

Queensland



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[Hansard]

Legislative Assembly

WEDNESDAY, 25 OCTOBER 1876

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY.

Wednesday, 25 October, 1876.

Adjournment.

ADJOURNMENT.

Mr. GROOM said he wished to call the attention of the honorable Minister for Works to a subject which he thought of considerable importance, and he should conclude his remarks with a motion. He had been given to understand by persons who were in possession of certain facts, that the Ipswich railway workshops were being converted into a sort of jobbing establishment, and were very much interfering with workshops which had been established by private enterprise in Brisbane and other places. In fact, a matter had been brought under his notice

only a few days ago, where, on Saturday last, a boiler was brought down from Dalby to Toowoomba, and a person who had established a foundry and workshops at Toowoomba was asked what it would cost to repair it; he gave a very moderate price indeed, to show that he was prepared to do that description of work and could do it; but the man owning the boiler turned round and said, "Oh no, I cannot give you that; I will take it down to the Ipswich workshops, where I can get it done for one-half;" and he (Mr. Groom) believed it was now being repaired at a price that he understood would not pay the wages of the men. He recollected that some years ago a considerable amount of very valuable machinery was purchased for the Ipswich workshops, and at that time, as there were many jobs which could not be done at private establishments, the various Ministers for Works gave permission that they should be done in the Government workshops. That practice appeared, from information which had reached him, to have been much abused—whether for the purpose of giving employment to the men engaged there or not he could not say—and it was a fact that work had been done there to the detriment of the proprietors of workshops established in other parts of the colony. He did not suppose it was the intention of any Government that large jobs should be taken to the Government workshops, and it was with the object of having such a practice stopped that he now drew the attention of the honorable Minister for Works to it. There was an engineer's shop established at Toowoomba in which £5,000 or £6,000 had been invested, and there were several places in Brisbane, all of which were quite able to do general work as well as it could be done in the Ipswich shops; and thus he did not see why the Government should enter into competition with private enterprise. He should like to know whether the honorable Minister for Works had given permission for the work to which he had referred to be done at Ipswich. He believed that Ministers had granted such permission, but only in exceptional cases, where there was not the necessary machinery elsewhere, and it was never intended for one moment that the Government workshops should compete with private establishments. He begged to move—

That this House do now adjourn.

The PREMIER said that, in answer to the remarks of the honorable member for Toowoomba, he might state that he had no information whatever of the particular job referred to by him, but he would make inquiries on the subject. He might tell the honorable member that he was extremely chary of having any private work done at the Government shops, and, in fact, on only one occasion had he allowed them to be used for doing private work, as he was well aware that there were large engineering establishments at Brisbane and elsewhere.

Mr. PECHÉY said that, with regard to the matter brought forward by the honorable member for Toowoomba, it would no doubt be a great advantage to people carrying on business where machinery was used if they were able to get jobs done at the Government workshops, and he did not himself think that there was any reason for feeling annoyed that those shops should to a certain extent compete with private establishments. He knew that the Government workshops had been of great advantage to him, as, had it not been for the opportunity afforded him of having the use of the Government establishment, he should have had to pay time after time large sums of money.

HONORABLE MEMBERS of the Opposition: Hear, hear.

Mr. PECHÉY said that he had applied to the Commissioner for Railways to get certain kinds of work done at the Ipswich workshops, and he knew that, but for having been able to send some work to them, he should have had to pay through the nose. That being the case, he did not see, so long as the work was paid for and re-imbursed the Government for what it cost them in wages and interest of money on the machinery, which he might mention was of a very beautiful description, that it would be good policy to close those shops against the public. He most decidedly entered his veto against anything that would lead to excessive charges on the part of private establishments. The public had invested a large sum of money in those railway workshops—as they were so often reminded by the honorable member for Warrego, who seemed to think that a tax would be necessary to cover the cost of the railways—and he did not see why the public should not make use of them; at the same time he should object to the introduction of a large amount of capital to compete with private enterprise. He thought it was a matter for the House to say how far the Government workshops should be allowed to do jobs for the public, and that there should be regulations fixing the charges.

