

Talk of Provincial extravagance—the thing pales into insignificance compared with that of the Colony. Depend upon it, unless we retrace our steps, the day of reckoning will come sooner or later, and it is not by hugging the chain which binds us, and rushing still further into the arms of Centralism that this day is to be evaded. It can only be met in one of two ways—either the taxation of the Colony must be increased, or the unnecessary and unwarrantable expenditure must be reduced. Of this latter, I feel convinced that there is not the slightest hope, so long as the two islands are mixed up, and unequally yoked together in one Legislature as at present—a Legislature which assumes to itself the conduct and control of the whole of the parish business throughout the Colony, instead of confining its attention to those few subjects which concern New Zealand as a whole.

It may be said, why not apply the pruning-knife and cut down the unproductive expenditure. And no doubt this would seem to be the natural solution of the difficulty. Long experience, however, has convinced me that this cannot or will not be done, and that the only practical remedy is to cut down the tree and plant afresh—and this leads to the real point to which, in my humble opinion, the attention of every elector should be directed at the forthcoming election. I should vote for no candidate, however personally acceptable, unless I could thoroughly rely upon his strenuously advocating and supporting such measures as shall substantially secure—

1. That each Island shall have power to provide for the maintenance of its own peace, order, and good government, and for the management of its own local affairs, irrespectively and independently of the other.

2. That the power and functions of the General Assembly shall be distinctly defined, and shall be limited to questions purely federal.

3. That the Provincial Legislature or Legislatures of each Island shall have supreme constituent powers in respect of all subjects not so defined as aforesaid.

It seems to me that the foregoing proposals embody a general principle of action, which if determined upon by a majority of the representatives of the people will produce such a reform as must lead to the existing taxation being beneficially expended or greatly reduced, and be conducive to the happiness and prosperity of the people of both Islands. It will be observed that I have not touched the question as to the number of Provinces in each Island; as this does not materially affect the chief object to be attained—namely, financial reform and retrenchment; at the same time there are grave and important considerations which would have to be taken into account in discussing the point as to the number of Provinces. My own opinion leans strongly towards at least two Provinces in each Island; I do not think that for years to come anything less will be satisfactory, either on the ground of economy or efficiency.

Provincial Councils, even in the false position in which they have been placed hitherto, have been important schools for the nurture of political life, and for political training, and as such (apart from all other benefits) they have been worth infinitely more to New Zealand than they have cost. How much more valuable would they be in these respects if placed on a proper footing and in a position of supremacy, each in its own sphere.

It would be easy to show as regards your own Provincial Council, that with all its faults, it is just as capable—aye and more so—of making laws and of dealing with the affairs of Otago as is the General Assembly at Wellington. In the case of the latter it may well be said

*This distance lends enchantment to the view*

It surely stands to reason that forty-six men, all of whom are elected by yourselves, assembled within the Province, can deal far more satisfactorily with your interests than can eighty-four men assembled in the North Island—only one-fourth of whom are elected by you.

Another great argument which is urged in favor of the proposed change is, that it will secure a greater amount of justice to outlying districts, that is to say, it will confer upon Otago what it already to a great extent possesses, and which every district which so desires it may possess to-morrow—viz., Road Boards with power to rate themselves. Hitherto these Road Boards have been subsidised by the Province out of its land fund. Under the proposed new regime they are to be subsidised out of moneys contributed by the people themselves. And this is the great boon for which we are invited to part with those institutions under which the Province has flourished so remarkably, just as if this boon could not be obtained if necessary under the existing system.

I know of few things which have been more beneficial to this Province than the liberal subsidies which during the past ten years have been received by the District Road Boards and Municipalities at the hands of the Provincial Government. It is true that since 1871 the Colonial Government has subsidised Road Boards throughout the Colony to the extent of £50,000 a year, and that Otago has had its proportion of this sum. This money, however, has not come out of revenue but out of loans, which have to be repaid—an easy mode of acquiring popularity from which the Provincial Governments have been carefully debarred.

Depend upon it, inadequate as it may have been towards their requirements, the outlying districts of Otago have had vastly more money expended within them by the Provincial Council than they are ever likely to have at the hands of the General Assembly. I would say more, that but for the enormous drain upon the resources of the Province [which has gone to uphold the lavish expenditure of the Colonial Parliament, the outlying districts would have been far more liberally dealt with than they have been. If the General Assembly can be confined to purely federal action, and the colonial expenditure reduced by £200,000 a year, both of which objects can be accomplished if the people are true to themselves, the outlying districts would be in an infinitely better position than they would be under the Abolition Bill. The abolition of the Native and Defence Departments alone, which cost the Colony £126,000 a year, would enable the Provinces largely to increase their expenditure in outlying districts.

Had the management of Native affairs been left to the Provinces, as they ought to have been, millions of money might have been available for outlying districts, and for the general benefit.

