The Bendigo by-election campaign has intensified over the past week, and the various political parties have put their policies before the voters. I do not intend tonight to comment on the possible outcome of the by-election, except perhaps to state that a by-election has traditionally supplied voters in Australia with an opportunity to give the Government of the day an admonition, a rap on the knuckles if you like, on an occasion on which—because it affects only one seat—the Government cannot be voted out or an Opposition voted in. When a Government has a record majority—such as held at present by the Government in Canberra—it may again prove a temptation to admonish the Government, although it is always the hope that one's candidate will prevail because of his association with the Government, which has guided the development of this country for so long and with such success.

It is, however, important in a by-election or in any election that when a candidate makes promises about points of policy, that he should be able to back up that promise by reference to specific policies or at least justify it by allusion to his party’s record. I realise it is difficult for the Labor Party to take the second step, because that Party has not sat on the Government benches in Canberra for about 20 years. One must therefore resort to their past performance when they were in Government—before 1949. This week in an advertisement in a Bendigo electorate newspaper the Labor candidate Mr. Kennedy promised primary producers a return to the “orderly marketing” system as established by Labor. That promise brought great amusement to farmers whose memories are long, because they recalled the sort of “orderly marketing” perpetrated by a Labor Government back in 1936 when that Government concluded a deal to sell 18 million bushels of Australian wheat to New Zealand. Matters, however, were far from amusing in those days. Let me briefly recapitulate the position at that time. The Labor Government’s agreement provided for the sale of 18 million bushels of wheat to New Zealand, most of it at 5/9d a bushel. The ruling price for wheat sold on overseas markets at the time was considerably higher than this, and went to 17/ a bushel—and later, even beyond—during the currency of this agreement. Persistent questioning spearheaded by Mr. John McEwen, who was then in Opposition at the time, led to disclosure of this notorious deal which was concluded by an Australian Labor Government at a time, it might be noted, when New Zealand wheatgrowers were negotiating for a guaranteed price above that which their Government had set—and that price was 7/1d. a bushel. And so the Australian and New Zealand Labor governments were able to keep down the price of wheat to their growers instead of allowing them access to the higher world prices then ruling.
This shocking example of "orderly marketing" set off a grower and political protests that rightly raged for some years, ultimately forcing the Labor Government of the time to dip heavily into public funds to the tune of some £7 million to make some amends to Australian wheatgrowers. Labor Senator Mr. McEwen in 1947 reflected the anger and bitterness of a wide section of Australians when he denounced the Labor Government's actions as barefaced lying, suppression of facts, evasion and equivocation and brazen and shameless deception. I have already mentioned how Labor's "orderly marketing" was recalled by the promise made during the week by the Labor candidate in the Bendigo by-election. Mr. McEwen, now of course Minister for Trade and Industry, was reminded in Parliament during the week of the deal. Mention of it served to re-kindle the fury with which he denounced the scheme in the 1940's. He said it was a quite incredible transaction, not to be regarded as anything less than an act of generosity by a Labor Government to be paid at the expense of the Australian wheatgrowers. And this, he said, was called "orderly marketing." If Labor's policies prevailed, as promised in the Bendigo candidate's claim, Labor would return to this form of "orderly marketing." And God help the wheatgrowers, commented Mr. McEwen. He went on to record how it was in the Opposition of which he was a member forced the Labor Government to beat a retreat on the deal. The protest campaign led to Labor making good from the Australian treasury to the wheatgrowers the millions of pounds which they would otherwise have been deprived.

"I hope Labor will never again be in a position to control 'orderly marketing' along these lines ever again," said Mr. McEwen.