Mr. IVORY said they had to thank the honorable member who had just sat down for the extreme candor of his remarks, which must have been as gratifying to other honorable members as it had been to himself (Mr. Ivory). They had also to thank the honorable member for Toowoomba for bringing such a matter under the notice of the House, as he considered that it was a gross misapplication of the Government workshops that they should be allowed to compete with private enterprise; and although they might have been, as stated, of great advantage to the honorable member for Aubigny, he did not think that the country paid for those workshops for the private benefit of the honorable member or anybody else. He presumed that honorable member supported the Government workshops being thus used on personal grounds only, and did not advocate such a

system on public grounds. He believed that such a system would lead to endless corruption—although he would not attribute corruption in the instance of the honorable member for Aubigny—and could be made the medium of a large amount of favoritism. He decidedly agreed with the honorable member for Toowoomba, and was glad to hear that the Premier had promised that he would look into the matter in future.

Mr. GRAHAM would point out that, in consequence of the elaborate machinery in the Government workshops, they could occasionally do work there that could not otherwise be done unless it was sent out of the colony, and that, therefore, the Government should allow such work to be done, and charge a fair rate of payment for it. His object in rising on the present occasion, however, was to draw attention to a circular recently issued by the Commissioner for Railways with regard to ledger accounts opened for the convenience of the public. That circular was as follows:—

[CIRCULAR.]

"Commissioner for Railways' Department,
"Brisbane, 10th October, 1876.

"SIR,—Referring to the Ledger Account opened for your convenience with the Railway Department, I am desired to inform you the Government have decided upon closing the present account at the end of this month, and opening, on and after the 1st November next, a fresh Ledger Account, provided the following conditions are agreed to, viz. :—

"That the amount of Ledger Account rendered shall be paid, without deduction, in Brisbane, at the beginning of each month, by yourself or your Agent.

"Unless these conditions are complied with, the account shall be closed.

"In carrying out this decision of the Government, I have to observe, any errors discovered in accounts rendered will be subsequently adjusted.

"A form is enclosed herewith, which, if agreed to, you will please cause to be returned to this Department duly filled up, with the view to the new account being opened, if approved.

"I have, &c.,

"A. O. HERBERT,
"Commissioner for Railways."

It seemed to him that that was a very arbitrary proceeding, and he did not think that any country firm could possibly conduct their business in such a way. Many accounts would become due in Toowoomba, as they would be incurred there; and yet the Railway Department expected their customers would guarantee to pay those accounts through some bank or agent in Brisbane. No bank would undertake to do that kind of work; and, therefore, an agent would have to be employed who would most likely charge a commission of two and a-half per cent. He had received a letter from one of his con-

stituents on the subject, from which he would read an extract:—

"We receive our monthly accounts from Toowoomba, and they could be rendered to us on the first of every month, instead of which, we understand that they are sent to Brisbane to be audited, and reach us about the middle of the month. We are prepared to hand the station-master at Toowoomba, on the first of each month, a cheque for the amount. Our payments have always been promptly made, except in cases where we have had to take exception to charges for demurrage, exchange, and other items which we considered improperly made."

He should have thought that that would be perfectly satisfactory, but he understood that the reason given by the department for the change in the system was, that some persons who had ledger accounts were dilatory in their payments. If that was the case, he thought the proper remedy was a very simple one, namely, to stop the accounts until those people paid up, and not punish others by inflicting upon them such a hardship as was now proposed. There was also another thing he would mention, namely, that the Government were in the habit of charging exchange on cheques. People in Toowoomba, where the accounts were due, were in the habit of paying by cheques for which they were charged exchange, but surely the Government could make arrangements with banks to cash cheques at all their branches free of charge. Again, he thought it was very unjust that all accounts were to be paid as rendered, before a person could see whether or not they were correct, although he was told that if any errors were discovered in accounts rendered they would be subsequently adjusted. Under the old system it was very hard to get accounts adjusted, but he thought under that now proposed, it would be still more difficult, as the money had to be paid first.

