

Queensland



Parliamentary Debates
[Hansard]

Legislative Assembly

FRIDAY, 29 JULY 1864

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY.

Friday, 29 July, 1864.

Brisbane Bridge.

BRISBANE BRIDGE.

The SECRETARY FOR LANDS AND WORKS moved—"That a select committee be appointed, with power to send for persons and papers, and leave to sit during any adjournment of this House, to enquire into and report upon the measures taken by the Brisbane corporation to carry into effect the provisions of the Brisbane Bridge Act, 1861, and whether such measures are calculated to afford satisfaction to the public, and that the said committee be chosen by ballot." In submitting the resolution to the House, he did not intend to detain honorable members by any lengthy observations. When he gave notice of the motion, it had been said by an honorable member on the other side of the House that the Government were desirous of putting a stopper on the bridge. Instead of that being the case, they were only anxious to get information respecting the action taken by the corporation in the matter. It was certainly a very important work, and the only object the Government had in view was to prevent further delay by facilitating operations. It was, therefore, desirable that they should know, in the first place, if the corporation were in a position to carry on the work; if they were, the Government and the country would be satisfied; if not, the sooner the matter was taken in hand by the House the better. The circumstances of the case were exceedingly simple. It would be in the recollection of honorable members that in the session of 1861 the sum of £15,000 was placed on the Estimates for the purpose of building a bridge across the Brisbane River. Unfortunately, or the reverse, this sum was not voted by the House; but during the same session the honorable member for North

Brisbane, Mr. Blakeney, introduced the Bridge Act, which was passed into law. In the course of debate on that measure, honorable members were informed that the corporation did not require a grant of money, but that certain lands should be alienated, the proceeds of the sale of which would, it was asserted, be sufficient to pay for building the bridge. The land was accordingly appropriated. He (the Secretary for Lands) did not know what value might be placed upon it by the corporation, but he could state that some short time since the Government had occasion to apply to the Surveyor-General as to its value, and although he (the Secretary for Lands) was not aware whether or not that officer had put his opinion into writing, he (the Secretary for Lands) had been informed that the Surveyor-General did not consider that, unless extraordinary circumstances arose by which the value of the land was enhanced most enormously, the maximum amount it would fetch would not exceed £10,000. Now it did appear to the Government that that amount was a very small sum with which to erect a bridge across the Brisbane, and they were astonished to find that it was the intention of the corporation to build a bridge from the proceeds of the sale of the land. After the Bridge Act was passed in 1862, the corporation took some steps in the matter, and called for designs, offering a premium of £300 for the best one, and £200 for the second best. Those designs were sent in, and entrusted to a board of gentlemen highly qualified to judge as to their fitness for the purpose, and two designs were selected as best adapted for a bridge across the river at Brisbane. Instead, however, of adopting either of those plans, they threw aside the recommendation of the gentlemen who had been appointed to examine and report upon them, and took another one which had never been approved of by the Government. He did not intend to refer to the correspondence which took place at the time between himself and the corporation, but he had discovered that to carry out the plan then adopted would cost £80,000. The Government had approved of the design, but the corporation had since thrown it aside, and submitted another one to the Government. Desirous of forwarding the object of building the bridge as quickly as possible, they approved of the second plan, and the deeds of grant of the lands had been issued to the corporation. Now it appeared to him that there was a possibility of those lands being sold, and the money applied to other purposes. If, however, the tender which he believed had been accepted by the corporation was of such a nature as to ensure the completion of the work, the Government would, of course, not feel themselves bound to say anything about the matter. Honorable members would perceive that a very important principle was involved. Certain lands had been granted for a public purpose—those lands belonged

to the citizens of Brisbane, and for the purpose for which they were alienated the Government was responsible to the citizens of Brisbane as a whole. It was the duty of the Government, in fact, to see that the money should not be misappropriated, but that the object for which it was given should be properly carried out. He believed that if a different policy had been adopted by the corporation, by this time the bridge would have been nearly completed. As it was, the corporation had afforded the Government no information whatever as to the tender, the position of the land, or anything at all in connection with the bridge, and he was therefore unable to give the House one iota of information. That was certainly not the position the House should occupy with respect to the matter. Public lands had been granted for a public purpose, but what had been done with them the Government and the country were in total ignorance of. Another circumstance was that the corporation had adopted the plans on their own responsibility. He maintained that the corporation were bound to show they were in a position to erect the bridge, and to complete it properly. What would be the probable result if the money found its way into the coffers of the corporation, and was improperly used—why, they would wake up some fine morning, and see that a few yards of the bridge had been constructed, and that it was left to the Government and the country to take up the work and finish it, the cost, of course, to be defrayed out of the public revenue. Under these circumstances, he thought that a better course of action could not be taken than to appoint a committee, who would be in a position to see what was best to be done in the matter. He would move the resolution, slightly amending it by stating the number of members he desired should be appointed on the committee, namely, five.

The COLONIAL SECRETARY seconded the resolution.

