

The Clem Lack Oration for 1977

PROBLEMS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE EARLY WEST

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It is a great honour to me to be invited to deliver the Clem Lack Memorial Oration to the Royal Historical Society of Queensland on an aspect of Queensland history. Naturally I cannot speak with the advantages and experience of most members of my audience who are native Queenslanders, and so I hope you will be tolerant of my efforts to identify some of the main aspects of local government problems in the early West.

I chose this topic for strictly practical reasons. I have been invited by the Blackall Shire Council to write a centenary history of their shire for their celebration year of 1979, and this is giving me an introduction to Australian history at what could very appropriately be called "grass roots" level. At the same time I would argue that the problems encountered by this one section of the mid-western community in the 19th Century are fairly representative of the experiences of huge non-metropolitan areas of Queensland, and that the particular case often illuminates the general. In 1962 this Society heard a paper written by A. C. Towner entitled "An Outline of the History of Western Queensland", which was very broad in its scope and contained an enormous amount of information on landmarks in Queensland history. My paper is much more limited in scope, much less knowledgeable in its content, but one which will, I hope, help you to recapture some of the trials of those whose task it was to govern the area of the western shires in their early days.

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The problem of water and its successful solution is basic to very survival in Western Queensland. Water shortage is both absolute and relative in this area. A rainfall of some 20 inches per annum is not adequate for normal needs, and in this land of extremes there is every likelihood that this amount will fall in such heavy concentrations as to create severe flooding, as in 1906 or 1910.

Drought is, however, the more normal state of affairs, and if the western grazing lands were to become habitable and viable economically they needed to solve the problem of water-supply. This appears to have been vital at four points in the life of the community: the supply of domestic householders and other water-users; provision for the needs of stock in their usual grazing areas; provision for the needs of stock on the move; the watering of the pastures to ensure the necessary supply of feed on which the property and life of the whole community was ultimately dependent.

This last aspect has remained insoluble. The areas and distances involved preclude irrigation and if areas of land are eaten out in times of drought there is little that the grazier can do about it. The other aspects were all successfully tackled by the end of the 19th Century, and it is no exaggeration to say that without this life in the west would not have been possible.

SINKING OF WELLS

In the early days dependence was entirely on rivers, dams, water-holes, and shallow wells, and in the early days of the Kargoolnah Divisional Board much of their business was concerned with the sinking of wells and their proper maintenance. At a typical meeting on 10 November 1880 they are to be found voting £20 for the sinking of a well on the Tambo-Emerald road, ten miles out of Tambo, £50 for a well at Maryvale, and up to £200 for a third at Dismal Creek.¹ On 19 April 1881 they not only agreed to spend £70 on the construction of a well and filter-bed and pump at Tambo Dam, but also agreed to provide a rope and bucket for the well on Birkhead road.² This almost suggests that such items were luxury provision rather than standard equipment.

In November 1885 at a special meeting to consider the water-famine at Jericho, they implored the government to put on a special water-train from Alpha to Jericho and said that the inhabitants of Jericho would be willing to pay for water if it was delivered to them. The Board complained that they had already spent more on that division than they had ever collected in

revenue and that they could offer nothing more to Jericho than a further £40 for some storage tanks.³ The government was not very sympathetic; they complained that the Board had not expended loan money wisely in the sinking of wells, and that they lacked a good practical overseer.⁴

In March 1889 the Board applied to the government for a further £2000 loan to sink an artesian well at Jericho, but in May 1892, Jericho residents, again experiencing water-famine, were having to cart water considerable distances and contemplating bringing it by rail.⁵ Their plea for an artesian bore was given scant attention in Brisbane, where the government, angry with Kargoolnah because of a political deadlock that had caused the Board to hold no meetings for ten months, expressed the view that the problems of the Board did not merit much consideration.⁶ Jericho received its water in 1910.

It was, of course, the bore water that solved most of the problems; it catered amply for householders and it allowed graziers a plentiful supply that they could channel off to their stock. Blackall was the first selected site for an artesian bore in 1885, though water was flowing from a second bore at Barcardine before the Blackall one yielded water which proved to be better for washing purposes than for drinking. In June 1898 the Town Council carried a resolution to take steps to reticulate the town with artesian water and established a sub-committee to consider the cost.⁷ In October the Treasurer was asked to lend the town over £5000 for sinking a new bore and reticulating the town with artesian water, though a later proposal was that the government should sink the original Blackall bore to a second supply, recase the entire drilling, and sell the bore to the Council for £1 per foot.⁸ This it declined to do, and made a counter offer to sell the Council the existing bore for £2000.

