

No. 20.

The AGENT-GENERAL to the COLONIAL SECRETARY.

(Telegram.)

London, 27th March, 1885.

FEDERAL BILL: Victoria pressing thirty-first clause be expunged, and urging that New South Wales, not having expressed any opinion, is indifferent whether it be retained.

No. 21.

The AGENT-GENERAL to the COLONIAL SECRETARY.

(Telegram.)

London, 30th March, 1885.

AGENTS-GENERAL, by request, met Lord Derby to-day to discuss amendments Enabling Bill. I stated I had no instructions, and could express no opinion. His Lordship stated he would introduce Bill, with thirty-first clause, after Easter holidays. . . .

No. 27.

MINUTE by the COLONIAL SECRETARY.

Imperial Federation and Earl Grey's suggested Board of Advice for the Colonies.

I HAVE carefully perused the article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of the 9th January upon Earl Grey's suggestion for the formation of a Colonial Council or Board of Advice, whose duty it would be to advise the Secretary of State for the Colonies on all matters of colonial interest.

The suggestion ingeniously gets over some of the difficulties, and may be accepted as a valuable contribution to the difficult question of Imperial Federation; nevertheless, I am constrained to take a view adverse to it, as I do not think it would be found to work well for the colonies, whilst at times it might seriously embarrass the Imperial Government and hamper its responsible action.

Suppose a case of Australian interest, in which even tolerable unanimity amongst the Australian Agents-General were to prevail, their views might be overborne by the other members of the Board, who, however ably they might represent their own colonies, might be in no way specially fitted to judge of our requirements; or, take the case alluded to by Earl Grey—namely, the fisheries—notably those of Newfoundland—the Australian Agents-General would have no special fitness to decide what advice the Board should tender, and yet by their vote they might possibly add to the embarrassment of the situation. The Imperial Government might find it convenient to fortify a “do-nothing policy” under such a vote; but how could the suffering colony obtain redress, or make its discontent officially known?

Unpleasant though it may be for a colony to have its wishes—involving, perhaps, its dearest interests—set aside or ignored, a refusal by a responsible Minister of the Crown, after full argument heard, would be much more palatable and less offensive than an adverse vote of an irresponsible Board at which its own Agent's voice may have been overruled. Colonial statesmen generally would consider it as a great departure from the principle of individual autonomy of the colonies were their interests on such vital questions as required the concurrence of the Imperial Government to be subject to the approval or disapproval of an irresponsible body, but yet carrying certain weight from its official position: the less their autonomy is interfered with the better. In all internal matters each colony is best able to judge for itself; it is only on matters which infringe upon Imperial interests that it is necessary to go beyond itself: and it would be better that such form the subject of direct negotiation with the Imperial Government than that resort should be had to any intermediate body for a solution of the difficulty.

Imperial Federation, to whatever proportion it may ultimately attain, must necessarily be of slow or gradual growth; and, with momentous issues depending upon its soundness, it is well that no hasty action of a defined character be adopted, which may turn out to be unsuited to the end in view. That which is immediately required, and which may serve until further discussion shall have paved the way for some more elaborate system, is that there shall be a distinct recognition on the part of the Imperial Government, as a constitutional principle, that, before definite action be taken on any colonial subject, the colony or colonies interested be consulted; and for that purpose the direct channel of the Agent-General should be recognized, and he should be entitled to ask for and to receive all information and papers which the Secretary of State for the Colonies or his department could furnish.

Hitherto the only officially-recognized channel of communication has been the Governor of the colony, who, by minute of the Chief Minister, is requested to convey the views of the colonial Government. Recently there has been growing up a sort of tacit acquiescence in the position of Agent-General, which should be extended to a full official recognition. The Agent-General, although not a Minister, is directly responsible to the colonial Ministry, and can be removed; or, where, as in New Zealand, he holds his position for a fixed period, it would probably be found expedient to make him removable if he fail adequately to represent their views. If, in the course of negotiation with the Secretary of State, any doubt or difficulty, or any new aspect of the question, arise, he can within twenty-four hours be in possession by telegraph of the views of the Colonial Ministry thereon. No channel of communication could therefore probably be devised to bring more promptly the two Governments—Imperial and colonial—*en rapport* with each other's views. The Colonial Ministry, acting under a sense of responsibility to the Colonial Parliament, would have its views tempered thereby, and modified also by those of the Imperial Government, as communicated through the Agent-General; while the Imperial Government, having the actual mind of the colony before it, and acting under its responsibility to the Imperial Parliament, would be in a position to decide