Mr. BAILEY said it appeared to him that no cheques were to be made payable in any other place but Brisbane, and that in itself accounted for the whole proceeding. In reference to the motion of the honorable member for Toowoomba, he must say that he felt annoyed that the Government workshops should be made use of by private individuals, more especially by members of Parliament, to get their work done; because, although it was possible that the work would be done more cheaply, there would never be any guarantee how much such work would cost the Government to do, or how much they would get for doing it, or even whether it would be paid for at all. There were many men who had expended large sums of money on machinery and workshops, and who were dependent on those workshops for their living; and it was in his opinion extremely wrong that the Government should compete with them. There might have been a time, when, owing to the want of good machinery in private establishments, it was a great conve-

nience to persons to be allowed to have certain work done in the Government workshops; but that time had passed, as there were now in the principal towns foundries capable of doing any work required. He thought it was time that the Government should put a stop to doing private work in the Government workshops.

Mr. PECHÉY rose in explanation. He wished to correct an impression that appeared to be entertained by honorable members—among others, by the honorable member for Wide Bay, and to state that he had never had any work done in the Government workshops since he had been a member of that House. He should be sorry if it was for one moment supposed that he advocated the principle that a member of Parliament should make use of his position to get work done at those workshops.

The SPEAKER: The honorable member is going beyond an explanation.

Mr. MORGAN said he was very glad that the honorable member for Darling Downs had brought forward the subject of ledger accounts. He happened to know something about them, and he thought it was high time that some change should be made in the present system. He knew of a case where an agent, instead of paying the ledger account with regularity, had gone on for two or three years without paying, until the unfortunate people who had been security for him, and who had been kept in the dark, were suddenly pounced down on and called upon to pay the money. That showed the system needed reform, and he hoped that the honorable Minister for Works would see that for the future innocent persons were not made to suffer for the tricks, or something else, of designing people. He thought the system of ledger accounts should be totally changed, and that it should be a cash transaction, the accounts being payable at the end of each week.

Mr. McILWRAITH said he should like to hear some explanation from the honorable Minister for Works with regard to the matter brought forward by the honorable member for Darling Downs. He thought it was a subject of great importance, as anyone who had been in the habit of having ledger accounts must have been astounded on receiving the circular recently issued by the Railway Department. That was not the way in which business was done in any other colony, nor, so far as he knew, in any other part of the world. Why, it was actually imposing a tax upon people living outside of Brisbane, because there were plenty of persons in the country who would have to employ an agent in Brisbane at two and a-half per cent. Then again, why should people be debarred from the right of examining their accounts before paying them—what were a few days when the Government had security that the accounts would be paid? He thought it was an outrage on the whole of the colony that

such a circular should be issued. With regard to the remarks of the honorable member for Aubigny, he thought that honorable member had not gone far enough; the honorable member had admitted that he had not had any work done by the Government since he had been a member of that House, but that, before then, he had benefited largely by getting work done at the Government workshops, instead of at private establishments. Did anyone suppose that the Government workshops were to be placed in competition with private shops? It was true that he had heard reports of some jobs going to the Ipswich works, but the present was the first time he had heard it admitted in that House. He believed that some time ago, in cases where work of a certain class was to be done, and for doing which the only machinery was in the Government workshops, the Government were justified in allowing it to be done there; at the same time the practice always was, that such permission could only be given by the Minister for Works himself. Now, however, there was machinery in many towns in the colony to do any work that might be required, and therefore he considered that the practice he alluded to should be discontinued. The argument of the honorable member for Aubigny was a very flimsy one indeed—that if anybody could get his work done cheaper by the Government than by private persons, he should do so, and the honorable member admitted that he had saved money in that way. In the case of a private citizen that would be bad enough, but for a member of the House to do so was most inexcusable. What had been said by the honorable member for Wide Bay was quite true—that although the Government might be able to do the work cheaper than anybody else, it would be quite impossible to know how much such work cost, or how much was charged. He had often heard it said that a large amount of private work was done at the Government workshops, and it now appeared that the statement was correct.

Mr. PECHÉY wished to say, in explanation, that any work he had had done at Ipswich was work which could not be done elsewhere.

Mr. J. SCOTT said that the honorable member stated that he had got that work done with great advantage to himself, as he would have had to pay through the nose for it if it had been done elsewhere.

