

Queensland



Parliamentary Debates
[Hansard]

Legislative Assembly

TUESDAY, 21 APRIL 1874

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY.

Tuesday, 21 April, 1874.

Supply.

SUPPLY.

The COLONIAL TREASURER moved—

That the Speaker leave the chair, and the House resolve itself into Committee of Supply.

Mr. FITZGERALD said he had three objects in view in rising on the present occasion to make some remarks on the proposed distribution of the surplus revenue that would shortly come under the consideration of the House in committee, and which he promised last week he would take an early opportunity of adverting to. His first object was, to propi-

tiate the honorable member for Carnarvon, who, when he (Mr. Fitzgerald) mentioned the subject the other day, expressed some fears that the business of the House would be very much impeded by it; and honorable members well knew the great anxiety of that honorable gentleman to get on with the business as quickly as possible. That was one object, and he hoped he would be able to obtain the entire sympathy and support of the honorable member he had referred to. The second was, to explain as clearly and in as earnest a manner as he possibly could, that the complaints of the northern settlers, and the constituencies represented by northern members, were really not without foundation; that they were not trading upon any mere sentimental grievances; but that they had at the bottom of those complaints hard facts, the most important of which related to pounds, shillings, and pence—which was the great question for consideration just now. The third object he had, was, to urge most earnestly on the honorable the Colonial Treasurer, after he had looked at the matter from a northern point of view, that he should alter, to some extent at least, the financial programme he had put forth; and not commit what was clearly an injustice to more than one important district in the colony. He was sure that honorable gentleman would not wilfully do injustice to any portion of the colony; and he thought that in dealing with this question, they should do so altogether apart from party motives of any description. Now, there were some old sayings which were not the less true because they were often repeated;—one was, “that history repeats itself”; and another, “that the experiences of one generation are often of but little use in guiding a succeeding one.” These were evidently sustained in the present instance; else, how was it, that though so short a time—about fourteen years—had elapsed since the older inhabitants of this colony had to complain bitterly of the treatment they received from the hands of the Sydney Government and the Parliament of New South Wales, they now forgot all that, and attempted to carry on the same injurious system towards the North, and gave the people of that part of the colony the same causes of complaint that they themselves had when Queensland was part of New South Wales. Amongst those complaints, the chief was, carelessness or inattention to local wants. The Sydney Parliament paid very little attention to what was required by the inhabitants of Brisbane in those days, and the people protested over and over again against the manner in which they were treated. They pointed out the difficulty of governing so large a country at such a distance from the seat of Government. They complained of misrepresentation, and the mal-appropriation of the public revenue, which was the greatest complaint they had. Now they found exactly the same complaints made here—that the people in the North had

the same cause for irritation against the governing body in Brisbane, that the people of what was now Queensland formerly felt with regard to the Government in New South Wales. He thought it could not be denied that up to the present time no attempt—no fair or rational plan—had been proposed by the parties in power during the last ten or twelve years to grapple with and settle on a fair basis this important question. And if the question were left unsettled for a much longer period, it would be really impossible to anticipate anything more than a constant series of quarrels and annoyances, and the House would become a scene of such debates as the present one, in which some honorable members would no doubt think him and other honorable members representing northern constituencies a great nuisance, and would hope that the question would be soon settled and got rid of. There were two ways of getting rid of it;—either to consider fairly the claims of the North, and to rectify as far as possible the grievances they could substantiate, and which were formerly substantiated against New South Wales; or to say at once, “We cannot satisfy you, take our blessing and go.” But so long as they were forced to remain within the colony of Queensland; so long as the present haphazard system of expenditure of public money was continued, and the same grievances existed, so long would they be compelled to bring those grievances forward and insist upon redress. They were to some extent forced into that position, because, if they did not do so, when they returned to their constituents they would be called to account, and asked why they did not notice these things, and did not press them persistently on the attention of Parliament. He contended it was clear that the House must act on some fixed ideas or principles of government that would secure fair play and justice to all, more especially in the distribution of the revenue. It was not natural that rational beings could be content to go on without some recognised principle, not only in taxation, but also in the manner in which public money was expended. It was no doubt true that the honorable the Premier as far back as the year 1865 felt that something was necessary—that some measure of self-government was required to be given to the outlying districts—and he introduced and carried through the Provincial Councils Bill, which he believed was now the law of the land. Some time afterwards there was a great deal of agitation at Rockhampton on the subject of local rights and local powers, and in 1867 and 1868 the northern members did their best to impress on the Government and Parliament the great want that was felt in that respect. The result was that a Provincial Councils Bill was introduced, but it was never carried out, having been strangled in its birth. After that followed the Financial Separation Bill of the honorable member for Port Curtis, and that really would have been