This offer was refused, as the Council believed that they could put down a new bore to the same depth for just over half this figure. Now the Council offered the government 15/- per foot for the bore on the incredible condition that the Treasury lend them £5200 with which to buy the bore, sink it further to a second supply, and provide reticulated water for the township. After first refusing the offer, the Treasurer accepted, but then found that the Council needed £6450 to do the job and their period for repayment doubled from ten to twenty years.⁹ The bore was handed over on April Fool's Day 1900 and the Intercolonial Deep Well Boring Company received the contract to proceed.

By the end of 1901 Blackall had been gazetted a water authority, and was able to enjoy the luxury of copious supplies of water as well as the revenue to be derived from selling it to ratepayers, the wool scour, the Kargoolnah Divisional Board which took all the surplus into the Barcoo River to water grazing stock, and eventually to the railways for watering their rolling-stock.

An example of the added amenities now available to the townsfolk was public bathing at the water hole at the 5 Mile Gardens in accordance with By-law No. 19. It was resolved on 17 January 1907 that the hours for ladies bathing should be from 8 o'clock to 10 o'clock p.m. on weekdays.¹⁰ They were to bathe only in the dark and never on Sundays.

LOCAL RIVALRIES

Another of the major themes of early local government in the west was the relations between different local authorities and the rivalries, often bitter, that developed between them. Soon after the establishment of Kargoolnah, subdivision 3 was separated from the main body for the creation of the Tambo division which was proclaimed in 1881. Relations with the new Tambo division seem to have remained fairly cordial. In February 1884 Kargoolnah sought the co-operation of the Tambo Board regarding the improvement of water supplies along the Tambo to Isisford road which ran through the two divisions,¹¹ and the first conflict occurred only when J. T. Allen, owner of Enniskillen and the first grazier on the Barcoo, notified Kargoolnah of his wish to have the leased portion of his run transferred to Kargoolnah, where it had originally been, from Tambo, where it was relocated in 1881. Allen had himself been a founder member of the Kargoolnah Divisional Board and felt an affinity with Blackall. The Tambo Board was asked if it had any objection to the transfer; it had, and Enniskillen, the first Barcoo station, remains today under the jurisdiction of the Tambo Shire Council.¹²

The real fued was with Barcaldine, the area to the north-west, which again was part of the original Kargoolnah Division during the 1880s. It was during this period that the hostilities began which helped to produce the political deadlock of 1892, when the councillors from the Barcaldine area divided against those from the south, to such an effect that the Board was unable to elect a chairman and one had to be imposed externally by the Executive Council in Brisbane.¹³ The cause of hostilities was undoubtedly the rivalries and jealousies that existed between Blackall and the

remoter, newer town of Barcaldine and the belief, as the *Western Champion* put it, that the Divisional Board expended only 1d. on Barcaldine for every f.1 that the district contributed in revenue.¹⁴

The feeling of neglect and exploitation led to the formation of a body of Barcaldine ratepayers called the Barcaldine Progress Association, which agitated in the 1880s for the creation of a separate division for their town and district. Their grievances found expression in 1881 in their demand for the opening of a new road between Barcaldine and Malvern Hills. This road was to leave the main Blackall road at Douglas Ponds Creek and cut through Alice Downs and the Burra Burra run to Malvern Hills. The intention of the sponsors was to give Barcaldine a direct link with the two largest stations on the Barcoo, Malvern Hills and Terrick; the latter alone was expected to produce almost 600 tons of wool in 1888.

Until this date the two stations had been accustomed to sending their clip via Blackall to the railway at Jericho, a distance of 105 miles for one station and 123 for the other. The new road, by giving them a much shorter route to the railway, at Barcaldine, would, it was hoped, divert trade from Blackall and Jericho to Barcaldine, which town would thrive at the expense of the other centre.

Kargoolnah had much to lose if such a road were opened, and they opposed its proclamation on the grounds that it was superfluous to the area's needs and would be an unnecessary and costly item to maintain.¹⁵ This argument was patently special pleading, and the road was eventually proclaimed on 13 September 1890 against strong opposition from the Kargoolnah Divisional Board.¹⁶ However, the Barcaldine victory was incomplete. During the next few years, in which time Barcaldine, separated from Kargoolnah, defaulted on debt payments to the parent Board, accused it of polluting the Barcoo River and made a bid to change the mail route from the Jericho Road to the Barcaldine Road, the Kargoolnah Division made no effort to clear the road and make it passable. Malvern Hills and Terrick continued to send their wool through Blackall to Jericho, and Barcaldine continued to feel frustrated at the denial of what it regarded as legitimate trade.