Mr. BROOKES did not intend to take up the time of the House at any length, as the request of the honorable member was so reasonable that he (Mr. Brookes) could not oppose it. It was extremely desirable that the Government and the country should be placed in possession of all information in connection with the bridge. The address of the honorable Secretary for Lands had been temperate throughout, although in some points his statement had not been quite accurate. The only thing the corporation objected to was the spirit which had been displayed by the Government in the matter, and he believed that body could show to the committee that they had no other object in view than the speedy erection of the bridge, and that they had taken no other steps than those they were fairly empowered to take. He believed that all the arrangements which had been made were of a very satisfactory nature. At the time the Bridge Act was

passed he was not a member of the corporation, and at the present time he was not a member of the Bridge Committee, so that with reference to details he was not so well informed as he might have been. He could willingly accede to the appointment of the select committee, whose enquiries would doubtless result in doing some good.

Dr. CHALLINOR said that at the commencement of the session he had asked a question on the subject before the House, and he should therefore cordially support the motion.

Mr. PUGH desired to correct an error into which the Minister for Lands and Works had fallen, with regard to the premiated designs for the bridge. The first prize was awarded to a design, which, at the estimate of the engineer himself, would have cost £80,000, and it was altogether out of the question that the council should accept either that or the next, which was also beyond their means. In accepting the design which was submitted to the Government for their approval, the corporation merely acted for the best, inasmuch as that design was accompanied by tenders, which showed that the bridge could be built for a sum not exceeding £30,000. There were three prizes awarded—the first of £150, the second £80, and the third £40; so that the whole amount was not that named by the Minister for Lands and Works, namely, £500. He thought that the corporation could have no objection to the appointment of the committee, and he certainly had no such objection himself.

Mr. DOUGLAS did not intend to oppose the motion. He would, however, much rather that the committee had been named. It was quite possible that the ballot might defeat the object for which the committee was appointed, as lists were generally handed round on both sides of the House containing the names of those honorable members whom it was thought desirable to appoint. As to the bridge itself, he considered that it would be self-supporting, as of course tolls would be collected; and he could not see how, under any circumstances, the House could be called upon to complete an unfinished bridge.

Mr. BELL said he entertained considerable fear that at some future day the Government would be called upon to take up the work where it had been left by the corporation. With reference to what had been said about tolls, he would remind honorable members that they could not be collected until after the bridge was built.

Mr. BLAKENEY rose, and, after expressing his opinion that the morning sittings were very inconvenient, especially to professional gentlemen, proceeded to state that the committee asked for by the Government would prove a perfect farce, similar to that which sat on the immigration question. At the time when he succeeded in passing the Brisbane Bridge Act, on the 9th August, 1861, he remembered that the principal

opponents of the measure had been the present Secretary for Lands, the present Treasurer, and Mr. O'Sullivan, then one of the members for Ipswich.

COLONIAL SECRETARY: No, no.

MR. BLAKENEY: He maintained that such was the case, and although they had at that time no "Hansard," they would find on reference to the public papers that he was correct. The honorable gentleman at the head of the Government had, on the contrary, lent every assistance in his power to pass the bill.

COLONIAL SECRETARY: Which I now very much regret.

MR. BLAKENEY: There was no doubt that at the present time the honorable gentleman was not so favorably inclined to forward the interests of the citizens of Brisbane as he had formerly been—a fact to be accounted for, perhaps, by what had occurred at an election when he vainly sought the suffrages of the citizens of Brisbane. And what were the placards that were stuck up all round the town by that gentleman's very influential committee? Why, they had printed on them the words "Vote for Herbert and the Brisbane Bridge." How was it that the Government had not taken some steps before to bring the subject of the bridge under the notice of the House? Why had they waited until active operations had been commenced, and the corporation had been put to some expense? It appeared to him that the Government desired to get possession of the control of the bridge in the same manner as they had obtained the water works. They might perhaps have an idea that sundry pickings were to be had. With reference to the assertion of the honorable Secretary for Lands as to the value of the land, not exceeding £10,000, he (Mr. Blakeney) could affirm that the land in the town boundary alone was worth £25,000; and there was reason to believe that for the suburban land another £5,000 could be got. A near connection of his had recently obtained £100 an acre for land, not nearly so valuable as that situated at Ovens Head, which was a portion of the land granted to the corporation. The honorable member for West Moreton had made the House acquainted with a valuable piece of information, to the effect that the tolls could not be collected until the bridge was built. What about the receipts at the ferries, which amounted to about £2,000 a year.

MR. PUGH: £4,000.

MR. BLAKENEY: Well, say £3,000—no mention was made of that. The contractor chosen by the corporation was an experienced man, and had the command of a great deal of money; and the total amount of the contract money was £50,000. As to selling the land, that was not thought of. It would be mortgaged, and let out on building leases, with a pre-emptive right to purchase at the end of seven years.

THE COLONIAL SECRETARY: Oh, at what rate?

