THE QUEENSLAND ANNEXATION: DOCUMENTS D7 to D11

In 1883 the excitement aroused in Australia by fears of German intervention in New Guinea encouraged the Queensland Government to bring the New Guinea question to a head. The Thursday Island Magistrate, Henry Chester, was instructed to annex all of New Guinea east of the Dutch border, in the name of the Crown. It was recognized in Queensland that Chester's annexation would be ineffective without subsequent ratification by the British Government, (D8) since Queensland, though an internally self-governing colony, could not conduct foreign affairs or acquire territory. Nevertheless, had the Germans been seriously considering hoisting their flag in New Guinea in 1883, Chester's ceremony may well have effectively forestalled them, and did constitute an assertion of rights which would have had priority over any German claim.

The British Government discounted the possibility of German intervention in New Guinea in 1883 and persisted in doing so until the German Protectorate was actually established in the following year. (D27) The Queensland annexation was repudiated, (D10) and in the House of Lords, the Colonial Secretary, Lord Derby, ridiculed the possibility of foreign intervention.

Nevertheless, the Queensland annexation of 1883 did bring the New Guinea issue to a head. Though repudiated, the way was left open for British intervention when a formula could be worked out which was satisfactory both to the Australians and the Colonial Office. (D10) They reached a compromise in the following year and the Protectorate was then established. (D15; D17; D19)

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D7 Chester's Proclamation Purporting to Annex Eastern New Guinea

Henry Chester raised the flag at Port Moresby on 4 April 1883, and the Proclamation he read on that occasion follows. Unlike Erskine's Proclamation of the following year, Chester did not restrict himself to the southern coastline, but took possession, in the name of the Crown, of the whole of eastern New Guinea and its adjacent islands. It is unlikely, however, that the terms of the Proclamation embraced what is now the Bismarck Archipelago, New Ireland or Bougainville.

Chester's Proclamation was read in the presence of about 200 Papuans and 13 Europeans. After the ceremony a Rarotongan mission teacher distributed £50 worth of trade goods amongst those present. Chester obtained the co-operation of the pioneer missionaries Lawes and Chalmers, who gave a banquet in the evening at which the Europeans, the Polynesian mission teachers and their wives, and the Motuan leader, Boi Vagi were present. The toast 'Prosperity to the latest gem added to the British Crown' was drunk, although Chester did not record the vintage.

Henry Chester was born in London in 1832 and educated at the Blue Coat School, the London School in Newgate Street, and the Royal Mathematical School. Chester died in Brisbane in 1914. Prior to his appointment as Police Magistrate and Harbour Master on Thursday Island in 1877, Chester had an interesting and varied career in India and the Middle East. In 1849 he joined the Indian Navy, which at that time was under the control of the East India Company. He took part in the Persian war, and was for a time British Political Agent at the Court of the Imam of Muscat and the Sultan of Oman. He came to Australia after the abolition of the Indian Navy in 1862.

I, Henry Majorbanks Chester, resident magistrate at Thursday Island, in the Colony of Queensland, acting under instructions from the Government of the said Colony, do hereby take possession of all that portion of New Guinea and the islands and islets adjacent thereto, lying between the 141st and 153rd meridians of east longitude, in the name and on behalf of Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria, her heirs, and successors. In token whereof I have hoisted and saluted the British flag at Port Moresby in New Guinea, this fourth day of April, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eighty-three.

God save the Queen!

HENRY M. CHESTER


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2 The Australian Encyclopaedia, op. cit., sub. nom., Chester
Governor at the time of the purported annexation, had by this time left Queensland, and had died on his way home to England. His successor had not yet arrived in Queensland when the despatch was written.

The stress placed on the undesirability of putting New Guinea under the control of a Colonial Government which was not notable for its success in the protection of its own aborigines, nor in the policing of labour recruiting in Melanesia for its plantations, may well have been influenced by the comments of the Aborigines Protection Society, in their letter of 14 May 1883.