TIME OF CRISIS

At the beginning of September 1894 the crisis came. The Barcaldine Chamber of Commerce offered a sizable cash bonus to the first carrier getting his team through the unmade road to the

stations, and Kargoolnah officials shortly afterwards encountered a party of five men clearing the road by chopping down trees, in the charge of a man who told them he was going to Terrick for wool. Arrests were made, and both sides invoked the aid of the government.

Barcaldine Chamber of Commerce complained to the Colonial Secretary that a licensed carrier proceeding to Terrick on a proclaimed road had been forcibly removed by order of the Blackall Police Magistrate. Kargoolnah complained that their jurisdiction had been infringed and that the men had no right to clear roads within the area governed by their Board, and they reinforced their point by prosecuting four of the men concerned who were fined for the malicious destruction of gidyea trees. The government sympathised with both sides. The carriers had a right to use the road, but not to clear it.¹⁷ And in spite of much abuse and pressure, Kargoolnah did not clear the road. In fact they petitioned to have it permanently closed. Their request was not granted, but there was apparently no means of compelling them to make it passable and so it retained what was virtually a theoretical existence only. In January 1895 they were further accused of felling trees across the route to make it even more impassable, and in answer to a query from the Colonial Secretary replied that the Board was not aware of any roads being blocked as described; they would make enquiries but the matter could be left in the hands of the Chairman.¹⁸ And there it remained.

The solicitors of both sides had had a field day, collecting good fees for the interchange of letters and telegrams amongst the contending parties, but the incident changed nothing. It confirmed the *Western Champion's* view of its neighbours as "the sleepy old fogies of Blackall", roused into action only by the jealous fear that Barcaldine might derive "a shilling's worth of benefit from anywhere within 60 miles of Blackall".¹⁹ It also confirmed what those in Brisbane had probably known for a long time, that the west would go its own way and would probably have to be left to do so. If the responsible people would not clear a road, then the road would have to remain uncleared.

I have not yet confirmed the ultimate fate of the road, though Barcaldine Shire Council was claiming, rightly or wrongly, in October 1903 that trade was now passing along it.²⁰ The claim was probably correct, though on 11 May 1905 they were still writing to the Colonial Secretary asking him to make the Kargoolnah Divisional Board clear their section.²¹ If trade were

developing, this would explain the attempts being made in 1903, with the support of A.H. Whittingham, manager of Alice Downs, to transfer the portion of Alice Downs situated in Barcaldine Shire to Kargoolnah. Whittingham maintained that most of his lands were already in Kargoolnah and that the close proximity of Blackall made that the obvious centre for managing the whole area.²² Unfortunately for the happy solution of this issue, the disputed lands contained the Barcaldine section of the contentious road, in addition to a fine river stretch that promised closer settlement in the future. It looked as though Kargoolnah were again attempting to exclude Barcaldine from a very desirable and profitable area, and the government would not agree to this.

DIFFERENCES SETTLED

Six years later there was a changed relationship. The two authorities settled their differences over boundaries and agreed to a mutual transfer of lands, and it was noted with some relief in Brisbane that the Barcaldine Shire Council and the Kargoolnah Shire Council had "amicably arranged an exchange of territory".²³ The new mood was remarkably manifested in December 1913 when Kargoolnah requested the Home Secretary's permission to contribute £100 towards the cost of making passable the main road from Blackall to Barcaldine. The Kargoolnah section was in good repair, they reported, but the Barcaldine part would cost £300 to put right and they wished to pay one-third of this amount. Permission was granted by the Minister concerned, who doubtless reflected on the new cordiality and the unlikelihood of such a gesture in earlier times.²⁴

The issue of roads was clearly a very central problem for the early governors of the western divisions, and anyone travelling in the west even today can appreciate this instantly. There is a mistaken view in metropolitan Brisbane that the west is Toowoomba; my own feeling is that a different world opens up beyond Roma, where towns, even along the main roads, are some sixty or seventy miles apart and the countryside is on such a grand scale that the narrow ribbons of passable terrain are veritable life-lines in an expanse so vast as to be frightening. As one's car wheels sink into the mud of the road from Morven to Augathella it is easy to recognise the importance of the early roads to the pioneers who lacked the amenities of modern travel.

At one of the earliest meetings of the newly-created Kargoolnah Divisional Board members asked the Colonial Secretary to empower the Board to revise and draw up a plan of all

roads within their division, and proposed that they should be divided into two sections — main roads for general public use and moving stock, and by-roads connecting up the stations, which were not to be stock-routes.²⁵ Their request was coolly received. Their first letter received no reply and their second was annotated with the comment that the Board had no power to give effect to their scheme.²⁶ It was evidently intended that authorities should assume no comprehensive power in their areas that would infringe central jurisdiction and that they should proceed on an ad hoc basis, making proposals for the opening or closing of roads as the need arose.