an excellent measure if it had not also been stifled at the outset. That Bill was framed on what the people of the North considered a tolerably fair basis, and it would no doubt have led to the establishment of local governments with large powers, which were what was wanted in a colony of such large dimensions as Queensland. He did not think it necessary to say much more with regard to local government, which there would be an opportunity of more fully discussing on a future occasion. The question now more immediately under notice was finance, and this, he regretted to say, had not received the attention it deserved from honorable gentlemen who occupied ministerial offices. This matter was in the same unsatisfactory state it had been in for years past—in fact, almost ever since the establishment of the colony; and even now they had nothing to satisfy them but some very vague hints from the honorable the Premier about some measure of financial adjustment, and also some hints from the honorable the Colonial Treasurer about extension of municipalities, with increased powers, that they might get by-and-bye; but they could confidently assure that honorable gentleman that they would not listen to such a scheme in the shape he seemed to entertain it. What they wanted was something very much greater than mere municipalities or small road boards, because, having to deal with a country so large in its extent, much larger institutions were required than road boards. With regard to finance, he, and those honorable members who were acting with him, could safely say they were expressing the views of their constituents in stating, that in coming to this colony they carried with them all the rights and liberties of British subjects, and the most important of these rights was, that people in one part of the country should not be taxed for the exclusive benefit of people in another part; but this had been constantly done, and was now being done. They held that no preponderance of numbers, in this their adopted country, could make it just, for the majority in any part of it to tax unfairly, or lay tribute on their fellow citizens in the remote parts of it, for the benefit of that majority. This was, however, particularly apparent, because it must be evident to every honorable member of that House, that there were large districts in Queensland, and especially in the North, which were totally separated from, and not naturally dependent on, the southern portion of the colony, and particularly the port of Brisbane. Although they might be fairly chargeable with, and were willing to contribute a just *quota* towards maintaining the various departments of the colony, and everything calculated to advance its interests, still they held it was totally unfair to take money belonging to other parts of the colony, and impound it and expend it, in order to make property where the greater number of the people

resided more valuable. Then, with regard to land revenue, he had long entertained the belief, which was very generally recognised, that the proceeds of sales and rents of lands should be applied for the purposes of immigration, public works, surveys, roads, and everything in fact which tended to give additional value to land. In fact, the price paid for land should be merely a land tax, collected in advance, for the purpose of effecting improvements in particular districts of the colony. He thought honorable members would admit that the affairs of a colony so vast, and so diverse in the prospects of its several parts or divisions, must be regarded, so far as Government was concerned, in the light of a partnership in which the different members contributed equally to the advancement of the interests of the firm; and that, in the distribution of the assets at the end of the year, each member should receive what he was fairly entitled to—and any number of members should not receive benefit at the expense of others. But how different had been the practice—but no sooner had the colony, that had been so bullied and so unfairly treated by New South Wales, got power over her own destiny, than she immediately repeated the very thing she had before complained of; and although repeated remonstrances were made from Rockhampton, and by northern members in 1867 and 1868, against the injustice complained of, and praying for the adoption of some intelligent system that would meet the wants of all, they were still as badly off as before. In fact, beyond attempts to satisfy outeries in certain localities by giving sops in the shape of extra money votes, nothing had been done, and they were still unable to discover the ground on which taxation was applied, or on what principles the revenue was allotted. For the convenience of honorable members, he and his colleagues, representing northern constituencies, had caused some information bearing on the subject, in which figures appeared very prominently, to be printed and circulated; and, before referring to this, he would explain that the sums put down under the head of local revenue and local expenditure had been taken from the Treasury returns for 1871–72–73, prepared in accordance with the Financial Separation Bill introduced by the honorable member for Port Curtis. On referring to the expenditure in the northern division for the last three years, as given on page 2, it would be seen that the actual customs receipts of the different ports for 1871, added to local revenue, such as from gold, land, licenses, and the like, and one-twelfth of the stamp duties and postage, taken in proportion to population, gave a total income of £98,217, as against the actual local expenditure, added to one-twelfth of the general expenditure of the colony, amounting to £53,440, thus leaving a balance to the credit of the northern division, after discharging all just claims on its resources, of £44,777. An

