

RIVERINA MOVEMENT

(By J. A. LORIMER)

The Riverina Movement is the public expression of a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the system of government in Australia, more particularly as that system affects the relations between the Commonwealth and the States.

The serious financial difficulties through which the whole country passed in the 'nineties, no doubt, called the attention of many people at that time to the government of the country.

The majority of people of any nation do not get excited about or give much thought to, the government of their country whilst they are able to go about their own private business successfully and profitably. As long as the average citizen is making money, he may growl about Government interference or departmental ineptitude, but he will not take time off from a profitable business to correct matters which do not vitally affect him.

When however his business is rendered unprofitable he looks to the government or the system of government to discover the cause.

As in the 'nineties when businesses were smashed all over the country and Federation emerged with the reconstruction, so in these bad times a movement for the further improvement of our national system of government goes hand in hand with financial loss and unprofitable business. People being unable by their own efforts to improve their own circumstances, have time and inclination to think and

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discover a remedy, which does not depend on individual effort only, for the improvement of our present social conditions.

The present state of finances, and of our social equilibrium, appear to be more acute in Australia than in other countries, the reason being that, here, the main contributing cause has been Government expenditure whereas, elsewhere, private spending has been responsible. Australia now stands in a position where private economy only accentuates the financial stringency, by reducing the already greatly diminished volume of trade.

We appear to have lost confidence in our own Governments and, worse still, in our own system of Government, we are to a great extent frightened of our Governments because we feel that we have not enough control over them at the ballot box. Centralised government naturally attracts the party machine, it is so easy to capture a majority of a small Parliament which has National powers, and so mould the destinies of a large section, or even the whole, of the people to the will of a small body in charge of the party machine.

Australian party machines merely function as all party machines do, the danger lies in leaving open to them a large legislative field, which can be completely governed both nationally and domestically from one central authority. Dominate that one authority and you dominate the nation. Naturally when such an easy field is ready for tilling and harvesting, party politics takes full advantage of its opportunity and tills and harvests for its own ends.

The party machines in Australia appear to have harvested nothing for many years but weeds.

To put the House in order it appears necessary to remove the power to legislate in National matters, to that body in which any party machine will find it hardest to

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hold a dominating influence (and later to model that 'body on lines that will increase that difficulty) and to narrow down the power of domestic legislation to areas in which a proper understanding of domestic problems will be within the knowledge of every representative in the domestic legislature.

Such is the objective of the Riverina Movement. To ensure that the objective when obtained will be safeguarded from the influence of any party machine which may capture the national legislature at any future time, a guarantee is included in the objective that domestic powers may not be interfered with by the National Authority. This may appear to be at variance with the idea of giving full sovereign powers to the National Authority, and as far as the words go it is at variance, but it must be remembered that this is a new departure, behind which Australia has no guiding precedent. Central Governments, either State or Federal, have not shown any inclination to delegate power to local authority, administrative functions have been grudgingly delegated, but no actual power to legislate, at any rate no power worthy of the name; Central Government in Britain on the other hand, whilst holding full sovereign powers, has the memory of many unpleasant results of the unwise exercise of those powers.

In Australia, unless advantage be taken of Britain's past experience of the unwisdom of interference by the Central Authority in domestic matters; and the interference of Central Authority be prohibited specially by enactment as part of the Constitution, it is feared that similar experiences to those recorded in British history might have to be endured here before the Central Authority would properly learn the lesson, "Hands off, except in cases of proved misbehaviour."

The Riverina Movement desires to substitute for the traditional non-interference of the British Crown and Par-

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liament a constitutional safeguard which will have the same effect in our national affairs.

We cannot tolerate the idea of a Commonwealth Parliament which may exercise over us the "Divine Right" claimed by Charles I of England, as we would thus lose all that our forefathers gained from the English Revolution, neither can we tolerate the idea of a multiplicity of authorities, all claiming power which is in many respects greater than that of the whole Nation.

We do want, however, a National Authority which can act for Australia as a Nation in all national matters, but which will not interfere in the purely domestic affairs of those districts where a community of interest in local affairs exists.

We consider that "Unification" would set us back to the time of Charles I, a matter of 300 years, and that New States, under our present Federal System, would only aggravate the overlapping and duplication which now exist between State and Federal authority.

One thing, however, is certain, and that is that the Commonwealth of Australia must be more powerful and more representative of our national aspirations than any of the parts composing that Commonwealth.

The part cannot be greater than the whole, and until the possibility of any part of Australia trying to prove itself greater than Australia, is completely done away with, Australia cannot be a nation.

Our objective states that we desire to "Consummate the nationhood of Australia" which we claim that Federation has utterly failed to do.

The Australian press, prior to Federation, led the people to believe that we would emerge into Federation as

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“one people with one destiny”; Australia was pictured on official cards as a young Queen taking her place as an equal in the British Commonwealth of Nations. The Duke of York came out as representative of the British Crown and figuratively set Australia on her throne with a Crown of authority and a Sceptre of power, and everyone was more or less satisfied that Australia was henceforth a Nation.

When “the tumult and the shouting” died, and the illuminations and decorations had been taken down and Australia took stock of her new Kingdom, it was found that the great cities (acting on the assumption that State rights are really important) had kept for themselves the jewels that were supposed to adorn Australia’s crown. The only additional task since handed to the Commonwealth has been the right (now found to be an obligation) to pay State debts in the case of default. The Commonwealth runs the Post Office, but the States control the means of transporting the mails, the Commonwealth fixes the Tariff but the States adjust wages so as to nullify its effect, the States fail to pay their debts and the Commonwealth has to shoulder that burden.

To consummate the Nationhood of Australia the rights of the component parts must be subordinate to the rights of Australia.

An Englishman’s home is his castle; yes, but that principle can still stand as between province and nation, without going to the extent of exclusion of the National Authority in cases of misbehaviour.

Australia has lacked during the whole of its history the British tradition of Local Government, its government system has progressed along an open road of experiment, tending towards centralisation of authority in all matters. That system has now broken down. We stand at the cross-roads and we must decide in which direction we are to continue.

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The road along which we have been travelling leads to disintegration with possible reconstruction in sections, some of which will undoubtedly favor the Russian ideal of government. The Riverina Movement points the way to a return to British ideals and the welding of Australia into a genuine Nation.

All those to whom Australia stands first can support the movement.

Those who think that Sydney, Melbourne, or even Tasmania or New South Wales can stand and prosper after Australia has split up into several unimportant States and a few Soviet Republics, will naturally oppose it.

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