

The Australian Premiers in England

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[Introduction]

When the Imperial invitation reached the Colonial Premiers, asking them to visit London to join in the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee, the proposal seemed somewhat chimerical. It arrived at a most unfortunate time. Arrangements were being made in five colonies for the election and meeting of the Federal Convention. Acceptance involved the prolonged absence of seven Prime Ministers from seven Parliaments. No one realised the grandeur, or more fully shared in the spirit of the occasion than I did. But, under the conditions existing, I confess that it did not appear to me that acceptance was justifiable. Nothing but the wish of Parliament and people, clearly expressed, could, I think, have made it so. That wish having become abundantly evident, it became my duty to give effect to it, and a most agreeable duty it was.

Our Welcome.

I left Sydney on Friday, May 7, and arrived in London on Friday, June 18, via Naples, after a most enjoyable week of sight-seeing on the Continent, under the guidance of Cook's invaluable staff.

Sir George Dibbs had, in some measure, prepared me, but only when I saw the mass of letters and invitations which awaited me at Dover, did I realise fully the nature of the ordeal through which I should have to pass. The programme of national hospitality prepared for the travelling Premiers surpassed all precedents, even in the entertainment of crowned heads. All the official, political, scientific, social, and fashionable circles of London, each a vast terra incognita, to the colonial visitor—and to all but very few Londoners as well—threw open their doors to me for a period far longer than I could possibly stay. Precisely the same experience fell to the lot of each of my colleagues. The patent fact that these overwhelming hospitalities were the outcome of a splendid exhibition of good-will, arranged not for personages, but for the Prime Ministers as the representatives of the Australian communities, added to our enjoyment, and nerved us with the resolve to acquit ourselves like men in the eventful campaign before us.

Looking back upon those wonderful days and nights, upon the stately procession of magnificent banquets—the dazzling beauty of the London drawing rooms—the bewildering race through breakfast, luncheon, afternoon, and evening receptions, varied by changing visits to the country, and crowned by the gracious and repeated hospitalities of the Queen and the Prince of Wales, I can only indulge in one feeling beside that of gratitude for so much kindness, a feeling of thankfulness we all survived, and that, so far as I know, we left upon our generous entertainers no unkind or disagreeable impressions.

Neither history nor mythology can suggest to us any great spectacle resembling the national homage accorded to Queen Victoria on the occasion of her visit of thanksgiving to St. Paul's, when the assembled chiefs of her mighty empire, supported by representatives of all nations, witnessed her offering of humble and grateful thanks to the Ruler of Princes, for the great mercies vouchsafed to her people and to herself during two generations. In the heyday of ancient empires, there were, no doubt, many magnificent festivals. But these cast their garlands in honour of successful tyrants. They marked a triumphant climax of brute force. The chains of the captives in the procession in those days made the sweetest music in the ears of imperial races now mouldering in the dust. The

historian will regard the unexampled demonstration on Tuesday, June 22, in honour of Queen and Empress Victoria, as the noblest of all processional triumphs. It was the tribute of a grateful people to the first of England's great rulers, to fully and finally discard the pretensions of despotic power the first honest attempt to govern by the advice of ministers enjoying the confidence of the people.

The Britain of the Past.