inspection of the expenditure in 1872 showed, in like manner, a balance of £72,953, and of 1873, of £60,570; making a grand total of £178,300, paid by the North, in three years, in excess of what could be fairly demanded from them. These were very important facts, and he hoped they should have some explanations of them—for at present they looked upon it as a great grievance, and apparently a gross injustice. However, as the honorable the Colonial Treasurer might probably wish to have the claims of the North proved by further calculation before giving any assent to them, he would take another mode of verifying them, which would be found on page 3 of the printed matter. From this it would be seen that—

“In 1871 the customs collections for the colony amounted to £324,000, which, divided by 120,000 persons, gave an average of £2 13s. 4d. per head for the whole of Queensland. Whereas, owing to the population of the northern division consisting chiefly of adult males, the collections at the several ports, £47,561 10s. 6d., with allowance of £9,512 6s. for the duties on goods that were paid at Brisbane or Rockhampton, gave an actual average of £5 14s. per head for the 10,000 persons in that division as the true amount contributed by them. In estimating, therefore, the real credit balance due for 1871—in addition to the amount admitted to be due by Colonial Treasurer's return of 23rd April, 1872—viz., £14,646 11s. 10d.—it is quite fair to credit the northern division also with the excess of customs collections, which in round numbers would be equal to £3 per head for 10,000 persons, or £30,000, thereby increasing the total balance for 1871 to £44,646.”

According to this system of calculation, it would be seen that the results were very nearly the same as those in page 2. Then

“In 1872 the customs collections for the colony amounted to £403,000, or an average of about £3 per head for 133,000 persons, whilst the 13,000 people in northern division paid £71,716, or £6 11s. each. This would entitle the North to a credit of £46,150, in addition to the balance of £27,266 9s. 3d. admitted by Colonial Treasurer's statement for 1872 to be due, and would raise the credit balance for 1872 to £73,416.

“In 1873 the customs collections came to £480,000, which, divided amongst 145,000 persons, gave £3 6s. as an average for the colony—the collections in the northern division same time being £90,181 3s. 7d. This would entitle the North to a credit of £2 18s. per head, or £42,050 in addition to balance of £11,278 7s. 1d., admitted by Colonial Treasurer's statement of 31st Jan., 1874, to be due, and raise the true credit balance for 1873 to £53,328.”

He felt that, in going through these figures, which were somewhat dry and uninteresting, he was taxing the patience of honorable members; but he hoped they would bear patiently with him, because it was a matter of the greatest moment, not only to his constituents, but to the colony generally:—

“Adding together the above balances for 1871, 1872, and 1873, we find a total of £171,340—differing but little from calculations attached to memorandum on 2nd page, and amounting to

£178,300—to be the amount of local revenue absorbed unjustly from northern division, by the haphazard way hitherto used of keeping public accounts as between the natural divisions of the colony, included as partners in the great firm of Queensland.

“Sinking at present, however, the consideration of these large sums, to which the inhabitants of the northern division have a most undeniable claim, and taking the Treasury returns for 1871, 1872, and 1873, prepared in accordance with Mr. Palmer's Financial Separation Bill, it will be seen that after providing out of the surplus of local revenue of 1871 for deficiency on the general account, and for which certainly the northern division is no way responsible, the credit balances for the last three years stand thus in round numbers:—

