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Australia as a Wealth Producer.

"Australia is essentially a producing country. Public credit has been pledged for money to build railways and roads and make harbors, in order to facilitate the development of resources and shipment of products on such an economic basis as will meet all costs and leave the grower, carrier, and trader a margin of profit. The State having a monopoly land carriage is the chief arbiter in solving the problem of breaking down distance from the point of production and the seaboard, and thus the question of multiplying trade routes and keeping them open is one for the public to study and appreciate, since the means of transit provided in this country directly affects their daily lives. The promise of future expansion cannot be fulfilled unless there is a simultaneous growth in railways and improvements of roads and rivers. Resources cannot be tapped and production increased unless trade channels are created and then maintained at a high standard.

"In their bold policy of transcontinental railways the United States and Canada have provided a fine object lesson for Australian statesmen to emulate. Australia never can be regarded as a self-contained country until south is linked to north and east is bound by ribbons of steel to west.

The Arbiter of Transportation.

"In Central Australia to-day the only means of transportation in the 20th century is the system (camel trains) which was available in the time when the first Pharaoh was developing Egypt. If a miner in the MacDonnell Ranges wants machinery from Adelaide it is sent 700 miles by railway to Oodnadatta and placed in the station yard to await a camel train. An Afghan is the arbiter of transportation in Central Australia! The neglect of geographical outlets in Australia represents a daily enormous waste. In Australia 38 per cent. of the total population live in metropolitan areas, and this unhealthy condition is mainly due to the policy of centralisation—the pull of city interests—faithfully observed by successive Governments and managers of State-owned railways. In Australia the making of railway rates by public authority has concentrated in three seaboard cities the trade that, under the making of railway rates by the railways themselves, would have been distributed among half a dozen seaboard cities and numerous interior jobbing centres. Melbourne contains 45 per cent. of the population of Victoria and handles about 78 per cent. of the railway trade of that State, Sydney houses 38.97 per cent. of the population of New South Wales, and all thoroughfares concentrate on the beautiful harbor until the trade and commerce of that State has become almost hopelessly congested. Queensland, in which State the railway terminals are at the nearest coastal port to the system, offers a better comparison, Brisbane accounting for only 23 per cent. of the population. South Australia provides the worst example in the Commonwealth, the metropolitan population being over 46 per cent. of the whole—or 8 per cent. above the Australian average, which is much in excess of any other country. It is cheaper for merchants in Ballarat to send their goods to Melbourne and then consign them back to Adelaide, than to send them direct to Adelaide from Ballarat. The freight from Ballarat to Adelaide direct is 144/- per ton, but from Ballarat to Melbourne and back to Adelaide it is only 99/-. Selfish commercialism based upon vested interest is always pulling for centralisation.

Centralisation.

"The policy of centralisation should be abandoned in favor of utilizing natural outlets, thus saving the cost of unnecessary haulage, but before this can be accomplished the 'federal sentiment' will have to be developed from the illusive theory into a practical common-sense tangible thing.

"A question that calls for constant repetition is, 'Are we as a community employing defective methods of transportation and paying so much for services that the profits on our staples depend too little on the actual cost of production and too largely on cost of carriage?' If so, the producer carries a heavy burden, trade and commerce suffer, and the loss to the community represents a waste of national wealth.

Gauges.

"No consideration of the problems of transportation and their relation to Australian trade and commerce would be complete without reference were made to the colossal national waste represented by the variety of gauges. Railway officials, legislators, traders, and the people generally condemn the system but the unanimity of public opinion makes for nothing but delay and a steadily accumulating loss and liability. All the 5 ft. 3 in. gauge lines in Victoria and South Australia could have been changed to a gauge of 4 ft. 3½ in. in 1897 for an expenditure of £2,350,500. To-day the cost would be £7,295,000. The longer this national work is delayed the greater will be the ultimate cost. The cost of conversion is increasing by £1,000,000 every year. The advantages of a uniform railway gauge—at least between the capitals—are too obvious to call for argument.

Economic Importance of Roads.

"There are few things so wasteful as a bad road. It is a constant drain upon the resources of a country and a continuous tax upon the users of it. In the United States 70 per cent. of the traffic passes over roads. An effort is to be made in South Australia to concentrate control in order to make for better thoroughfares. By recent legislation increased power has been invested in the Government Roads and Bridges Department, and it is hoped that the lost art of roadmaking in this State will be regained, and that good roads when made will be maintained. There is a growing demand in America and Europe for transcontinental roads, national highways connecting States in order to facilitate passenger and goods traffic by motor power. This movement should be encouraged in Australia.

"National Highways Commission."

"Some guarantee of uniformity in policy in respect to railway, rivers, and roads may yet have to be found in a national highways council or commission should the pressure of other work prevent the interstate commission giving the necessary supervision. There is scope for Federal and State co-operation in providing better roads, devising means of increasing train loads, eliminating curves and grades, and making for an acceptable common gauge, standardising equipment, and generally making for economy and efficiency in order that the unit of transportation shall be reduced to a minimum in this land of great distances.

Harbors and Ocean Freights.

"The problem of transportation is by no means finally solved as far as trade and commerce are concerned when produce has been moved at a minimum of cost from the most distant inland point to the seaboard. Oversea carriage is a prime factor to the producer, trader, and country of origin, since all surplus produce over home requirements has to meet world-wide competition. Although at a disadvantage in the matter of distance from European-consuming centres, Australia has been well served by ship-owners. Steamers trading to Australia, however, have reached the maximum depth of the majority of shipping ports, and freights are more and more being regulated by the carrying capacity in a single bottom, which in turn is governed by draught. When it is remembered that the oversea freight charges against Australian produce exceeds every year the interest on the public debt, the importance of these two factors—harbors and ocean transit—in the problems of transportation will be better appreciated.

"On a per capita basis Australians can invite comparison with any other producers or traders in the world. Productions from all industries in 1911 reached the fine total of £188,745,000, equal to £42 0/8 per inhabitant. Australia's combined trade—export and imports—equalled £35 17/2 per head of population. There is no other reason why Australia should not supply the needs of her own people and then help to keep full the cupboards of other countries. There are vast areas in the Commonwealth of no productive values to-day simply because of the absence of modern means of carriage to the seaboard.

"Unite!"

"Australians should unite in a patriotic effort to inaugurate an era of improved transportation, embracing increased efficiency in railway management, full use of inland waterways, and a 'good roads' movement in order to encourage the occupation of waste places of the continent, and so multiply production, and add to the volume of trade and commerce. Problems of transportation not only have a close relationship to trade and commerce and the general material concerns of the country, but they effect national life in all its numerous interests. We owe much to the pioneers, who so well and truly laid the foundations of our already great Commonwealth, but upon this and succeeding generations devolves the sacred duty to courageously face the daily obligations of making this continent not only habitable, but the home of a prosperous and progressive people. By such means and such means only will Australia occupy its rightful place as the economic centre of the Pacific—the dominating commercial power of southern seas."