The astonishing progress of the British Empire during the past sixty years, in all the material elements of prosperity and power, in population, territory, wealth, and commerce, has been shown by statistics familiar to your readers, and I will not now refer to them. But other changes, grander still, not measurable by statistics, nor visible at first sight, have been working during those sixty years in the character, temperament, and genius of the British people. The diverse and unsympathetic races inhabiting the British Isles, which inexorable conditions of contiguity and conquest have consolidated, slowly and painfully until they have become one people, have passed through many phases of shame and of glory. Their path through the centuries has been red with blood, and they have laid violent hands upon the fairest portions of the earth. The races over whom they exert despotic power, run into hundreds of millions. Before the present reign, what the valour of the sword had won, was held by the terror of the sword. The triumph of military and naval prowess abroad was accompanied, before the present reign, by a selfish and tyrannical system of government at home. Those distant places in which pioneers of the sovereign race were laying the deep foundations of the Empire, were regarded by the Imperial authorities as convenient cesspits for the crime and ruffianism of the parent land. Petitions for even the smallest measure of self-government were sternly refused, protests against the taint of convict immigration, were contemptuously ignored. The system of "protection" which was then rampant in matters of trade, was so adjusted that in the colonial possessions trade with other people was prohibited, and trade with the Mother Country, on anything like equal terms, was equally impossible. Whilst the soldiers and sailors of Britain performed prodigies of valour abroad, the statesmen of Britain perpetrated prodigies of meanness and chicanery at home. Such was the dark, tempestuous condition of the British Empire, within the memory of living Englishmen.

A New Policy.

The present reign is the most glorious in our history, because it has witnessed a wonderful transformation in the power and policy of Great Britain. The ceaseless efforts of silly rulers to assert personal power, have disappeared. Ministers of State have become trustees for the whole people. The sovereign, divested of personal responsibility, has become a centre of stability for the constitution, and of reverence to the whole people. The rottenness of Whig boroughs, and of Tory boroughs, has been removed, and a broad and tolerably just and popular franchise prevails in the three kingdoms. Those dark places where public robbery and corruption were easy, are now lit up by the relentless and beneficent glare of the newspaper press. Purification at home has had the happiest effects abroad. The colonies, not so long ago seething with discontent and sedition, with every legitimate grievance fully redressed, and enjoying the priceless gift of self-government, have risen to the rank of young nations, and regard the Mother Country with sentiments of regard and affection, which brighten the path of the future for both. In those far-off lands of India, whose teeming millions of different races and religions were not long ago formed by a company of English traders, pure and efficient systems of public justice and of civil government have been established, under the direct responsibility of the whole nation.

The most wonderful change of public policy, however, has been in those matters about which the Englishman of sixty years ago was most convinced public policy was right. Too much space would be occupied by even a brief review of the complex code of tariff and navigation laws which were in full force, and were then almost universally believed to be essential to national security, if not national existence itself. But the general effect of those laws, and the spirit in which they were administered, isolated British commerce from the commerce of other countries, and provoked among the nations bitter phases of jealousy and retaliation.

This state of things was then thought to be greatly to the advantage of British trade, and necessary to the well-being of the people. It was true that an artificially dear price for bread had not saved the agricultural labourer from abject misery. It was equally true that extravagant duties on foreign manufactures had not saved from wretchedness, hardly less complete, the operatives and their toiling wives and children. Also, that, in the vital point of mercantile marine, the tonnage of the United States then under simpler laws, was rapidly overtaking that of Great Britain. Still, the statesmen and

the people of the United Kingdom clung to the old fetters, and protested that Free Trade in goods, and Free Trade in shipping, involved the speedy, complete, and irremediable destruction of the whole Empire.

What Free Trade has done.

The horrors of a great famine sealed the doom of the Corn Laws, and when the landlords were beaten, the days of Protection became numbered. Gradually, but completely, each fetter, each protective bulwark, was removed; and the power that had successfully braved Europe, and conquered India, faced the momentous experiment of Free Trade at home versus Protection abroad.

Reviewing the forty or fifty years of this great experiment, it cannot be said that other nations have shown any disposition to follow the example of Britain. On the contrary, they would seem to have gone "Protection mad," did we not know that high Customs Duties form a convenient screen for the strain of a vast military expenditure, and for purposes of corruption and extravagance. Whatever the cause, however, the effect on British trade is the same. To add to the gravity of the situation, the new world is just as difficult of access as the old. Even the self-governing colonies, with the exception of New South Wales, have joined in the almost universal confederacy which opposes to the open ports of England, the barricades of Protection. The British Isles, with their 121,000 square miles, against every other power, and most of the British Colonies as well! Surely no fiscal system has ever been subjected to so tremendous an ordeal! Surely, in this unequal fight, the commercial and shipping interests of England must have been shattered, her manufactories crippled, her labourers, and especially her agricultural labourers reduced to even greater wretchedness than in the dreadful days of 1820–45?

