

The Attitude of New Zealand

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II. Attitude of New Zealand

IN Australia and Tasmania, the triumph of the federation movement has now been celebrated; the agitated period of courtship is over, and the east and west of the Australian continent have settled down to the more prosaic business of married life. Even the cautious few outside who think that federation has been born prematurely, even the ultra-democrats who suspect one portion of the federal constitution, even the pessimists who shake their heads over the burden likely to be entailed by the additional government, are sympathetic onlookers. They may hint at the friction likely to attend the early efforts at united Australian action, and the difficulties certain at first to be set the statesmen and councils of the young Commonwealth; but they are not disposed to belittle the genuine desire for a higher patriotism and a broader natural life which has been at the back of the federal movement in Australia. Whatever unexpected obstacles may meet the Australians, whatever troubles they may have to overcome, no one who knows anything of them has the faintest doubt of their ability to make a success of the form of government which is their deliberate choice.

New Zealand, however, has not thrown in her lot with the Australian family. Several newspapers in this country have expressed surprise at this abstention, while some have rather hastily concluded that at most it can be but a temporary and mistaken reluctance, due to provincial prejudice. This is in no small measure due, I think, to the common misuse of that sprawling and unscientific word "Australasia," which causes many a Briton to regard New Zealand as an Australian colony. In fairness to my government and my countrymen, I think it will not be amiss for me to state simply the difficulties and views which have so far made them hesitate to join Australia. I do not assert that their reasons are unanswerable or that their doubts may not be overcome. I do say that there has been justification for caution and delay.

To begin with, our colony is in no sense an offshoot or outlying province of Australia. A few hundred adventurous pioneers did, indeed, find their way from the continent to the islands in the Alsatian days between 1810 and 1840. These men—traders, whalers, and runaways—left their mark on New Zealand history, for they helped to make annexation necessary. But after 1840 they were quickly submerged in the flood of British immigrants,

and since then New Zealand has drawn comparatively few settlers from the other side of the Tasman Sea. Of the thousands of gold diggers who flocked across to Otago and Westland in the sixties, far the greater number were Britons who had spent but a few years, perhaps but a few months, in Australia, and had not been deeply stamped with the Australian impress.

Not only were the founders of New Zealand Britons in the most direct sense, but, from the first, the bulk of the Colony's trade and business intercourse has been with the Mother Country. London is New Zealand's great market and its financial centre; and New Zealanders read the books, glance through the newspapers, buy the clothes, surround themselves with the trees and flowers, and speak with the accent of England or Scotland. Lord Salisbury, Mr. Chamberlain, and Lord Rosebery, are more clearly-defined figures in their mind's eye than Mr. Barton, Mr. Deakin, and Mr. Reid. Ten New Zealanders laugh over **Punch** for one that skims the **Bulletin**.*

The shortest sea voyage between New Zealand and Australia is from Wellington to Sydney, and that though a straight line, measures 1200 miles. The Tasman Sea is deep, unsheltered, and swept by rough winds, and the passage occupies at least four and a half days. Before the coming of the white man there was no intercourse between continent and archipelago.

The Maori are brown Polynesians, as different from the Australian "blackfellows" as Abyssinians are from Namaquas. None of the Australian beasts or reptiles, only one bird, none of the eucalypts and acacias which are the conspicuous features of Australian plant-life, ever found their way across the Tasman Sea. The fertile easy-rolling downs, the park-like woods and dreary endless "scrubs" of the sandstone continent are replaced in New Zealand by snowy mountains or steep green hills, rich valleys divided by cold mountain torrents, and one of the densest, most luxuriant jungles to be found in the temperate zones. The climates of the Commonwealth and the Colony are as unlike as are the landscapes, and some people think that the two branches of the Anglo-Saxon race which inhabit them are already developing different characteristics. At any rate the great spaces, large cities, immense pastoral properties, and semi-tropical climate of Australia are tending to distinguish her social and industrial life from that of New Zealand. Small farmers form the dominating class in the island-colony. They hold the balance of power between the trade unionists and the wealthier landowners and townspeople, and are likely to continue to do so.

As against these elements of difference much friendly intercourse takes place between the two sides of the Tasman Sea, despite the rough passage. Many Australians take a midsummer holiday trip to see the Alps,

volcanoes, and fiords of cooler New Zealand, and New Zealanders are glad to return the visit during the winter-time. The Australian papers have some circulation in New Zealand, and three of the best-known Australian banks have many branches in the Colony. Lastly there is a valuable inter-colonial trade, amounting at the present time to rather more than three millions sterling in the year. Three-fifths of this trade is done between New Zealand and New South Wales, and this preponderance of Sydney's share of the trade is a noteworthy point. Sydney has been a free port since Mr. George Reid made it so in 1895, but New Zealanders apprehend that their trade with New South Wales may in the near future be hampered by tariff restrictions. Naturally much is made of this apprehension by those colonists anxious to persuade their countrymen to enter the federation.

The New Zealand Government and the House of Representative have appointed a Royal Commission to examine into and report upon the expediency of federating with Australia, and failing that of entering a Customs Union, or at least making a commercial treaty with the Commonwealth. But though prepared to consider the question in this manner, the majority of New Zealanders—so far as I can judge—seem far from persuaded that it is either their destiny or to their interest to become an Australian province.

