time repeating my story. He passed me on to the Attorney-General in Canberra. That was one way of getting rid of me. I couldn't call to see him, he was a thousand miles away. I was told to send my evidence to Canberra. I did and the government did nothing. By now, I had realised that they were all just giving me the run around. The monopoly man had bragged he'd control our manufacturers, and here it was actually happening, with the Australian government's blessing.

I was desperate. What else could I do to save our store. We were fast running out of stock. I flew to Melbourne to the Trades Hall to see Bob Hawke. He had always put himself over as the defender of the little man. He certainly knew about restrictive trade - he'd had the same trouble when the trade union had first opened their store in Melbourne. It was in all the papers how the union had been denied stock.

I sat in Bob Hawke's office for four hours one day, and about the same amount of hours the next. His staff said that he was there, just behind that other door, but he wouldn't see me, and he has the temerity to say he is for the little man. If he had been for the little man, he surely would have tried to stop this robbery. When the union had the same trouble, he must have seen how controlled goods were sold without competition at high prices to rob Australians.

I had to go on trying to save our business ; it carried so many of us now and none of us wanted to lose our living. Maybe I could shame that restrictive trade office to work. I had two friends who worked at the monopoly store and who knew the price coding. I learned the coding, then went to the monopoly store and bought a dozen and a half garments. Even I was astounded at the markup. I cleared a window, and put the over priced garments in showing the cost price and monopoly's extortionate selling price.

One of the garments was a little child's waist coat, the cost price of which was \$5.30, selling for \$13.50. I thought that was sufficiently over-priced. Yet the next day, one of monopoly's staff came into our store and said "you've got the wrong cost price on that little waist coat". I said "I can read their costing". Whereupon the woman said, "that may be so, but what you don't know is that monopoly has formed a subsidiary company that buys from Taiwan, then sells to the parent company itself at a profit ; they then put another profit on it. Originally that little waist coat cost \$2.30.

My God, what a racket ; by this double dealing, \$2.30 becomes \$13.50. No wonder monopoly profits rose from a few hundred thousand dollars a year, to millions and no wonder so many of our factories had to close. Monopolies wouldn't want to buy from Australian factories, when they are allowed to rip off Australians like this.

What else could we do to wake up Australia to the rotten state of things. We remembered the cutting from the Australian news where the monopoly man bragged he'd control our manufacturers. We found it and stuck that too in the window. A few days later we received a letter from monopoly's solicitors saying "take that notice out of your window, or we will sue". The strange thing was it had looked so grubby in the window, we had taken it out before we received the letter. Where had it been put. We searched for it and having found it, we stuck it back in the window. The best thing monopoly could do for us was to sue. Then the public would learn how the government allowed monopolies to control goods, so Australians could be

over-charged. Unfortunately we heard no more from that solicitor. While we were fighting to hold on to our business, an owner of an electrical shop slid quietly into our store and in a whisper, told how some of his electrical appliances had been stopped because he had been selling cheaper than the local monopoly. He wasn't telling publicly what had happened ; he was afraid to open his mouth or, like us, he wouldn't get enough stock to keep his store open.

Small traders were afraid of these greedy monopolies - how could they fight them ? The restrictive trade laws had been made useless and the government presented a blind eye. Decent honest traders didn't have a powerful union and a representative like Bob Hawke, so thousands of them, little companies like ours, were put out of business.

Our main store was almost empty now. No-one can run a store without stock, so the lease had to be sold to a gents' outfitters. One week after he had signed the lease, I met him in the street. He was very down. He had already been told that he would not be allowed to sell his good suits there, even though he was selling them in his other store around the corner, but not in our store near monopoly.

The A.B.C. sent a representative into our store. He asked if we would tell our story. We thought the A.B.C. could be trusted to tell the truth, but the next day they told the people of Hobart that we were getting out of business, because I was getting old. 'Getting old' were words used out of context. They were used to imply that we were getting out of business of our own free will.

It was not so. How could it be, when we had only recently taken over our third shop, opposite monopoly and had spent a great deal of money, enlarging and knocking two shops into one. No, we were forced out of business by monopoly, when they cut off our supplies, by controlling our manufacturers. Exactly as the monopoly man had bragged he would do in the Australian news, just before Christmas 1969.

P.S. It is a few years since our prices were stable, since before the Australian government contrived to invade our store with bogus statements of protecting free trade, then stood inactively by while monopolies controlled our manufacturers and goods to kill competition and free trade and made millions while they overcharge Australians. As the government man said "free trade is the only honest way to come by the true price of an article". Wake up Australians.

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