The contrary is the case. The total tonnage of Great Britain, which was 3,350 tons in 1848, is now 9,000,000. The total trade of Great Britain, which was £181,000,000 in 1841, is now £738,000,000. The exports of British produce and manufactures in 1896, was £240,000,000. If these exports were measured by quantity instead of value, the increase would be many millions more. Then the wages, hours of labour, condition, and comforts of the masses are greatly better than they were fifty years ago. The grand result of the unaided struggle of Great Britain against the world, in trade, shipping, and finance, is simply this, that the enterprise, skill, and industry of her business community, have, under Free Trade conditions, won for England at the close of the nineteenth century, a position of world-wide supremacy, greater, and far more wonderful, than the glories of her conquests by land or sea have ever been.

There is one market which is fought for by the producers of all nations, civilized and uncivilized. There is one market to which the enterprise of the

world can turn, free of charge. There is one great body of civilized workers free to choose always exactly the raw material they require at the cheapest possible price.

For nearly fifty years the cheapness and abundance of the world have been “dumped” upon the shores of Great Britain. By this time the people of England should be languishing in misery! Yet, strange to say, every fresh avalanche of cheapness and abundance is transmuted into wealth more and more abundantly, until British capitalists and their surplus wealth overrun every sphere of development the wide world over.

There is another wonderful change, which, like Free Trade, greatly strengthens England's hold upon the self-interest, if not the gratitude, of other countries. The British Empire is open to all comers, on equal terms.

A Good Queen's Reígn.

To sum up the wonderful record of the present reígn, it can be said of Queen Victoria that she has sat on the throne during the noblest period of the nation's history, that, with her cordial sanction, the fabric of Government has been freed from the last vestiges of court intrigue and corruption, and is to-day the purest and strongest in the whole world; that the result of the emancipation of trade and industry has been to lift her people from wretchedness to comparative comfort, and her prestige in wealth and commerce to a dazzling height; that the same generous and enlightened spirit which effected stupendous political and industrial reforms at home, advanced the great self-governing colonies from the place of helpless dependents into that of equals, of friends and allies, and that during all these grand and auspicious changes in the sphere of politics and trade, the public life and the home life of the country have been adorned by a personal example on the throne which has won the hearts of all nations.

From all these causes and influences, the national celebration of the Queen's sixty years of sovereignty was a unique festival which knit all peoples together, if only for a moment, in common sympathy. If only for a moment the deep jealousy with which Europe has watched the marvels of British expansion and enterprise, was cast aside, and the brighter side of England taken into account; her magnanimous policy in trade and colonisation, her faithful attachment to the principles of good government. But the grandest sight and recollection of all will be the continuous and unexampled ovation given by the public in the streets of London to the venerable Sovereign, preceded and followed as that right royal ovation was, by the enthusiastic cheers with which the vast populace of London, the men, women, and children of East and West welcomed the representatives of their kindred beyond the seas.

What the Premiers did.

The period covered by the programme prepared for us by the Imperial Government, extended from about the 14th June until the 10th July. I did not arrive until the 18th June, missing a flying trip made by the other premiers to some of the towns in England and Scotland.

I was in time for the first great function, namely, the Jubilee Banquet of the Imperial Institute, the chair being occupied by the Prince of Wales. Sir Wilfrid Laurier sat on his right, and I upon his left. I can hardly expect ever again to form one of so distinguished a company. All the greatest men of the country in the active political, professional, scientific, and literary world seemed to be gathered together. I knew, as all men do, about the genial courtesy of the Prince, but I confess that I was scarcely prepared to find him so good a speaker. I may say here, that the fame won for his charming qualities is thoroughly deserved; but he is a much abler man than many in the colonies can have any notion of.

