

Queensland



Parliamentary Debates
[Hansard]

Legislative Council

WEDNESDAY, 23 AUGUST 1911

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL.

WEDNESDAY, 23 AUGUST, 1911.

The PRESIDENT (Hon. Sir Arthur Morgan) took the chair at half-past 3 o'clock.

METHODIST CHURCH BILL.

SECOND READING.

The ATTORNEY-GENERAL (Hon. T. O'Sullivan) said: This Bill is intended to give effect to the decision of the General Conference of the Methodist Church of Australasia which was held in Adelaide on 26th May, 1910. The preamble to the Bill refers to that decision, and sets out the facts which render this legislation necessary. As hon. gentlemen probably know, the Methodist Church of Australasia is now divided into six Annual Conferences, as set out in the preamble—namely, the New South Wales Conference, the Victoria and Tasmania Conference, the South Australian Conference, the New Zealand Conference, the Queensland Conference, and the Western Australia Conference. The General Conference, whose decision I have referred to, corresponds to the Federal Parliament of Australia, and the Annual Conferences correspond to the State Parliaments. The church in New Zealand wishes to form itself into a separate church, with a new name, and having an independent existence. In other words, the New Zealand branch of the Methodist Church wants to establish Home Rule, so far as church matters are concerned, and they have evidently made out a good case—a sufficiently good case to satisfy the General Conference and the various Annual Conferences. I have in my hand the minutes of the General Conference to which I have referred, and the decision of the conference will be found reported on page 88 of those minutes. It reads as follows:—

“The New Zealand Conference having preferred a request to be constituted an independent conference, the General Conference, in view of the geographical, national, and other special conditions affecting New Zealand, consented unanimously to the constitution of such independent conferences, subject to the consent of each of the six Annual Conferences concerned, and the sanction of the Parliament of each of the Australian States and New Zealand, upon the following plan.”

Then the plan is set out at length in the minutes. Hon. gentlemen will observe that this consent was given on two conditions. One condition was that the consent of each of the six Annual Conferences concerned should be obtained. That condition has been already complied with. The other condition was that the sanction of the Parliaments of each of the Australian States and of New Zealand should also be obtained. That condition is now in process of being complied with. A similar measure to the one which is now under consideration is being introduced in each of the other States and in the Parliament of New Zealand. I understand that the New South Wales measure was to have been introduced before the present time, but I have no definite information on the subject, and probably owing to the political turmoil in that State it may be that the Bill has not yet been introduced. The measures to be introduced in all the Parliaments are precisely on the same lines as this Bill. I may state that I

have the approval of the draft of the measure in writing under the hand of the Rev. Dr. Youngman, who is the president of the General Conference of the Methodist Church of Australasia. The reason for the request on the part of the New Zealand branch of the church may be summed up in one word. The reason is a geographical one. There are 1,200 miles of stormy sea between the mainland of Australia and New Zealand, and that physical fact and the results which naturally flow from it constitute the reasons which make it advisable for the church in New Zealand to ask for separation in church matters. Whether it is desirable in the interests of the church to do so is not a matter which concerns us in any way. The governing body of the church and all the parties interested think it is advisable, and the only question for us to consider is whether legislative assistance is necessary. I have pointed out that one of the conditions under which the consent of the General Conference was given was that parliamentary sanction in the different States and in New Zealand should be obtained, so that even if it were not strictly necessary from the legal point of view the fact that the consent has been given subject to that condition would justify us, I think, in giving legislative sanction to what is asked for. But there is a further reason for asking for the legislative sanction of the various States, and that is that in all the States the union of the different bodies which now form the Methodist Church of Australasia has been recognised; and it has been recognised by all the Parliaments that the New Zealand Conference is a part of the Methodist Church of Australasia. On that basis certain legislation has been put through, and therefore it is highly desirable that legislative sanction should be obtained from the various State Parliaments. If hon. members wish to refer to the previous legislation affecting the Methodist Church of Australasia I would refer them to the Wesleyan-Methodist Church Property Trust Act of 1893, which will be found at page 4900 of the statutes, and to the Methodist Union Act of 1905, which will be found at page 8269 of the statutes. The history of the church and the method of vesting its property and many other details of interest, at any rate to the members of the church, will be found in those Acts. The provisions of this measure are very short. Clauses 1 and 2 may be looked upon really as formal. Clause 3 declares the New Zealand Annual Conference independent. That is the clause which crystallises the decision arrived at by the General Conference at the request of the New Zealand Conference. Clause 4 provides for the date of independence. The date is necessarily not a fixed date, because it depends on certain Acts of Parliament being passed in the various Parliaments; but it is provided that the president of the General Conference shall fix a date at which the independence of the New Zealand church shall take effect, and that date, of course, will depend upon the necessary legislation being passed by the various Parliaments. Clause 5 may be looked upon as formal. It deals with the question of evidence of the independence of the church in New Zealand, a copy of the *Gazette* containing a copy of the president's certificate being conclusive evidence of the independence and of the date on which it shall take effect. Clause 6 makes a printed copy of the minutes of the General Conference evidence in legal and other proceedings before any court of

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justice. Section 12 of the Act of 1893 makes somewhat similar provision, but it has been found defective in practice, and clause 6 of the Bill will cover one or two of the deficiencies which have been found to exist. The only other clause in the Bill—clause 7—may be regarded as formal, though it may be very convenient for those wishing to operate under the Act. If there is any other information that I can give to hon. members at the Committee stage, I shall be very happy to supply it. I beg to move that the Bill be now read a second time.

