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CHAPTER II.

INITIATION OF RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT.

Arrival of Sir George Bowen in Brisbane.—The First Responsible Ministry.—Injunctions to Governor by Secretary of State in regard to choice of Ministers.—Ex-members of New South Wales Legislature take Umbrage.—The Governor on the Characteristics of Various Classes of Colonists.—The Governor a Dictator.—The Microscopic Treasury Balance.—Gladstone as Site of Capital.—Mr. Herbert as a Parliamentary Leader.

When on 10th December, 1859, Governor Bowen, accompanied by Mr. Robert George Wyndham Herbert, his private secretary, had landed amidst great popular rejoicings at Brisbane, read the Queen's proclamation of the new colony, and been sworn in as Governor by Mr. Justice Lutwyche (the Resident Supreme Court Judge for Moreton Bay), he was compelled to choose Ministers and then govern the colony for nearly six months before they could be constitutionally approved by the representatives of the people in Parliament assembled. Sir George Bowen was faced by the dearth of seasoned public men, and by the dread of enlisting the services of strong partizans whose opinions and personal qualities were alike unknown to him. But as a constitutional Governor he could do no executive act until he had secured responsible advisers, and therefore the immediate appointment of Ministers was imperative. Hence on the day of the official landing a "Gazette" notice contained the proclamation of the Queen's Letters Patent, and notification of the appointment of Mr. Herbert as Colonial Secretary with Mr. Ratcliffe Pring as Attorney-General. Thus with the Governor and his two Ministers an Executive Council was at once formed; and five days later Mr. (afterwards Sir) Robert Ramsay Mackenzie was gazetted Colonial Treasurer. (a)

These appointments gave umbrage to certain colonists, particularly to those who, having represented Moreton Bay constituencies in the New South Wales Assembly, were deemed in many respects most eligible as advisers of the Queen's representative. Mr. Herbert had come out from England with Sir George Bowen as private secretary at the moderate salary of £250 a year. He was a scholarly young man of 28 years, and among other advantages had enjoyed the privilege of holding for a time

(a) For personnel of first Ministry and Parliament, see Appendix B, post.
the post of private secretary to Mr. Gladstone. Indeed, both the Governor and his secretary, although the former had been selected by Sir E. B. Lytton, Colonial Secretary in the superseded Derby Administration, may be classed among the Gladstone school of politicians. Sir George Bowen probably recollected the injunction of Sir E. B. Lytton against partizanship, and the danger of identifying himself with the “squatters.” For not only were they, speaking generally, partizans of a pronounced type, but the reservation of tenant rights made by the Order in Council of 6th June was calculated to taint them with a strong personal, or at least class, bias in land legislation and administration.

In his official despatches to the Colonial Secretary Sir George Bowen did not mention at length these initial difficulties; but to Sir E. B. Lytton he wrote more fully. “I have often thought,” he said, under date 6th March, 1860, “that the Queensland gentlemen-squatters bear a similar relation to the other Australians that the Virginian planters of 100 years back bore to the other Americans. But there is a perfectly different class of people in the towns. Brisbane, my present capital, must resemble what Boston and the other Puritan towns of New England were at the close of the last century. In a population of 7,000 (a) we have 14 churches, 13 public-houses, 12 policemen. The leading inhabitants of Brisbane are a hard-headed set of English and Scotch merchants and mechanics; very orderly, industrious, and prosperous; proud of the mother country; loyal to the person of the Queen; and convinced that the true federation for these colonies is the maintenance of the integrity of the Empire, and that the true rallying-point for Australians is the Throne.”

To the Under Secretary for the Colonies (Mr. Chichester Fortescue) Sir George Bowen wrote on 6th June, 1860:—“At the first start of all other colonies the Governor has been assisted by a nominated Council of experienced officials; he has been supported by an armed force; and he has been authorised to draw, at least at the beginning, on the Imperial Treasury for the expenses of the public service. But I was an autocrat; the sole source of authority here, without a single soldier, and without a single shilling. There was no organised force of any kind on my arrival, though I have now, by dint of exertion and influence, got up a respectable police on the Irish model, and a very creditable corps of volunteers. And as to money wherewith to carry on the Government, I started with just 7½d. in the Treasury. A thief—supposing, I fancy, that I should have been furnished with some funds for the outfit, so to speak, of the new State—broke into the Treasury a few nights after my arrival, and carried off the 7½d. mentioned. However, I borrowed money from the banks until our revenue came in, and our estimates already show (after paying back the sums borrowed) a considerable balance in excess of the proposed expenditure for the year.”

Sir George Bowen’s initial difficulties were not chiefly financial; however; neither was the lack of material force to give effect to the law a serious embarrassment. He was empowered practically to select the seat of government by determining where the Parliament should first assemble. Among the opponents of separation had been certain squatters who sought to place the capital of the new colony in some more geographically central place than Brisbane. Of these Mr. William Henry Walsh, of Degilbo, Wide Bay, one of the most able and virile of the Moreton Bay ex-members of the New South Wales Parliament, was very prominent. Offended by the Governor’s selection of Mr. Herbert for the Premiership, Mr. Walsh refused a seat in either House of the new Parliament, and sought to create an agitation in the more northerly ports of Maryborough and Rockhampton, each containing about 500 inhabitants, in favour of Gladstone as the capital—a place which Sydney political influence had always indicated as the future seat of government when a new northern colony came to be established. But each of the towns mentioned had ambitions of its own, and regarded Gladstone as a rival. The movement therefore failed; but the colony for years lost the benefit of Mr. Walsh’s services at a time when every capable man was needed to assist in organising the government and directing the Parliament of political novices who took their seats a few months later. Mr. Arthur Macalister, solicitor, another ex-member of the New South Wales Parliament, and an excellent debater, was perhaps equally disappointed, but he was at least more diplomatic. As member for Ipswich he took his seat on the Opposition benches, and after two years’ service in the Assembly was invited by Mr. Herbert to join the Government. This invitation he accepted, and four years later he became the party leader. The sequel proved that the Governor had made no mistake in selecting Mr. Herbert for his Premier. He proved a first-rate parliamentary leader, and succeeded in giving the new colony the inestimable advantage of over six years of stable government at the outset of its career, in marked contrast to the kaleidoscopic Administrations which so greatly hindered political progress in more than one of the southern colonies.

(a) The census of 1861 showed that then the population was only a little over 6,000.