

# WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S PLEA FOR SECESSION

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AN answer has now been given to the demand of Western Australia for secession from the Australian Commonwealth. When she found that no amelioration of her alleged intolerable plight could be obtained from the Federal Government in spite of repeated and clamant demands, she turned to the Mother Country, believing that while Britain could not interfere on account of the terms of the *Statute of Westminster*, the Mother Country might be induced to undertake the rôle of arbiter or adjudicator when the request for her services came from one of the constituent States of an overseas Dominion. It was a rather moot request that was thus proffered Britain. Did she really possess any power to arbitrate or pass judgment in a dispute between the Commonwealth of Australia and one of her constituent States? So the matter was referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee for consideration, and representatives came over to London from Western Australia to lay their case before this Select Committee. After two months' deliberation the reply has now been given, and it has filled the representatives of Western Australia with disappointment and chagrin. For the Joint Parliamentary Committee, while doubtless sympathizing with Western Australia in its unfortunate plight, resolutely refused to look at that side of the question, and gave their decision on constitutional grounds only, viz: that for Great Britain to arbitrate or adjudicate in the case would be *ultra vires*, and that the remedy for the grievances in question must be sought not at Westminster but at Canberra, not from the Imperial Parliament but from the Parliament in which Western Australia has due representation. As one writer on the subject has put it: "The Imperial Government can no more assist at the separation of Western Australia from the Commonwealth than remove one of the stars from the Southern Cross." Or, to change the figure, the union was, like any other decent, well-attested union, for better for worse; Great Britain would not dissolve it even if she could.

Now this is where the Select Committee's decision is of interest to Canada, for there are several points in which the situation in Western Canada is analogous to that of Western Australia. There is one striking exception, however, which ought to be stated

at the outset, viz: that whereas in the *British North America Act* no mention whatever is made of the Provinces severing their connection with the Dominion—the Fathers of Confederation either failed or deliberately refused to see such a contingency—it is expressly stated in the Australian Constitution that the union is “indissoluble”. Nor can Western Australia plead ignorance of this; for although she was not a signatory of the Constitution, the contents of the Bill which empowered the establishment of the Constitution were well known to her people. They were slow, however, to admit the advantages which would accrue from Federation, and hesitated considerably before giving their consent. At length, after taking a referendum on the question, which returned a favorable verdict by a vote of two to one, Western Australia agreed to enter Federation on condition that she would retain her own customs dues for five years.

Now there have been occasions in Canada since Confederation, especially at Dominion election times, or when the West felt that she was receiving unfair treatment at the hands of the East, when the cry of secession has been heard in the land. It is in this latter respect that the situation holds some similarity to that in Western Canada. Let us note a few points of resemblance.

First of all, both in Australia and in Canada there has always been a problem between East and West. This is *in rerum natura*, and could scarcely be otherwise. When such long distances separate East and West, and spaces intervene that are economically unprofitable, difference of opinion is bound to arise. Secondly, both in Australia and in Canada the bulk of the population is to be found in the East. Thirdly, the seat of government is in the East, with all the advantages which proximity to the capital and increased parliamentary representation are said to bring. Fourthly, most of the manufactures of both countries are located in the East, and the “big interests” can always exert pressure on the Government of the day to the benefit of their particular industries. Fifthly, there are large tracts of land in the western section of both countries that are either valueless or have not been developed to the point of being revenue-producing. And sixthly, the West in both countries is the home of primary products, such as timber and wheat, only a small proportion of which she can appropriate to her own use. These resemblances have only to be stated to show that the problem between East and West is mainly economic. But even in this respect the problem has never been so acute in Canada as in Australia, nor has the line between the rivals been so sharply drawn.

In spite of these points of resemblance, there is one striking point of contrast, and it turns mainly on the constitutional aspect of the affair. The difference hinges on the question of federalism. The Australian Constitution is modelled on the Constitution of the United States. In the federation of Australia and America certain defined powers are granted to the federal Government by the various States, and all powers not so granted remain with the State Governments. This is true federalism, which Canada, according to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, is not supposed to possess. For by the *British North America Act* certain defined powers are in the hands of the Provincial Governments, while the residue belong to the Dominion Government. Though Australia may not admit it, she is suffering to-day from what the United States is suffering from—a too rigid Constitution, by means of which, in an attempt to promote the welfare of the whole, she is likely to be unjust to the interests of one or more of the parts. But just as President Roosevelt, since the momentous finding of the Supreme Court in regard to the N.R.A., is determined to amend the American Constitution in order to make its statutes fully applicable to a highly industrialized country in the present day, so Australia may eventually have to undertake the difficult process of amending her act of constitution, and perhaps Western Australia may thus find redress for her grievances without having recourse to secession.