Southern Division	...	...	£84,000
Wide Bay and Burnett	...	...	82,000
Central	...	...	38,000
Northern	...	...	53,000
making together £257,000, and representing the surplus proposed by the Colonial Treasurer to be allotted as follows:—			
Southern Division, Public			
Works	...	...	£57,000
Railway Surveys, say	...	13,000	
			70,000
Leaving balance	...	...	£14,000
Wide Bay and Burnett,			
Public Works	...	13,000	
Railway Surveys, say	...	5,000	
			18,000
Leaving balance	...	...	64,000
Central Division, Public			
Works	...	4,500	
Railway Surveys, say	...	5,000	
			9,500
Leaving balance	...	...	28,500
Northern Division, Public			
Works	...	13,300	
Leaving balance	...	...	39,700
Total	...	...	£146,200
Out of these second balances which, by every rule of justice, ought to be laid out for the exclusive benefit of the divisions to which they belong, the Colonial Treasurer proposes to take—			
For Lighthouses and Beacons	...	...	£19,000
„ Telegraphic Extension	...	...	35,200
„ Immigration	...	...	75,000
Total	...	...	£129,200”

Now, what was the meaning of this? It was—that after expending nearly all that would be due to the southern division in local works, the honorable the Colonial Treasurer proposed, in a spirit of large-minded liberality, to take the balances of the Wide Bay and Burnett district, as well as those of the northern division, where there was no railway expenditure going on, as in the southern and central provinces, and expend it for general purposes, of which by right only one-tenth part should be charged to the northern division. Now, against such a misappropriation of public funds, even if the honorable members for Wide Bay and the Burnett, and the central district, were content to forego their just rights, honorable

members representing the northern districts must most strongly protest. It must also be remembered that, in addition to these admitted balances, they had, for the three years just passed, a further claim, amounting to about £80,000, for the four years previous to 1873. From the time the agitation first commenced in 1867, when these matters were clearly pointed out to the Government and the House, in printed papers and otherwise, they had a right to consideration for previous balances, if the House meant to deal with them in a fair and straightforward way, such as they might expect as partners in a large firm dealing fairly with each other. If it were otherwise, confidence would be completely destroyed, and the sooner they separated the better. If, to save borrowing money just now for the purposes of lighthouses, the extension of telegraphic communication, and immigration, the honorable the Colonial Treasurer had proposed to take the funds required out of surplus balances by a *pro rata* contribution, according to population, they would offer no opposition to such a course; because that would leave the northern division liable for only one-tenth, or about £13,000, and they would not have the slightest objection to that, if they were assured that the balance, £26,700, would be properly applied. But if this proposed expenditure were persisted in, he would appeal to honorable members to prevent, by their votes, the carrying out of this most unjust appropriation, which was in reality to divert what ought to be the property of particular districts, and apply it to general purposes. He did not for one moment suppose that the honorable the Colonial Treasurer had a design to injure the northern portion of the colony; but it appeared that he had dropped into the old groove, into which so many of his predecessors had fallen in respect to this question; and he did not believe any honorable members representing other portions of the colony would do injustice if it were pointed out that by pursuing a certain course they would be doing injustice. He did not believe they would take advantage of the inexperience of their younger brethren of the North, to attempt to deprive them of their just rights. He had no doubt the honorable the Colonial Treasurer might object to the correctness of their calculations, or might say he did not accept the mode of keeping the public accounts initiated by the late Government; but they had gone very carefully into the matter, being deeply interested in it, and they would be glad if that honorable gentleman would point out what other calculations they could adopt on a better basis, and which they and the public could understand. The honorable the Treasurer might also contend, that the present apparent surplus was really coming from, or was generated by loan funds applied some years back to make good deficits in general revenue; but inasmuch as the interest of this money had