Nevertheless, despite Lord Derby’s disapproval of the Queenslanders, the way was left open for the gradual extension of British influence in New Guinea and the Western Pacific, within the framework of the Western Pacific High Commission. There were, however, two conditions. The first was that the Australian Governments act jointly, and not separately, in requesting Imperial action; and the second was that they should pay for it. The Intercolonial Convention, which met at the end of 1883 in Sydney, went a long way towards meeting the first condition, while the passing of a Queensland Act in 1884, underwriting the cost of a Protectorate administration in New Guinea, met the second.

Sir,

Her Majesty’s Government have given their careful consideration to the request of the Government of Queensland, as placed before them in the correspondence with Sir Arthur Kennedy and with the Agent General for the Colony, which has been laid before Parliament, that the eastern portion of the Island of New Guinea, with the islands adjacent thereto, may be annexed to Queensland. Although the first communication reached me through Mr Archer on the 28th February, it was not until the 19th of June that I received Sir A. Kennedy’s observations on the subject, and, through Mr. Archer, a copy of the proclamation with which Mr. Chester, the magistrate, took possession of the territory in the name of the Queen. It has therefore not been possible to communicate to you before now the conclusions at which Her Majesty’s Government have arrived.

2 They are unable to approve the proceedings of your Government in this matter. It is well understood that the officers of a Colonial Government have no power or authority to act beyond the limits of their Colony, and if this constitutional principle is not carefully observed serious difficulties and complications must arise. If there had been any apprehension of the intention, which is said to have been taken, of a foreign Power to take possession of any part of New Guinea, the views and proposals of the Colonial Government could have been placed before Her Majesty’s Government by telegraph, and if the circumstances had justified immediate action it could have been taken without a delay of more than a very few hours. It is therefore much to be regretted that your advisers should, without apparent necessity, have taken on themselves the exercise of powers which they did not possess.

3 The apprehension entertained in Australia that some foreign Power was about to establish itself on the shores of New Guinea appears to have been altogether indefinite and unfounded, and the inquiries which have been made by Her Majesty’s Government have given them the strongest reasons for believing that no such step has been contemplated. Nor is there at the present time any sufficient ground for anticipating the early settlement on the shores of New Guinea of a white population from the Australasian Colonies which, in the absence of any established authority, would become a source of trouble and danger to the Colony. The results of former expeditions have been disastrous, and unless there should be indications of their intended renewal on a considerable scale, no question would arise with respect to the prevention of disorders resulting from that cause.

4 Her Majesty’s Government are, moreover, clearly of opinion that even if the time had arrived for asserting and exercising the Queen’s authority and jurisdiction on the shores of the island, or on some portions of them, there would be no necessity or justification for including in these measures the whole of the vast territory to which the proclamation of the Queensland Government purports to apply. It is estimated that the interior of the country contains several millions of savage inhabitants of whom little or nothing is known, but it is certain that they have given no sign of a desire that their land should be occupied by white men. It would require exceptionally strong reasons to justify the annexation of these tribes and their territory, and in the absence of any such reasons, a grave responsibility would be incurred in establishing the Queen’s jurisdiction over a large coloured population which would certainly resist subjugation and has apparently nothing to gain by it.

If, however, it had been shown that the extension of the Queen’s sovereignty to the eastern portion of New Guinea has become necessary, the proposal that the territory so annexed should form part of the Colony of Queensland would be open to strong objections. The Colony already comprises an immense extent of territory: the seat of Government is situated in the south, a thousand miles from the southeastern point of New Guinea: it is practically governed by a Parliament which represents the white population, whose interests are altogether different from those of the coloured races, aboriginal and imported, within the Colony: and while I am aware of the difficulties with which the Colonial Government has had to contend in connexion with the labour traffic and other questions affecting native interests, the fact that those difficulties have not in all cases been successfully dealt with cannot be disputed, and has often of late been the subject of much comment. The Queensland Government is at present undertaking heavy charges and responsibilities in connexion with the settlement and development of its vast northern territory, which cannot be fully occupied for many years to come, and even if it could be reconciled with former precedents and sound general principles that the Imperial Government should devolve upon any Colony the duties incident to the establishment of British dominion in such a country as New Guinea, neither