On Sunday morning we attended, with the Speaker and Members of the House of Commons, the Thanks-giving Service at St. Margaret's Church, the sermon being preached by Dean Farrar. The address was a masterpiece of Christian eloquence, and contained the essence of many sermons. I deeply regret that I was unable to accept an invitation from Dr. Farrar to visit Canterbury, as I should have been delighted to make his acquaintance.

London.

I did not take in a just impression of London for two or three days. Its greatness does not arise from one or two conspicuous sights as in most places, but from so many different attributes not to be mastered at once. But on Monday, the 21st, when the preparations for the next day were at their height, and the streets were thronged to their utmost capacity, I realised the vastness, the vitality, and the wealth of the world's metropolis. I also saw the marvellous discipline enforced upon the Londoners of all ranks, on foot, or driving, by those most benevolent and efficient despots, the Metropolitan police. One could never tire watching the endless string of vehicles five or six abreast, and the masterly way in which women and children were cared for when they wanted to cross. Over and over again I have seen the police stop lines of traffic —this is done by the raising of a finger—in order to escort some poor woman and her children across. The streets of London are not perfect, but they are greatly superior to those of any other city I was in. Quite the worst streets I have ever seen are those of New York. During the illuminations, London was a marvellous spectacle. The lights did not so much attract, beautiful though they were. But the overwhelming mass of radiant, well-dressed humanity which thronged the pavements and the streets. I will never forget. I wish some of those Australians who are prone to describe England as in process of decay, could have seen those crowds. My opinion, from what I saw, is, that a better, more prosperous race is growing up in England to-day than in any generation before.

Rural England.

My visits to the country were only too few, although I seized every chance of going out of town. I had always looked forward to views of the agricultural counties as far more to be desired than views of great cities. I must say the reality was equal to my high expectations. Only actual vision can do justice to the rural scenery of England. More attractive combinations of the effects which can be produced by centuries of care and cultivation upon a country naturally fertile and well watered, are, it seems to me, quite impossible to conceive. I went through some villages which presented endless points of interest and comparison. It pleased me to see that the dwellings in the newer villages and their surroundings, were far more comfortable, and showed more signs of prosperity than those of older date; because that does not point to a declining England. Certainly the great towns do not point to any such decline. Of the country seats near London which I saw, those which most impressed me, were Osterley Park, the residence of Lord Jersey, which is within driving distance; Ashridge, the residence of Earl Brownlow, about thirty miles from the city, and near the lovely vale of Ailesbury, in Kent; and Cliveden, on the Thames, sold by the Duke of Westminster to Mr. Astor. The oaks and elms in some of these places are 800 years old, and shape the stateliest vistas. Those in the park of Windsor Castle are among the finest I saw. It is somewhat novel to an Australian to see grapes and peaches ripening under glass. I think we can show finer specimens in the colonial orchards. The strawberries were very fine, but only of the red variety. Gwydyr, the Welsh estate of Earl Carrington, is a very beautiful place, the house, small and ancient, but most interesting. One of my greatest regrets was that I could not accept most kind invitations to stay at other places of the greatest beauty and historical interest.

Express Speed!

The fact is, that my stay in England, strictly limited by the date of my return to Sydney, and occupied as it was by so many functions arranged for us by our generous entertainers, gave me no chance of doing or seeing anything thoroughly. I seemed to be travelling “express” all the time. I fondly hoped, when I left Australia, to hear all the best speakers, actors, and singers of London; but, alas! I only heard one great preacher—Dr. Farrar—during the two or three Sundays I spent in London. As for theatres, I did not get to the special performance given by Mr. Henry Irving at all, and had, at last, to break, I don't know how many engagements, to see him as Napoleon,—not by any means one of his great parts, although deeply interesting. Then I did not hear much of Melba, as I could not reach the State opera performance until late. The only functions that we were allowed to become really familiar with were public banquets, afternoon and evening receptions. In the course of these engagements I met a great number of people; but everything was rush and crush. At dinner or luncheon there was some slight chance of a leisurely chat, but it was all a matter of chance.

