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CHAPTER III.
DIFFICULTIES OF EARLY ADMINISTRATIONS.

Meeting of First Parliament.—Amendment on Address in Reply defeated by Speaker's Casting Vote.—Adoption of Address in Reply.—Compromise between Parties Indispensable.—Successful Inauguration of Responsible Government.—The Governor's Egotism.—Mr. Herbert's Retirement.—Mr. Macalister Succeeds.—Financial and Political Crisis.—Proposed Inconvertible Paper Money.—Governor Undeservedly Blamed.

On the 7th of May, 1860, the 26 members of the first Legislative Assembly—among them the three Ministers of the Crown—having been returned, Parliament was summoned to meet at Brisbane on the 22nd of that month, just a few days before the maximum limit of delay specified by the Queen's Order in Council. On 1st May Sir William Denison had appointed 11 members for a five years' term to the Legislative Council, and three weeks later Sir George Bowen, conceiving the number insufficient, appointed four members additional for a life term, raising the total number to 15. Thus the first Parliament of Queensland was at length fully constituted, and all preliminaries had been completed for entering upon the work of the first session. (a)

On the 22nd of May the session opened, and after members had been sworn in Sir Charles Nicholson, for some years Speaker in the Sydney Parliament, was elected President of the Council, and Mr. Gilbert Eliott—formerly an officer of the Royal Artillery—the member for Wide Bay, Speaker of the Assembly. Both Houses then adjourned for a week.

The Governor's Speech, which was of great length, having been delivered, the Address in Reply was moved in both Houses. In the Council the leadership had been entrusted to Captain Maurice Charles O'Connell, Minister without portfolio, who had long been in the Port Curtis district as a trusted official of the New South Wales Government, and in early life had served with great distinction as a British soldier in Spain. In the Council no difficulty arose in adopting the Address. But in the Assembly an amendment moved for the adjournment of the debate at an early stage was only defeated by the Speaker's casting-vote, one member being absent. It thus appeared that the Assembly was almost

(a) The names of the first Ministers, and of members of both Houses of the first Parliament, will be found in Appendix B. It may be of interest to mention that of all these representative men one, Mr. A. W. Compigne, who resigned his seat in the Council in 1864, alone survived till the Jubilee Year; and that he died at his residence, Brisbane, on Sunday, 4th July, 1909, in the 92nd year of his age.
equally divided. This was a dangerous position to be faced by a new
Premier without a day’s previous experience in Parliament, and with the
two most formidable debaters in the House, Mr. Macalister and Mr.
(afterwards Sir) Charles Lilley, in active opposition. Mr. Herbert made
a diplomatic speech, however, and the Address passed without much
further contention. The division list showed that, despite the efforts of
the Governor and his Premier to avoid identification with the squatters,
the votes of the latter were essential to the existence of the Ministry, since
the members of the Opposition consisted almost exclusively of town
representatives. The following day (30th May) the Government nominee
for the Chairmanship of Committees, Mr. C. W. Blakeney, was defeated
by 15 votes to 7, and Mr. Macalister, who was nominated by the Oppo-
sition, was thereupon elected on the voices. The division of parties evidently
made compromise indispensable to the passing of much-needed legislation.
But much had been gained by the Government. All its members had been
elected by the constituencies, and the Assembly had practically acknow-
ledged that it was entitled to a fair trial. Seeing that for nearly six
months Ministers had held their portfolios without parliamentary
sanction, and had naturally made many executive mistakes during that
time, it may be held that the first session of the first Parliament had been
inaugurated successfully from the Ministerial standpoint. In his official
despitches, as well as in private letters to friends in England, Sir George
Bowen revealed himself as a genial though apparently unconscious egotist.
His assumption of what must strike the discriminating reader as a
dominating influence in the political and executive affairs of the colony
was scarcely consistent with his position as a ruler representing the Queen,
and competent to act only on constitutional advice. An impartial survey
of Mr. Herbert’s six years of office as Premier leads to the conclusion
that chiefly to his judicious counsel and incomparable tact in the manage-
ment of men the Governor owed the exemplary success attained in the
organisation and government of the colony.

The Governor’s complete if rather florid reports to the Colonial Office,
however, justly evoked cordial responses from the Secretary of State.
Sir George Bowen was a most capable man, but sometimes betrayed want
of both reticence and dignity. He was enthusiastic as well as optimistic,
and his retention in Queensland for the unusually long period of eight years
is an unanswerable certificate of his official merit. Yet it is undoubted that
when bad times overtook the colony in 1866 both the Governor and his
Premier appeared to have outlived their popularity, though their combined
action at that time for restoring the public credit was perhaps the most
eminent service that either of them had ever rendered. Mr. Herbert
had formed no ties in Australia; he had exercised supreme influence
in the local Legislature; but now that there were several members with both natural capacity and parliamentary experience aspiring to the Premiership, believing that he had better prospects of preferment in the Imperial service, he determined to return to England. His subsequent long career at the Colonial Office justified his anticipations, and it may be safely said of his departure from Queensland that the colony's loss was the Empire's gain.

The ex-Premier did not leave the colony abruptly, however, on handing over, on the 1st of February, 1866, all ministerial responsibilities to Mr. Arthur Macalister, his senior colleague in the Cabinet. He occupied his seat for nearly six months, in fact, and conducted himself with native dignity and becoming self-effacement as an unofficial member of the Assembly. Unhappily he was not to leave Australia without having a wholly unexpected shadow suddenly cast over his long administration of affairs. In mid-July the news reached the colony of the catastrophic failure of the Agra and Masterman's Bank, which had undertaken to finance the Queensland railway loan then being rapidly spent. The financial crisis of 1866 played havoc in London; it was of crushing effect in Queensland, for the Treasurer could not meet his obligations, and the railway workmen threatened a riot in consequence of non-payment of their hard-earned wages. In this emergency, Parliament being in session, the Treasurer, Mr. (afterwards Sir) Joshua Peter Bell desired to adopt the recent American expedient of issuing an inconvertible paper currency. The Cabinet approved, but on the Governor being consulted before the introduction of the bill he emphatically declined to promise the Royal assent to the measure, if passed. This he did for the all-sufficient reason that his Imperial instructions compelled him to reserve the assent to all measures affecting the currency. Ministers immediately resigned, and the Governor became the victim of irrational public obloquy for a time. (a) Mr. Herbert consented to lead a stop-gap Administration, and under his guidance a bill was at once passed empowering the Government to raise £300,000 by the issue of Treasury bills bearing not more than 10 per cent. interest per annum. They were forthwith disposed of at a premium, and the credit of the Government was restored. The temporary Government then resigned, and Mr. Macalister resumed office. Thus Queensland was saved from the double peril of paralysed credit and a debased paper currency.

(a) Sir George Bowen, writing to the Right Honourable Robert Lowe, afterwards Lord Sherbrooke, said:—"Several leading members of Parliament were ill-treated in the streets; and threats were even uttered of burning down Government House, and of treating me as Lord Elgin was treated at Montreal in 1849."