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1 The Australian Encyclopaedia, op. cit., sub. nom., Kennedy
2 See the preceding document
4 The New Guinea And Pacific Jurisdiction Contribution Act Of 1884 (48 Vic., No. 7)
5 Then Queensland’s Agent General in London
6 See Kennedy’s despatch of 26 April 1883, supra
7 See supra D7
the time nor the circumstances would appear favourable for the assumption by the Queensland Government of the control of a large native population owning a territory not required, and, to a great extent, at least not suited, for the occupation and labour of European settlers. It has been stated in the press that one reason for which some persons in Queensland desire the annexation of New Guinea is the facility which would thereby be afforded for obtaining a large supply of coloured labour for the sugar plantations without going beyond the limits of the Colony. It is no doubt generally understood that the Natives of New Guinea would not willingly accept or be suitable for labour engagements at a distance from their shores, but the fact that the suggestion has been made indicates a special difficulty which might present itself if the request of the Colonial Government were complied with.

6 Her Majesty’s Government have not failed to give due attention to the representations made by the Governments of New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia in support of the action taken by your Government. Those Governments do not, as I understand, definitely endorse the proposal that the island should form part of Queensland, nor do they undertake to share the expenses which might be entailed by any attempt to govern it, but they express in general terms a desire that it should be brought under British rule. Such an expression of opinion has, necessarily, much weight with Her Majesty’s Government, but it does not indicate any substantial advance towards the more effective settlement of a question of this nature. The affairs of the Pacific Ocean, and the political relations of the Australian Colonies with adjacent places and powers, are matters of the highest importance to those Colonies, and require to be dealt with on broad and clearly defined principles, and by the united action of the Colonies. Her Majesty’s Government regret that it should be necessary from time to time to refuse assent to proposals coming from individual Colonies for the assumption of large and serious responsibilities in regard to places and questions not specially concerning those of Her Majesty’s subjects who live in other parts of the empire; and I trust the time is now not distant when, in respect of such questions, (if not for other purposes of government,) the Australasian Colonies will effectively combine together, and provide the cost of carrying out any policy which after mature consideration they may unite in recommending, and which Her Majesty’s Government may think it right and expedient to adopt.

7 In the meantime Her Majesty’s Government are of opinion that they must continue to decline proposals for large annexations of territory adjacent to Australia, in the absence of sufficient proof of the necessity of such measures. In the case of New Guinea there is already in existence a jurisdiction which may be made to suffice for immediate exigencies. The powers of the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific extend to that island, and if the Colony of Queensland, with or without assistance from other Colonies, is prepared to provide a reasonable annual sum to meet the cost of placing one or more Deputies of the High Commissioner on the coast, Her Majesty’s Government will be willing to take steps for strengthening the naval force on the Australian station so as to enable Her Majesty’s ships to be more constantly present than hitherto in that part of the Pacific. A protectorate thus gradually established over the coast tribes would be capable of meeting the principal requirements of the case for some time to come, and would be free from the grave objections to which, as I have shown, the course now urged upon Her Majesty’s Government is open.

I have, &c.
Signed DERBY

SOURCE: Further Correspondence Respecting New Guinea, C-3691,
London, 1883, pp. 22-24

8 Under The Western Pacific Order in Council, 1877, as amended.

D11 McIlwraith in Defence of the Queensland Annexation

Alfred Deakin, himself an advocate of British control of the Western Pacific, described McIlwraith as "...a man of action, capable and resolute". Comparing him to Griffith, who replaced McIlwraith as Premier of Queensland later in 1883, Deakin wrote:

"Sir Thomas was a man of business, stout, florid, choleric, curt and Cromwellian; Griffith, the leading barrister of his Colony, was lean, ascetic, cold, clear, collected and acidulated."  

In the following memorandum, McIlwraith set out his defence of the Queensland annexation of New Guinea. The memorandum is dated 10 July 1883.