Conference with Mr. Chamberlain.

The conferences between Mr. Chamberlain and the Colonial Premiers were four in number. The following were the leading subjects considered:— (1) Naval Defence; (2) Political and Commercial Relations; (3) Investment in Colonial Stocks; (4) Pacific Cable; and (5) Coloured Alien Bills. Mr. Chamberlain opened proceedings by a series of general observations upon all these questions. It was agreed that the proceedings should be regarded as confidential, except as to resolutions arrived at. On the question of Naval Defence, it was evident that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and First Lord of the Admiralty at first intended, or hoped, that the Australian contribution to Naval Defence would be substantially increased, and that the movements of the Australian squadron would not be restricted as in the existing agreement. I took advantage of a speech made by Mr. Goschen at the banquet of the Royal Colonial Institute, in order to put an end to any such expectations. I ventured to suggest that we could best do our duty to the empire by developing the resources of the Australian continent, and that to cripple our slender finances in order to make a paltry reduction in the cost of the British navy, would not be a good thing for the Mother Country or ourselves. At the conference there was no pressing on these matters. We were told that the Government were satisfied to let the contribution and the agreement remain as they are, and that the *Orlando* would be replaced by a first-class cruiser.

All this was very satisfactory. As to a change in the political relationship between Great Britain and the colonies, there was much vague expectation, and some visionary suggestions; but matters had to be left as they are, and wisely so, until some one can suggest a scheme which promises better results. Sir Wilfrid Laurier seemed in earnest about colonial representation in the British House of Commons, but he got no backing. Under the head of commercial relations there was a very interesting interchange of ideas, which did not look for much in the direction of a Zollverein, and centred upon a discrimination between the products of Great Britain and those of other countries in the tariffs of the self-governing colonies; in other words, that they should follow the lead of Canada. Of course, New South Wales, in opening her ports to Free Trade, has given England all she asks for, and far more, in effect, than Canada has given. There is, I think, some chance that, in this respect, the Conference will lead to some better state of things in the colonies, with high duties against England. The investment of trust funds in colonial securities was brought up, but I fear it is as far away as ever, until a commonwealth of some sort be established. The Bills to

prohibit the immigration of coloured aliens were the subject of earnest discussion. I do not apprehend any difficulty except as to the inclusion of British subjects. Much of the evil has come from the arrival of British subjects of the coloured races, and unless they are included, or some other way is formed of dealing with them, serious questions must, I fear, arise. The project of the Pacific Cable was discussed, but until Canada can make up her mind about it, the project will hang fire. In the meantime, the chances of a line connecting Australia with Great Britain, via the Cape of Good Hope, are improving, backed as they are, I am told, by the opinions of the military and naval authorities at home.

Future Meetings.

There was one proposal to which the Conference agreed, namely, that there should be periodical meetings in London of the same kind. Such a proposal may seem like securing for ourselves an agreeable holiday, but in the changes of local politics, it is just as likely that our successors will thus be benefited. In any case, and be the Premiers whom they may, the suggestion is worthy of consideration. The advantage derived from our conference will be great and lasting. The Secretary for the Colonies and his high subordinates must be more fitted for their high posts after the unrestricted intercourse we had, and I am sure we all are.

But, above all minor points, I wish to emphasise the lasting impression made upon the minds of the Colonial Premiers by the enthusiastic kindness of the whole British Nation, from the Queen upon the throne down to the humblest of her subjects. The visit has left in the minds of the Australasian people, and in the minds of the British people, a sense of closer kinship and a sense of greater strength. The future may have vast changes and events in store for the human race, but one of the grandest facts of the closing century is the magnificent loyalty and affection of the British people for their illustrious Sovereign, and the unprecedented stability of the ties which bind Greater Britain to the Fatherland.