HON. A. GIBSON: I happened to be one of the representatives from Queensland to attend in Adelaide at what is termed the Methodist General Conference in May of last year. This question of a division of New Zealand from Australia was keenly discussed throughout the day on which the motion was made, and also the day following, and it was considered, in the interests of the Methodist Church, and in the interests of New Zealand as a Dominion, that the division should be allowed. The General Conference is held six times in Australia to once in New Zealand, and the New Zealand brethren, both ministerial and lay, have to come over to Australia to legislate at this General Conference. It was a very grave difficulty that so many of them—about forty ministers or more and forty laymen—had to come over to Australia to legislate for the benefit of the church for the next three years, and discuss some of the things that were done during the previous three years; and, as there had been a change in the name of New Zealand during the three years preceding this conference—it was then only New Zealand, a part of Australia, but during the interval it was termed a Dominion—and they, being a people not attached to Australia, thought that in the interests of their church it would be well if a division were allowed them, and that they should have a conference of their own, and not be entirely subject to the General Conference of Australasia. In everything that is done, whether for the public weal or woe, there is always a difference of opinion, and there was naturally so there. Those who understand the nature of the conditions surrounding the Methodist Church, know that the body is one general body, having foreign missions attached to it, and having supernumerary funds attached to it, and many other conditions that bind the whole body together, so there was some difficulty in regard to the division taking place and breaking up the amalgamation that had lasted for years. But after the whole question had been thoroughly discussed, it was felt that the New Zealanders had made out a good case for the division, and certain conditions requisite for the stability of the church in New Zealand and the church in Australia were entered into and carried out in the spirit of the speeches that were made, and they decided that they would pass the motion, at the desire of New Zealand. I am not quite sure whether it was an unanimous vote or not, but it was by a vote of at least three to one.

The ATTORNEY-GENERAL: It was reported as unanimous.

HON. A. GIBSON: I am not quite clear on the matter. I am speaking now of the general feeling in the conference—and I was one of them—that the New Zealanders had big schemes of religious work to carry

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out, and which could be carried out successfully if they had a conference of their own. One of the great factors in allowing them to depart was that there is another portion of the Methodist Church, called the Primitive Methodist Church, and they were not willing to associate themselves in the General Conference; but, if there was a New Zealand Conference, they were prepared to join them. I believe that union has almost taken place since that day, and instead of there being a Wesleyan Methodist Church and a Primitive Methodist Church in those islands, it will now be a united Methodist Church, and the two bodies—probably three or four—will fall into line. There are in all sections of the community, and amongst the ministerial brethren of our churches, men who stand for order, and the position of the delegates was called into question—whether they could vote away from Australia a portion of its responsibilities. The question as to how that could be arranged and how we were to get at the right of the matter was referred to Judge Way, the Chief Justice of South Australia, and the Attorney-General, and many other gentlemen were called in to advise, and show where the weakness might exist that would create something like what happened in the division of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland some years ago. It was said, "If we divide we may have to divide everything, and create a good deal of disturbance." That, of course, has rectified itself now in the Presbyterian Church, as many of the old members have died and others have come to the wisdom they ought to have had then. The Methodist Church did not want that to occur, so Judge Way was called in to report and say what was best. It was held that the General Conference could not finally decide, and say that they would allow New Zealand to go. It was, of course, acknowledged that what was done might be put before this Parliament and the other five Parliaments of Australia, but it was felt that the delegates sent to that conference from the various churches in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia, and even the Dominion of New Zealand, had not power to grant this concession. Judge Way, in submitting his report to the president of the conference, gave it as his opinion that it was a matter for the members of the churches to say whether they were willing that the division should take place. It might be as well to understand that at the quarterly meetings of the various churches, representatives were sent to Brisbane, and those representatives selected seven clergymen and seven laymen to go down to the General Conference. It was held by Judge Way that the quarterly meetings that appointed the delegates should be held before the legal declaration could be made that the division should take place, and I am very pleased to tell hon. members—I cannot give the number of those meetings as it is very large—but at probably 300 or 400 quarterly meetings in Queensland this proposition was put before them, and the vote was an unanimous vote from one end of Queensland to the other—that the church in New Zealand should be allowed to have what it desired.

Hon. P. MURPHY: Home rule.

HON. A. GIBSON: Yes—that they should be allowed to have their own conference. That was the arrangement, as I understood it. Everything was done in Australia, feel-

ing that it would improve the carrying on of the work of God, and I think, from what I saw of the New Zealanders and from what I have heard and read since, that the right action was taken, and this afternoon I have no hesitation whatever in saying that if this Bill is passed the New Zealanders will be very pleased with our action, and I believe it will tend to the glory of God.

Question—That the Bill be now read a second time—put and passed.

The committal of the Bill was made an Order of the Day for Tuesday next.

ADJOURNMENT.

HON. A. H. BARLOW: I am very sorry that this sitting has been so short. I hope we shall have a quorum on Tuesday, as we hope to put two Bills on the table, and, if there is any luck in another place, we may have a large measure from there. At any rate, we have to be on the *qui vive* for a Supply Bill. I apologise for the short sitting to-day, but express the hope that a quorum will be formed on Tuesday next. I beg to move that the Council do now adjourn.

Question put and passed.

The Council adjourned at two minutes to 4 o'clock.