One of the crimes with which your Provincial Council was most loudly charged in the Assembly, was that its sole aim had been to aggrandize Dunedin at the expense of the Province. Never was there a more reckless and unfounded charge. It would be no difficult matter to show that considering the extent of its population, Dunedin has had no more than very scant justice at the hands of the Provincial Council. It is much to be regretted that there are those among us who, while they exhibit an unfounded jealousy towards Dunedin, have no objection to aggrandize Wellington to any extent, at the expense of Otago.

I have long been convinced that if there is to be any genuine diffusion of local administrative power throughout the Colony, such diffusion will have to emanate from Provincial Legislatures. I do not anticipate that any practical measure in this direction is likely to proceed from Centralism as it exists in this Colony.

The Provincial Council of Otago has done much in the way of extending power of local administration. It has already placed upon the Statute Book an Ordinance whereby, if the people desire it, County Boards may be constituted at any time, with full power to administer all local matters; an Ordinance which confers far greater powers, and makes much more liberal provision in the way of substantial endowments, than did the local Government Bill, introduced into the General Assembly as part of the Abolition Bill.

By virtue of a colonial statute, a fixed proportion of the land revenue has to be set aside as an endowment for these County Boards, whenever they are brought into existence. As it is, however, none have taken advantage of this Ordinance, from which it may be presumed that the people deem themselves better off as they are; an opinion in which I do not think that they are very far wrong. The Provincial Council has created and endowed all over the Province, Municipalities, Road Boards, School Boards, Harbour Boards, Athenæums; in short, its maxim has been to decentralise administrative power in every direction, and in this it has afforded a striking contrast to the Colonial Parliament, whose principle of action has been, centralise—centralise—centralise—so much so, that if not checked now, it will shortly become impossible to move in any part of New Zealand without the authority of the Governor in Council, which means practically, an irresponsible bureaucracy at Wellington.

That your Provincial Council is faultless and may not be improved, it is not for me to allege. Let it be what it may, it is an embodiment of the popular will; a transcript of yourselves; and if it acts indiscreetly, the remedy is in your own hands. All I would say further is that if you sweep it away, you will commit an act which you yourselves will yet bitterly regret; an act which posterity will mourn over and deplore. What would England, Ireland, and Scotland give now to have what we are asked to throw away—their local parliaments to deal with local affairs?

You may rest assured that political privileges are not so easily acquired that they should be lightly disposed of, and that nothing but the most culpable indifference as to the responsibilities which devolve upon them, will account for the people of this Colony parting with one iota of the powers and privileges which they now possess, or permitting themselves to be led by those who are influenced by a morbid love of change for its own sake.

One word more in conclusion. I have endeavored very imperfectly to point out that Otago, which has been the milch cow of the Colony, has nothing to gain, but everything to lose should the Abolition Bill be carried into operation—that the Colonial Parliament has from first to last been the wet blanket upon progress—that the resources of the Province are every day disappearing more and more in the maelstrom of Colonial finance—that the bane of the Colony has been the gradual growth of a grasping and improvident Centralism, repugnant to the genius of free institutions, and totally unsuited to the peculiar circumstances of New Zealand. You might as well attempt to build a pyramid, commencing at the apex, as to build up a great nation in New Zealand by means of one Central Government at Wellington.

I cannot disguise from myself the fact that, could we divest ourselves of the idea of the unity of New Zealand, the true remedy for the existing evils, in as far as Otago is concerned, would be that the Province should be erected into an independent Colony. Even were the people unanimous on this point, however, there are difficulties in the way which would take much time to surmount. As it is, therefore, the practical remedy at this moment is to send to the new Parliament men who will spare the country from that plethora of Government with which it has for years been scourged—men who will see to it, that the General Assembly shall take the shape of a simple and inexpensive federal Council, dealing only with a very few subjects; and that the two Islands, and the various Provinces in each, shall be separate, distinct, and independent as regards the disposal and control of their respective revenues, and the management of their local affairs. Of course there must needs be an equitable adjustment, as between the Provinces, as to the payment of existing Colonial liabilities, which adjustment would have to be regulated by the federal Legislature.

Finally, I trust it may not be deemed out of place to point out, in reference to the approaching election, that if there should be more than one anti-Centralist candidate for the same seat, the chances are that the Centralist candidate representing it may be a minority of the constituency, will be returned, unless all the anti-Centralist candidates but one can be induced to retire, or unless the electors shall determine to confine their support to one and the same candidate. I do most fervently hope that every elector will arouse himself to a due sense of the gravity of the situation, and that we may each and all be guided and directed by that wisdom that cometh from above.

I have the honor to be, fellow colonists, yours faithfully,

J. MACANDREW,

Superintendent of Otago.

Dunedin, 16th Nov., 1875.