In the meantime the impartial observer can come to no other conclusion than that Western Australia is the victim of most unfortunate circumstances. Not only has she suffered in common with other countries from the effects of world-wide depression, but isolated as she is, she is paying the price of being part of a country that is fenced around with a ring of Protection, a part moreover that is receiving few or none of the benefits which are expected to follow in the wake of Protection. She has been called the Cinderella of the Australian Commonwealth, the unfortunate sister who has been unable to share the family's advantages. For example, it would be much cheaper for her to buy machinery from Great Britain than from Melbourne. But the Australian Government has made this impossible by imposing a high tariff on machinery imported from abroad, even from Great Britain. Again, she could import sugar from Java instead of paying nearly five times as much for sugar from Queensland. But Australia has prohibited the import of sugar from Java. Further, she is restricted in regard to shipping, for the Commonwealth Government has protected the local coastal shipping companies to such an extent that Western Australia is

obliged to use them rather than the large lines from Europe and the Orient.

It is not to be greatly wondered at that Western Australia is raising a loud cry against the existing order of things. But the Select Committee at Westminster, in response to her plea for secession, in effect says: "The Mother of Parliaments dare not and will not interfere. You belong to my family. True, but this trouble is in your own household, and must be mended there". So the solution would appear to be: either fiscal autonomy to all the States of the Commonwealth, or special concessions in the matter of the tariff to Western Australia because of her peculiar circumstances. Only ten years ago, however, the demand for fiscal autonomy came before the Commonwealth Government, and it was rejected. And quite recently, when Western Australia asked for a reduction in tariffs, it was refused because of the pressure brought to bear on the Government by the manufacturers of New South Wales and Victoria, and by the sugar-producing interests of Queensland.

In spite of her grievous plight, there are some who believe that Western Australia's cry of secession is only of an alarmist nature, merely a "desperate remedy" cry raised by her in order to find a way out of pressing difficulties. Secession, they maintain, would be only a cutting of the Gordian knot, and would lead to difficulties greater than those she is at present experiencing. But her circumstances are, to say the least, serious, and her people are united in their present determination. Again, they have had recourse to the referendum, and an overwhelming verdict was returned in favour of secession. Western Australia is not in a pleasant mood. And now her representatives have returned from London in a spirit of bitterness, a spirit that will not make for peace and harmony. While that spirit is to be deplored, their courage is to be admired, for they intend to continue the fight, and they are still hoping against hope that the finding of the Select Committee will not be accepted by the Imperial Government. It is not likely, however, that the British Government will do otherwise than accept the report of the Select Committee. But now that the Select Committee has clearly indicated that the proper place for the solution of this vexing problem is in the Commonwealth, it is to be hoped that the parties concerned will make a determined effort to adjust matters fairly and equitably. Not without reason the representatives of Western Australia assert that the material prosperity of their State is being retarded by restrictions imposed on them by the Commonwealth Government. In their statement

to the press they affirm that "to a large extent the injuries inflicted on Western Australia are not the natural consequences of her entry into Federation, but the result of abuses of the Commonwealth Constitution by the Federal Government and the Federal Parliament". That is a striking indictment which is now given to the world. If these abuses have any foundation in fact, the rest of the British Commonwealth of Nations look to Australia, with that sportsmanship which has made her famous the world over, "to play cricket" here also.

But if Australia should still be disinclined to move any further in the matter, or make justice extend to generosity, then it would seem a reasonable thing to suggest that the whole dispute be referred with powers of arbitrament to another Select Committee, composed this time of representative members of the Imperial Economic Conference. This would be the nearest approach to a jury of her peers, for it would be composed of men who not only know the constitutional aspect of the matter, but have also had practical experience of the fiscal matters in dispute. Here, if anywhere, a wise and just verdict could be expected. The Canadian representatives on such a Committee should prove extremely useful.