The formal procedure of government surveys and proclamations often led to delays and exasperated exchanges concerning unfulfilled projects and work remaining to be done by the government. On the Board's side it was a constant battle to keep things moving and have roads passable, if that was the current objective.

In May 1883 the Board appointed John Lawford as working overseer and commissioned him to form a working party consisting of a cook, a horse-driver, and three other labourers, to begin the endless, lonely task of road-work in the division.²⁷ And road-maintenance was not just a question of clearing a route through the scrub but of ensuring that water was available for travellers and stock undertaking the long hazardous journeys.

In December 1889 the Board took into its partial employment the Cobb and Company grooms who operated on the Jericho Road, asking them to look after tanks and fences, to act as caretakers, and to report damage. Stock in general was to be watered at troughs, but if sheep-droivers gave to the caretakers notice of their intention to water sheep, they could water them within the fences, provided that all necessary repairs were made after the exercise was completed.²⁸

Stock movement was often controversial. Sometimes roads would be gazetted at a width of only 10 chains, instead of the half mile on each side considered necessary for stock movement.²⁹ Sometimes there were ambiguities about the government's intention. In July 1890 the Lands Office was asked to explain a gazette notice of the previous November which had failed to make it clear whether a road was to be open for the use of members of the public travelling with stock. The lessees of the property through which the road passed were objecting to stock-travel and were threatening with prosecution anyone who attempted to undertake it.³⁰

FINANCE THE FINAL KEY

But local government in the 19th Century, as today, was often in the end a matter of money, the desire to undertake a large range of activities foundering against limited resources available. The problems of the town of Blackall were particularly acute. When the ratepayers of the town made one of their periodic appeals to the Division to take over the town and create a new amalgamated authority, they complained that the municipal council had a "managing expenditure . . . disproportionate to the revenues received".³¹ In other words its income was less than its outgoings, and this constituted unhappiness for the people of Blackall as well as for Mr. Micawber, in consequence of which they frequently sought the economies of scale that amalgamation with Kargoolnah would bring.

Frequently necessary improvements could not be carried out because of the unavailability of the necessary money; frequently they attempted to carry an overdraft on their bank account, only to endure the humiliation of being told that their credit was not good enough to stand the sum they requested. In October 1893 they received a letter from the Colonial Treasurer's department informing them that they were in arrears in repaying instalments due to the government under the provisions of the Local Works Loan Act to the amount of £349.1s.4d., and requesting immediate steps to rectify this position.³² The situation was doubtless aggravated by "the matter of the late Town Clerk's deficiency", which the Mayor was left to deal with in 1895;³³ and even a £5 contribution towards repairs to the main crossing of the Barcoo at Blackall created a haggling session which ended only when the Divisional Board agreed to accept £2.10s. in full settlement.³⁴

It must have been an historic moment when the Mayor was able to announce on 12 October 1896 that for the first time for many years the Blackall Council was free from all arrears; it just had its debts.³⁵ Continuing poverty was again manifested in the abortive attempt in February 1903 to stop the Mayor's allowance of £15.³⁶ It was a perpetual battle to persuade the bank to lend more money and to try to persuade the government to extend the period of loan repayments and thereby reduce the annual amount to be paid. The unhealthy state of Blackall finances can be seen from the fact that in 1905 the capital value of rateable properties was only £21,320. From a general rate of 3d. in the pound this should have yielded £266.10s.0d., in addition to

which the Council was still owed £61.12s.11d. from rate arrears for 1904. Altogether they managed to collect only £249.3s.2d. and were left with arrears of £78.19s.9d.³⁷

This was a pitifully small income on which to run a municipality. By contrast, the Divisional Board, despite its occasional cries of poverty, did from time to time agree to transfer £1000 from its current account into fixed deposit for limited periods, a luxurious option that was never open to the town. It is little wonder, then, that the pressure for amalgamation of the two authorities should have come from the town and that the Divisional Board, and later the Shire, should have been reluctant to acquire such an impoverished partner.

I suppose the thing that strikes me particularly as I reflect on the problems of local government over the years is their essentially unchanged nature. If we were to drop in on a present-day meeting of the Blackall Shire Council we would certainly not encounter in Roy Darwen, the present chairman, such a man as Mr. Parnell who told his colleagues in January 1892 that he did not intend attending meetings more often than once a quarter. Nor would we find in the present Shire Clerk, Bob Younger, an official who ever left his embarrassed chairman with an unexplained deficiency to sort out, as did his municipal predecessor in 1895. There would probably be no unseemly rows with neighbouring shires, but there would certainly be discussions on the problems of water and roads, and there might even be discussions still on the vexed question of finance.

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