His Excellency the Administrator of the Government in Council
His Excellency the Administrator of the Government, at the instance of the Honourable the Colonial Secretary, lays before the Council the following Memorandum by the Premier on the refusal of the Imperial Government to confirm the annexation of New Guinea, and recommends that the same be approved:

MEMORANDUM by the Premier of Queensland on the refusal

and was submitted to the Administrator at the meeting of the Queensland Executive Council held at Government House in Brisbane on 17 July 1883. It was subsequently forwarded to the Colonial Office.

1 The Federal Story, Melbourne, 1944, p. 9
2 Ibid., p. 10
3 This memorandum was written before the preceding despatch was sent from the Colonial Office to Queensland, but after the news of the refusal to ratify the Queensland annexation had reached the colony.

4 Correspondence Respecting New Guinea And Other Islands, C-3863, London, 1884, p. 25
5 Ibid., p. 24
of the Imperial Government to confirm the annexation of New Guinea.

The decision arrived at by Her Majesty's Government in reference to the annexation of New Guinea seems to me to justify some decided and concerted action on the part of the Australian Colonies. It is scarcely necessary to refer at any length to the previous correspondence on this subject, or to the repeated representations in connexion with it, which have been made to the Imperial Government.

It seems to me right that reference should be made to the various reasons assigned for this refusal. In 1875, Lord Carnarvon, while not discouraging the idea of extensive annexation, assigned as one reason why he could not act on the representations of the Australian Colonies, that the British tax-payer could not and would not bear the expenditure.6

Lord Derby advances the same reason now. He adds to this other reasons—the enormous extent of the territory, the unknown character of the interior, and the hostility of the natives. These objections may be easily combated. The expense need not be great, and we now know that the Australian Colonies will undertake this expense, or share it with Her Majesty's Government, if required to do so. As for the natives, the Dutch have not interfered with the aborigines in that part of New Guinea claimed by them, and their claims cost them nothing. They held the country as against any other Power. There would be no difficulty in our doing single-handed, in that part of New Guinea contiguous to our shores, a great deal more than the Dutch have done during the last fifty years in the North-Western portion of the Island. Queensland has simply been desirous that New Guinea should not fall into the hands of a foreign power, and that the requisite authority should be exercised over those adventurers who frequent the shores of that island. Experience in Torres Straits has already proved valuable in this respect. The 'beachcombers' who frequented the islands of Murray and Darnley have taken themselves off since the annexation of these islands to Queensland territory. What was effected in Torres Straits could have been carried out with perfect ease on the mainland of New Guinea. All that was required was the acceptance of the proclamation. I still think that it ought to have been accepted, and I hope that the Australian Colonies will, by their several and united representations, urge upon Her Majesty's Government a reconsideration of their decision.

But there can be no doubt that the refusal to annex New Guinea, together with the possible acquisition by foreign powers of some of the Pacific Islands contiguous to Australia, does raise very serious questions intimately connected with the future interests of the Australasian Colonies. If Her Majesty's Government does not feel that the annexation of New Guinea, or of the islands adjacent to Australia, is of so much importance to the empire as large as it is to the Australasian Colonies, that some means be devised by which those islands may be held and governed for the benefit of the Australian people. The step taken by the Queensland Government in causing a formal claim to be made over New Guinea, was done in the interests not only of Queensland, but of all the Australian Colonies, and in the interests of the natives of New Guinea, who ought to be protected by some lawful authority from contact with the lawless adventurers who are too often a law to themselves. That also which is for the advantage of this country, is surely for the advantage of Great Britain. The middle island of New Zealand was won for

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McIlwraith in Defence of the Queensland Annexation

Great Britain by a timely act of annexation. In the last century, similar timely acts of annexation won large portions of America for the Anglo-Saxon race. Why then should not Queensland be permitted, with the sanction of Her Majesty's Government, to assist in carrying out this national and beneficial policy? If, then, the real reason for the refusal to annex New Guinea be, not the expense, but the difficulty of providing for the government and protection of the native races, might not this be met by the sanction and authority of the united colonies? Some justification, it has been often said, is required for federation—may it not be found in this exigency.

