

NEW ZEALAND REFORMS

Much Progress Made in Direct Legislation, Methods of Taxation and Local Self-Government

The following letter from a New Zealand contributor has a particular interest at this time:

Athenree, New Zealand, May 1.—To the Editor of The Independent: Your letter of March 17 (my thirty-fourth birthday) received. I hardly know what reform papers there are in New Zealand. Almost the whole press is in opposition and the liberal papers are almost all traitorous to reform. The single-taxers have a capital four page monthly, The Liberator, in Auckland, and the prohibitionists several small local papers, but these are for a special object, and have a very limited circulation.

Please remember we have only 105,000 square miles and under 900,000 population from Manikiki near the Equator to Campbell Island, near Antarctica. The original five colonies of Otago, Canterbury, Wellington, Hawke Bay and Auckland are yet as mutually hostile, as, say Nebraska and New Jersey, and under twenty years ago the misgovernment had led to a general collapse, business ruin and exodus of population. We are fortunate in possessing as premier the Rt. Hon. R. J. Seddon, a man with complete control over parliament and most keen sense of public feeling. His personal control since 1893 over four general elections, makes his tact a rough but efficient substitute for direct legislation. But I deprecate any despotism.

Direct Legislation

The direct legislation movement in New Zealand divides roughly into two parts—separated about 1893, when "Pat" O'Regan, the ablest man in New Zealand politics, entered parliament. Previously, its use was the old English and American form of requiring a poll of electors to pass a municipal debt, in some cases to give or amend a franchise, or to alter boundaries, etc., by petition. No recognition of popular sovereignty was admitted or thought of.

About 1893 the "no license" party took from us an inter-party unit. Previously liquor licenses had been issued for each year by a local committee elected in small areas by rate-payers (occupiers of real property). Licenses had always been renewed, but a "no license" committee was elected at Syderham near Christchurch (our Boston) which refused all of about a dozen licenses on only temperance rounds. A great row in and out of parliament ensued. Finally licensing districts were altered to equal the electorates (62 in number) which are readjusted after each five year census to equal numbers with a 28 per cent allowance for rural areas, and 10 per cent variation allowed. This sounds complex, but is a compromise and works well. At each general election the adult voters (British subjects twelve months in the colony and three in the electorate) decide in each district separately the license question also. There are three issues: Shall licenses continue; or be reduced; or abolished? You can vote for any, or reduction and no license. Continuance or reduction carry by bare majority, no license only by three-fifths of valid votes cast. Reduction forces

the licensing committee, elected three months later by adults (five and magistrate of district as chairman), to reduce one-tenth to one-fourth of the licenses, not less than one if only one, beginning with those with any police complaints.

Referendum Works Well

Seddon proposed last year, but failed, to take a further referendum on (1) nationalization of the liquor trade, as in Carolina; (2) to make possession of use of liquor illegal in no license areas.

There is some friction in the contest of a most powerful and wealthy trust and a growing majority of the voters, but the referendum system works easier than any other could and no one disputes the decisions—till next time. A large share of the no license vote is from anti-brewers' trust voters, who desire a department of state to replace the trust when smashed.

In 1902, twenty-four districts gave a bare majority for no license, and six others the three-fifths majority, but in two this was upset for legal points, since erased by parliament. There is now, from all motives, a 3,000 majority to "bust the trust" and a much larger vote is expected in November next.

Referendum an Agent of Peace

The referendum has proved an agent of peace in a most difficult task, the suppression of a liquor trade with the approval of the voters and the public. We have no colonial direct legislation law so far. O'Regan, beaten several times with referendum bills, got one read the second time about 1897 by sheer mental force. Government then took it up, but has so far failed to pass it through the upper house. They are not keen on it and as it has no initiative clause it is of little value. Seddon says he favors initiative, so we will see what comes on this session. O'Regan is now not in parliament; H. G. Ell, M. H. R. of Christchurch is ablest and best worker for direct legislation, though the whole single tax group is a unit for direct legislation and effective voting, another of O'Regan's measures and now championed by Geo. Fowlds, M. H. R., Grey Lynn, the president of the National Single Tax League and convener of the inter-party land and tariff reform group in parliament, which has a membership of about thirty.

This widening of the single tax sympathies to a position almost exactly that of The Independent is, in my opinion, the most valuable part of O'Regan's record. Of course, the benefit of any purification of government inheres in higher land values, and increased robbery of the disinherited, but all forms of roguery are one, and injure one, you weaken all, for the attack on the next.

Municipal Legislation

It is in municipal legislation that direct legislation has made its great hit with us. Many county (95) or Borough (105) or for purely local objects, any road or town district (subdivisions of certain larger counties, about 300) on initiative may be put in to the local body by fifteen to

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