The PREMIER, in answer to the remarks of the honorable member for Darling Downs, said he could assure that honorable member that the Government were at present making inquiries in the other colonies in reference to the mode of keeping ledger accounts there, as he was under the impression that there were no ledger accounts kept in the other colonies by which the collection of money was made so difficult as it was here. There was, in fact, so much difficulty in getting the

accounts paid here that it had been found necessary to make the change proposed in the circular letter. He might inform the honorable member that an alteration was now under consideration by which it would be arranged that all accounts should be paid weekly at local offices established along the line of railway. It was highly necessary that some change should be made in the present system of ledger accounts, as more than half of them were not paid regularly; that was, in fact, the reason why what was considered rather a strong order had been issued by the Railway Department. When he had received information from the other colonies, he should be prepared to take the best action he could; but honorable members must bear in mind that he had been only a short time in office, and had not been able to give much attention to those matters.

Mr. McILWRAITH said he should like to know how much had been lost since the commencement of ledger accounts from those accounts not being paid. He believed if the honorable member inquired, he would find that the colony had lost altogether about £32 in that way.

Mr. Low thought that the losses, if any, arose from allowing heavy accounts to run on for a number of years. It was very hard that parties who were securities for the commission agents should receive no notice of the accounts running on, and then be called upon all of a sudden to pay up a large sum of money. He had sent up a good many goods, and had been in the habit of paying once a month, and he believed as a rule that all country accounts were regularly paid. It would be a very great hardship in some cases to compel people to employ an agent in Brisbane to pay for every trifling thing.

Mr. WALSH would suggest that the Premier should lay on the table a return of the amount of work done at the Ipswich workshops for the honorable member for Aubigny. That honorable member said that the work he had had done there had not been done since he was a member of the House. He did not know what kind of work it was, but he could safely say that he was in office for three years, and during that period no work was done for the honorable member. It would be just as well for the House to know what was the quantity, quality, and cost of the work done for the honorable member. He thought the honorable gentleman had jumped at a conclusion in addressing the House on the subject, as he said that he considered that the Government should do work for persons; but did not the honorable member know that the Government would not be inclined to do it for people who had no political influence? did it not strike the honorable member that on the eve of some important business coming on in that House, he could induce the Government to believe that he had some work to be done that could only be done in the Government workshops? Why, there was at the

present time in that House a member who had had land granted to him, notwithstanding it had been refused to previous applicants over and over again, on the ground of its being required by the Government for a railway reserve; and that being the case, could honorable members not conceive that some powers of suasion might be applied to the Government for other purposes? He had tracings of the land at that very moment in his possession. He might say that an honorable member of that House had such persuasive powers that after he (Mr. Walsh) had, whilst in office, withdrawn certain lands from sale which had been applied for by another gentleman, those lands were subsequently granted to an honorable member opposite.

HONORABLE MEMBERS: Name, name.

Mr. WALSH: The honorable member for Aubigny.

Mr. PECHEY: I deny it; it is utterly false.

Mr. WALSH: I will show the House the papers—the honorable member for Toowoomba knows the land well.

Mr. BUZACOTT wished to know from the Premier if a circular similar to that read in the House by the honorable member for Darling Downs had been sent to persons in the habit of forwarding goods by the Northern Railway as well as to those sending goods on the Southern and Western line, as it would be very hard if persons residing at Rockhampton had to pay their accounts in Brisbane. Whenever any complaint was made of the working of the Railway Department, the honorable the Premier invariably told them that he had not been long enough in office to be responsible. That circular was issued during the present month, and surely the honorable gentleman had been long enough in office to know something about the matter. At any rate, he wanted to know whether people sending goods by the Northern line, would have to pay their accounts in Brisbane.

The PREMIER: No.

Mr. McLEAN thought that the matter brought under the notice of the House by the honorable member for Toowoomba was of far more importance than the honorable Premier appeared to think it was. The honorable gentleman said that he would inquire into the matter, but he thought the House should not be contented with that, but insist upon something more being done. It had been stated by the honorable member for Toowoomba that he had been told that the boiler referred to was to be repaired at the Government works for one-half the cost that it could have been done for at Toowoomba, although the man there, being anxious to show that he could do the work, sent in a most moderate estimate. That being the case, he thought the Premier should inquire not only whether the work was being done at the Ipswich shops, but also what it would cost the country. If the work could not be done at one-half of

the cost, then those favored individuals were having work done at the expense of the taxpayers of the colony; and if he understood the honorable member for Toowoomba, it was very evident that the work would be done at the cost of the country. That appeared to him to be the point to be looked at. If work was to be done at the Railway Department for private individuals, it ought to be done at least at the same rate that was charged in private establishments, or otherwise it would be useless for private gentlemen to invest their capital in large establishments.