MR. BLAKENEY: He could not tell exactly, but he considered at about twenty years purchase; so that if a piece of land was leased for £100 a year, the corporation would have to pay £2,000 for it. It must be obvious that there was no intention to sell it. He believed the Government was jealous of the corporation, and that was the reason why action had been taken in the matter. However, he was rather pleased that the committee was to be appointed, as its labors would, he believed, serve to show how groundless were the charges made against the corporation. In his opinion there was something behind or under the arrangement—the Government either desired to impede the work, or they were anxious to get the matter into their own hands.

THE COLONIAL SECRETARY rose to explain his reason for regretting his having assisted to pass the Bridge Act. It was simply because he believed, that if the Act referred to had never been in existence, the bridge would have been built in 1862 for half the price it would cost and be finished in 1865, or 1866. Referring to what had been said about pickings, he believed that the contractor and engineer would make from £30,000 to £40,000 out of the job, unless steps were taken to prevent them. He could not understand the course of action taken by the honorable member for North Brisbane (Mr. Blakeney). In 1862 that honorable gentleman had advocated the erection of a bridge, in order to make some property he possessed at South Brisbane more valuable, and yet he had allowed year after year to pass by without any commencement being made, and when the Government came to the rescue he opposed them.

MR. BLAKENEY: The Government wanted to stop it.

THE COLONIAL SECRETARY: From the representations which had been made to the Government outside the House, it had appeared necessary that the whole affair should be looked into at once.

MR. TAYLOR said he must have been mistaken in supposing that the honorable members for Port Curtis and North Brisbane, who had spoken on the question, were radicals, and he was, therefore, astonished to hear the objections they had made to the ballot being used in the selection of the committee. He had no doubt but that the corporation would fail to carry on the bridge, but he would allow them to proceed with it, and the inevitable result would be that the people of Brisbane would never be able to obtain another sixpence from the Government for any purpose whatever. It was probable that the bridge would reach the middle of the river, when the Government would have to take it up and finish it, in order to remove the obstruction to the navigation. The idea of the corporation borrowing £80,000, and giving security only to the extent of £30,000,

was absurd. He did not know how they managed to get the bank to lend it; he could not do it, and he considered that he was almost as cute in money matters as the corporation of Brisbane. The honorable member for North Brisbane had been guilty of a breach of the rules of the House, by applying the term "farce" to any of its proceedings, and he would call upon the Speaker to decide whether or not the gentleman referred to was out of order.

The SPEAKER said that had the honorable member been out of order, he would not have allowed him to proceed.

Mr. TAYLOR resumed: The conduct of the honorable member in endeavoring to burke the question by absenting himself from the House, in hopes that there would not be enough to form a quorum, was also worthy of severe comment. He (Mr. Blakeney) stood in the lobby grinning when honorable members were coming into the House, instead of entering like a man, and endeavoring to form a quorum. The idea of the Government being jealous of the Brisbane corporation was a very good one—they were a very fine body of people for anybody to be jealous of! The honorable member also seemed to have a keen eye for pickings—perhaps that was the reason why he was so anxious to become an occupant of the ministerial benches.

The SECRETARY FOR LANDS AND WORKS said he could not allow the question to go to the vote without saying a few words. The honorable member for North Brisbane (Mr. Blakeney) appeared never to miss a chance of imputing motives to the Government. What motive could they have, except to see that the corporation were doing their duty to the citizens of Brisbane under the Bridge Act? The question was not whether the bridge cost £60,000 or £80,000. It was the object of the Government and the House to see that the money the corporation obtained by the sale of the lands which had been granted them was properly applied. As to the tolls, they would not take effect until after the bridge was finished; and as the rate was to be fixed by the Governor, with the advice of the Executive Council, he would state that he should not advise His Excellency to make them high, believing, as he did, that in consequence of the grant of land the public were entitled to some consideration in the matter.

The motion was put and passed, and the Speaker appointed the Secretary for Lands and Works and Mr. Douglas, scrutineers.

Mr. DOUGLAS said he did not intend to vote, and would ask the Speaker whether, if there were less than sixteen papers handed in, the committee would be, according to the rules of the House, duly appointed.

The SPEAKER reserved his ruling until after the ballot papers were handed in, when

Mr. DOUGLAS said there were only thirteen, and that number not being equal to a

quorum, he would take the Speaker's ruling upon the point.

The SPEAKER said that unless his attention were called to the state of the House, and he found there was not a quorum present, he should not count the House out, which he always did under such circumstances. As to the voting, it was at the option of honorable members themselves whether they voted or not; their presence in the House at the time the ballot was taken was sufficient to render valid the appointment of any committee. He differed somewhat from Mr. Murray, late Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales, on the point raised; but still, he (the Speaker) was inclined to adhere to his own opinion. The result of the ballot was then announced, and the following honorable members were declared duly appointed:—The Secretary for Lands and Works, Messrs. Lilley, Edmondstone, Bell, and R. Cribb.