Sir William McMillan, in a recent article, seeks to brush aside the geographical difficulty by suggesting that some of the Australian members will take just as long as would the representatives of New Zealand to travel to the Federal capital. In this I do not think the Australian federalist is correct, for it would take most New Zealanders six days to get from their homes to an inland town in New South Wales. Moreover, there is all the difference in the world between sea distances and land distances. The sea is a barrier between communities; land, except in the case of utter desert or impracticable mountain chains, forms a link. For instance, what concern has New Zealand in Australian railways, Australian river navigation or irrigation, the colour of the labourers who work in Australian sugar-plantations; or in the lighting of and the trade along Australia's coastline? And how would it advantage New Zealand to have her post-office, her telegraphs and telephones, her light-houses, to say nothing of her railways controlled from an office standing a hundred miles on the other side of Sydney?

After the tariff question has been settled, the greater part of the federal parliament's time will probably be taken up in discussing matters of which New Zealanders will know little more than they do of the Alaskan disputes between the United States of America and Canada, or the grievances of Newfoundland over the question of the French shore. Defence is a different

subject altogether, and were the two communities independent nations the need for common help might drive them together and would, of course, weigh more heavily with the smaller of the two. But Australia and New Zealand are parts of the British empire, and as they can only be attacked by sea the British Navy is their main defence. Any attempt to become naval powers on their own account is unlikely, and, for financial reasons, would be highly imprudent. They have quite enough to do with any money they can raise or safely borrow without purchasing a navy at a million a warship. In the case of an invasion of either the commonwealth or the colony, the co-operation of their land forces will be needed, but it will be odd if that cannot be arranged, under the friendly auspices of the mother country, without political union. So, at least, it seems to many New Zealanders.

It has been suggested that some New Zealand litigants might wish to have the right of going to the Federal High Court of Justice as an alternative to the Privy Council. Should that be so, it is not likely that the commonwealth will deny them the privilege. In any case this convenience would not be a matter of supreme importance, and colonial suitors bent on appealing to an outside tribunal will find it difficult to improve upon the Privy Council.

On the other hand the question of commercial intercourse is serious. It would be folly to ignore the value of the intercolonial trade between New South Wales and New Zealand, or to pretend that Australian protectionism may not to some extent interfere with it. As yet, however, the precise intention of the protectionist majority is not known. Moreover, the imports which Sydney takes are mainly food and forage, the demand for which increases in dry years and falls off in wet seasons. Customs duties might hamper such a trade but would hardly destroy it. It would require a very marked change in Australian farming or the Australian climate to do that. But little as New Zealanders may like losing part of their Sydney trade—if they do lose it—that loss alone will scarcely impel them to federate. As a set off, too, against the influence of this fear must be reckoned the dislike of the New Zealand protectionists to opening their local markets to the competition of Melbourne and Sydney manufacturers.

It is asked, too, with some cogency, whether the colony can afford to send her ablest public men to devote the greater part of their time and energy to working in Australia at affairs mainly Australian. The Chief Justice* of New Zealand has recently shown very clearly that in the event of federation, the New Zealand Parliament would still have to do nearly the whole of the business it does now. Yet some twenty-one of the ablest public men would have to spend months in New South Wales in one or

other House of the Federal Parliament. The colony is not suffering from any over-supply of politicians, who unite ability with knowledge and experience, and while it is not suggested that the supply is diminishing, some observers think that it is not increasing fast enough to keep pace with the rapid multiplication of the state's functions. Federation with Australia might turn what is already a source of anxiety into a grave danger.

Then, as a sentiment, federation has hardly yet touched the people of New Zealand. The wave of feeling which gradually gathered strength and overflowed eastern and south eastern Australia was checked by the wide interval of ocean. The Federal orators did not visit the islands or attempt to rouse the islanders; their pamphlets and newspaper articles hardly reached New Zealand; the Australian Natives Association, that powerful source of agitation, has no branch there, and the cry for "One continent, one nation," excludes New Zealand by implication. To many of the islanders the thought of surrendering a part of their justly-prized autonomy, and of being controlled by the opinions and interests of Melbourne and Sydney is far from welcome. They are proud of their lonely but beautiful country, with its romantic interest and fair promise; to most of them their own self-government is dear, and seems a thing worth preserving in its completeness, even at the risk of a slight present sacrifice.

For some years past New Zealand has been prospering with a growing prosperity, and the colonists have ever been a bold, self-confident, and rather venturesome branch of the British race. Good times have not tended to abate these characteristics, and New Zealanders do not think their colony too small to live alone. On the map, New Zealand, by the side of Australia, seems but a tiny strip; the commonwealth is twenty-nine times the size of the colony. But the difference between the respective populations is not so great; the one is to the other as 4½:1. Still less is the disparity of trade. The value of Australia's external commerce last year was, I believe, about £70,000,000, while that of New Zealand was about £23,000,000. Certainly the population of the island colony is not the poorer of the two, proportionately.

At the present moment, therefore, the wish of many, probably of most, New Zealanders, is to preserve unchanged their settled policy towards their over-sea neighbours. This policy has for a number of years involved a request for trade reciprocity; for hearty co-operation in defence; and for common action in approaching the Imperial Government when the interests of the Empire in the Pacific are concerned.

W. P. REEVES.

Footnote Page 114: Sir Robert Stout.