MR. WALSH said he had found the paper to which he had referred, and would read it.

THE ATTORNEY-GENERAL: The honorable member has already spoken.

THE SPEAKER: The honorable member is rising in explanation.

THE ATTORNEY-GENERAL: I think, sir, this is very inconvenient, because the honorable member is now making a personal attack on the honorable member for Aubigny.

MR. MOREHEAD: The honorable member for Aubigny charged the honorable member for the Warrego with stating what was false.

MR. WALSH said the facts of the case were, that a Mr. Munro applied for the same land and was refused it, which was afterwards granted to the honorable member for Aubigny, and he believed that Mr. Munro's application was refused solely because he, Mr. Walsh, was warned that the land would be required for railway purposes. (The honorable member here read a paper detailing the circumstances.)

THE MINISTER FOR LANDS: I was not in office at the time.

MR. WALSH: I am not making a charge against the present Government.

THE ATTORNEY-GENERAL: The honorable member for Aubigny was not a member of this House till the end of 1873.

MR. PALMER said, in reference to the subject of allowing private jobs to be done at the Government workshops, that it would be well if the honorable Minister for Works would fall back on the regulation he made when in office, which was, that no private work should be done at the Ipswich shops except by permission of the Minister himself, and then only if the work could not be done by anybody else. No private work was ever done there with his knowledge whilst he was a Minister, unless on a certificate from the engineer that it could not be done anywhere else in the colony. It had come under his notice, however, that work had since been done at the works which should have been done elsewhere. In respect to the proposed alteration in the ledger accounts, he thought it was a mistake on the part of the department, as anything that would tend to check traffic on the line must be. As regarded any difficulty in getting the accounts paid, he thought the delay must be owing to neglect on the part of the officers

of the department. He remembered that when he was in office, some little difficulty occurred in getting an account paid, and the Secretary for Works stopped the next goods belonging to the party; and if what had been stated was correct, that accounts had been allowed to run on for years, the officers of the department should be made to pay for such neglect. There could be no difficulty in getting the money, as the Government had the matter in their own hands. Those persons who had ledger accounts were constantly getting up goods, and unless they paid for the carriage of them, the Government should stop the goods.

MR. PECHAY was anxious to say a few words in explanation of the matter referred to by the honorable member for the Warrego, who, no doubt, thought he was correct, but who was entirely wrong. The land referred to was applied for by him before Mr. Munro applied for it, but he was refused on the ground that it was a timber reserve. It was refused to him by Mr. McDowall, the then Commissioner of Crown Lands at Toowoomba, and subsequently the late Mr. Coxen granted it to Mr. Munro. He (Mr. Pechay) immediately put in a claim for it, and it being found that his application was a prior one, the land was given to him. He was the wronged party rather than the wronging in that case, and if the honorable member for Warrego knew the whole of the circumstances, he would rather have sympathised with him than have attempted to throw disgrace upon him.

MR. GROOM said that the object he had in view in moving the adjournment of the House had been sufficiently attained, and he trusted that the honorable Minister for Works would make it his business to inquire into the incident he had mentioned, and also into some other cases that had occurred prior to that which he had stated; because if his information was correct, it was a state of things that had been going on for some time. He was quite aware of the instructions which had been referred to by the honorable member for Port Curtis; and it was because those instructions had degenerated into an abuse that persons now said that they could get work done at the Government workshops for one-half what it would cost elsewhere. He had been informed that even ploughs and harrows had been made at those workshops, and if such things were allowed to go on, it was impossible to say what else would be done. With reference to the matter to which attention had been called by the honorable member for Darling Downs, he might mention that he had received two or three letters on the subject; and he would suggest to the honorable Premier that if he should consider the alteration necessary in consequence of some defalcation, he should also remember that he might be inflicting a hardship on a number of persons who were in the habit of paying their accounts with regularity. With

regard to the Hogarth Meat Preserving Company, for instance, it would be a very great hardship, for he thought their cheques might be considered good anywhere. He considered the honorable member for Darling Downs had been perfectly right in directing attention to the subject. Having attained the object for which he moved the adjournment, he would, with permission of the House, withdraw it.

Motion withdrawn accordingly.