It might be a beneficial exercise to contrast this Labor handling of "orderly marketing" with the Government's own enlightened policies. Considerable problems have beset the wheat industry because of rising world production and resultant fierce competition for available remunerative markets. The Government and the industry have faced these problems side by side. Administration of the wheat stabilisation scheme over the years by the Liberal-CP Government has been based on continuing sound policies. The Federal & State governments and the industry are now co-operating to ensure the success of the system of delivery quotas proposed by the Wheatgrowers Federation.
Their eyes on the next Federal elections, the Labor Party has been in a generous mood for some time now. The promises outlined by Mr. Whitlam and other Party spokesmen would fill a "lucky dip" barrel, and no doubt a wide section of the public have been wondering where all the money is coming from. The cost of two ALP policy proposals was disclosed in Parliament this week following a question to the Minister for Social Services, Mr. Wentworth. The question dealt with the cost to the Australian taxpayer of proposals to eliminate the means test and to increase the pension rate to half the minimum basic wage. These are both Labor promises. Labor's pension promise, a resolution adopted by the ALP's 1967 conference, is that pensions for married pensioner couples be at least equal to the minimum wage, and that increases in that wage should be applied to pensions. Recently Mr. Whitlam said the Labor Party if elected this year would phase out the means test over six years and pay a full pension to everyone 65 years and over. This, he reported him as saying, would cost well below $100 million a year. In Parliament during last week, Mr. Wentworth produced a set of official figures which made the calculations of the Opposition Leader sound something like a pipe dream. Mr. Wentworth said although there was no such thing at present as an accepted minimum wage, he had made his calculations on the basis of that being about $38 to $40 a week. If the present pension were raised to $30 to $35 a week, the direct cost to the Budget would be about $200 million a year. If the means test were abolished, and the higher rate of pension operated, the cost to the public purse would be an additional sum of just under $500 million a year. And so, irrespective of the fringe benefits now received by pensioners, the total cost of these two steps would be around $700 million. If you wanted to add the cost of the fringe benefits, a rough guess would be that these would cost in the vicinity of a further $150 million.

During the week I tabled a report to Parliament which I was presented with by two ALP policy proposals were disclosed in Parliament this week following a question to the Minister for Social Services, Mr. Wentworth. The question dealt with the cost to the Australian taxpayer of proposals to eliminate the means test and to increase the pension rate to half the minimum basic wage. These are both Labor promises. Labor's pension promise, a resolution adopted by the ALP's 1967 conference, is that pensions for married pensioner couples be at least equal to the minimum wage, and that increases in that wage should be applied to pensions. Recently Mr. Whitlam said the Labor Party if elected this year would phase out the means test over six years and pay a full pension to everyone 65 years and over. This, he said, would cost well below $100 million a year. In Parliament during last week, Mr. Wentworth produced a set of official figures which made the calculations of the Opposition Leader sound something like a pipe dream. Mr. Wentworth said although there was no such thing at present as an accepted minimum wage, he had made his calculations on the basis of that being about $38 to $40 a week. If the present pension were raised to $30 to $35 a week, the direct cost to the Budget would be about $200 million a year. If the means test were abolished, and the higher rate of pension operated, the cost to the public purse would be an additional sum of just under $500 million a year. And so, irrespective of the fringe benefits now received by pensioners, the total cost of these two steps would be around $700 million. If you wanted to add the cost of the fringe benefits, a rough guess would be that these would cost in the vicinity of a further $150 million.

During the week I tabled a report to Parliament which I was presented with by the Commonwealth's $80 million program for the construction and equipping of science laboratories in both Government and independent secondary schools. This program has vastly improved the quality of science teaching in these schools and has thus fully justified its role as one of the Commonwealth's schemes to improve the quality of education in Australia. I explained that under the Act a total of $37.7 million is available over the three-year period from July 1968 to June 1971. Of this just over $16 is for independent schools. The balance of over $21 million is for government schools. By June 1971 substantial inroads will have been made into the backlog of needs for science facilities in both Government and independent schools—but, of course, we realise that more will need to be done.
So towards the end of the present three-year period the Government will introduce legislation to continue operation of the scheme another beyond 1971. At this stage we intend to alter the basis of allocation of grants among all recipients of these funds so that they will be made available according to outstanding needs. In my own electorate of Wannon, the benefits resulting from the application of these science laboratories funds will be well known. A good number of government and independent schools have received either full laboratories or equipment under the program, and I am sure the parents of the students at these schools fully appreciate the advantages that these facilities confer.