doubtless been already charged in the yearly general expenditure, it would be an unworthy subterfuge to affirm that the real surplus revenue of the last three years was a myth, and that he had a right to allot it in the haphazard neck-or-nothing style, so frequently adopted, in dealing with large sums. He anticipated another objection of that honorable gentleman would be that he would probably assure the House that if very large sums were voted for Northern Queensland, or other districts, they would not be able to expend them, and he would probably point to some £20,000 of loan votes still unexpended, in proof of this view. But such a line of argument, if it were taken, would be sheer nonsense. He admitted that if they had only one engineer to superintend works in a district twice the size of the colony of Victoria, that these loan votes would remain unexpended for an indefinite time; especially as that officer no doubt sometimes got a hint that it was a very good thing to see loan votes continue on the paper, and he need not be in a hurry to spend them. But he could say that if they were granted a system of local self-government, with large powers—which alone would satisfy them—the Treasurer would not have to complain of these balances being left unexpended. It would be quite the contrary; they would be much more likely to go the other way and possibly get into debt. He would now refer in a general way, to some remarks which were made the other evening by the honorable member for Aubigny. That honorable member pointed out, that although the North had been very badly treated in former years, they had every reason to consider themselves very liberally dealt with indeed, so far as the present year was concerned. He was quite prepared to admit this; it appeared to him an unexpected piece of good luck to have a sum of £31,000 placed on the Estimates for 1874, for public works in the northern districts. But he would remind honorable members that the amount proposed to be spent in works in the other parts of the colony, amounted to about £123,000; so that the North would receive about one-fifth, which was not at all out of proportion, when it was considered that the revenue from that division this year was expected to amount to very nearly, if not over, £200,000. It should also be remembered that a very large expenditure was now going on in the southern and central districts for railways, which did not appear as public works, and the interest on which, if added to the expenditure in the different districts, would certainly show that this sum was by no means in excess of what the North was fairly entitled to. He trusted the explanation he had endeavored, however imperfectly, to make, would at least convince honorable members that they had some grievances, and that they were not altogether groundless; and that on the question of finance, as they looked at it, they had grave

cause for complaint. When they came to examine into other matters it might also be found that they had equal cause to be dissatisfied. He would also invite honorable members to study this subject a little before they indulged in pleasantries and jokes about northern grievances, and the northern manifesto. If they do so, it would be found that the northern representatives did not raise their voices without good cause for doing so, and until justice was done, it was not a matter to joke about. He thought there was one thing pretty certain, and that was, that the time had come when matters must be gone into, and decided in one way or another. They could not go on in this way year after year, expecting convulsions at every meeting of Parliament; and it was quite time that some general system of management were adopted, if the two portions of the colony were to agree together. If the Ministers who controlled the destinies of Queensland were not able to devise some system by which the claims of the North could be satisfied, and by which the same irritation and annoyances which existed years ago, in regard to New South Wales, could be avoided, he thought the sooner they said, "Go; depart in peace," the better. It was an undeniable fact that Queensland had benefited by separating from New South Wales, and no injury had been done to that colony by such separation; for New South Wales was still as prosperous as when she was connected with her discontented provinces. What the northern constituencies said was this—"If you can agree with us upon a system which will satisfy us; and we can go on year after year without constant bickerings and dissensions, and without expecting great revolutions occasionally, then let us become as members of one great partnership; but if not, let each of us take our separate course." No apprehension need be felt with regard to the northern districts not being able, so far as revenue was concerned, to bear the large amount of expense which the establishment of a Government entailed. When Queensland separated from New South Wales, in the first year of her existence she had, he thought, a revenue of £159,000, and they were quite certain that if they had the collection of their own duties in the North the revenue of the new colony this year would be equal to £200,000, which would be quite sufficient for their present wants. He would conclude his address by again urging upon the honorable the Colonial Treasurer to reconsider the question of surplus revenue, and to deal with it in such a way that they could show, so far as the North was concerned, it was just and fair. If they could not show that, it would be the duty of the northern representatives to lay the matter before their constituents, and say they had appealed to the Government and the House, and pointed out the injustice under which they labored, and they refused to listen to them. Of

course, if that were so, it would be of little use to bring on other subjects connected with northern interests; but they intended to bring them on and obtain an affirmative or a negative vote upon them, and afterwards take such a course of proceeding as the position demanded. But he submitted most seriously that it would be for the advantage of all, if the question could not be settled satisfactorily and quickly, because the North was tired of the delays that had taken place, to say so distinctly. Ever since the question was first stated, the same uneasy feeling prevailed in the North, and was getting greater and greater; and, in fact, in many communications he received it was said they would listen to nothing but territorial separation. The honorable gentleman at the head of the Government and his colleagues might not think much of this; they might look upon it as what was sometimes called a tempest in a teapot, and would come to nothing; but he could assure them that the feelings and determination of the northern people must come to practical results. It was impossible that it could be otherwise: if they could not obtain what they wanted—what they considered justice and fair play—they would agree on an address to Her Majesty, and go on their own hook as soon as possible.

The question was then put and passed, and the House went into Committee of Supply.