I submit that a case has arisen which may be made use of to call into existence the higher forms of government required to give effect to this policy of annexation. The Australian Colonies are now united by sentiments of filial regard and devotion to the British Empire, though they are not represented in the British Legislature. The Imperial Parliament dominates the whole Empire, and the Colonies are not represented in that Parliament, though their interests may be vitally affected by its decisions. It is not possible to give authoritative effect to the wishes of the people of Australia in anything beyond their own domestic interests, except through the intervention of Her Majesty's Government.

The circumstances of the present case seem to point to a necessity for combination among the Australian Colonies—a combination for both legislative and executive purposes. Australian interests are involved in securing the peaceful and progressive supremacy of Australian influences in the adjoining seas. In order to effect this it is necessary that there should not only be sentiments held in common, but that a form of government should be provided capable of giving expression to these sentiments. The federation of the Australian Colonies may thus be forwarded. Here is work for the united Colonies to do, if they can be got to unite. I suggest that a convention of delegates should be held to discuss the basis upon which a Federal Government could be constituted.

This, I believe, was the form adopted in Canada, previous to the constitution of the Dominion Parliament. May not this example be followed here? The Dominion Government has added largely to the influence and the national integrity of Canada. It seems probable that a similar form of government adapted to the special requirements of Australia would give life to national aspirations here, without repressing the autonomous Governments of the respective Colonies. To it would properly belong the discussion of such measures as are necessary for the consolidation and security of Australian interests, as well as for the government of these outlying islands in the Pacific, which at present are not claimed by any civilised power.

I think, therefore, that there ought, in the first place, to be representations from all the Australian Colonies, urging upon Her Majesty's Government a reconsideration of their decision as regards New Guinea; and, in the next place, Her Majesty's Government should be invited to move in the direction of providing for a form of federal government suitable for the Australian Colonies. I propose that this memorandum should be embodied in an Executive Minute and forwarded both to Her Majesty's Government and to the Governments of the respective Australian Colonies for their consideration, and for such action as they may deem expedient.

T. McIlwraith

July 10, 1883

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6C-1566, op. cit., pp. 85-86
Intervention in the Pacific

The Council deliberate and advise, as recommended, immediate action.

A. V. DRURY,
Clerk of the Executive Council

SOURCE Correspondence Respecting New Guinea And Other Islands, C-3863, London, 1884, pp. 25-6

AFTER THE QUEENSLAND COUP: TOWARDS A COMPROMISE:
DOCUMENTS D12 to D17

After the Queensland coup in 1883, and despite Colonial Office disapproval of the form and manner of Queensland intervention, the movement for the annexation of New Guinea gained momentum. The Colonial Office did not close the door on Imperial involvement in New Guinea and the Western Pacific. (D10) Gradually a formula was worked out involving the unified action and policies of the Australasian Governments, and the firm financial commitment from one or more of them, as the twin conditions for Imperial action in New Guinea.1 (D15; D17) Meanwhile, public pressure continued, particularly in Eastern Australia, for the annexation of New Guinea, and other islands in the Western Pacific. (D12; D14)

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D12  The Melbournians Demand Intervention in the Pacific, 1883

The following speech was delivered by Mr Justice Higinbotham at a public meeting in the Melbourne Town Hall on 16 July 1883. The report is taken from the Melbourne Argus of the following day. The Mayor of Melbourne presided at the meeting, and was supported on the platform by a number of members of the Victorian Parliament and some clergymen, in addition to Higinbotham.

The annexation resolution moved by Higinbotham was carried unanimously. Further motions were passed, supporting the action of the Victorian Parliament in agreeing to contribute to the expenses of the annexation of New Guinea and other Pacific islands, and requesting that the resolutions passed at the meeting be forwarded through the Premier of Victoria to the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the other Australian Governments.2 This was done.2

Born in Dublin in 1826, George Higinbotham was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Lincoln’s Inn. Emigrating to Melbourne in 1854, he practised successfully as a barrister, edited the Argus for nearly three years, and was Attorney-General in the McCulloch Ministry from 1863 to 1868.

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1 Derby to the Governors of the Australasian Colonies, 9 May 1884, Further Correspondence Respecting New Guinea And Other Colonies, C-3839, London, 1884, pp. 34-35

2 C-3863, op. cit., pp. 16-17

3 Enclosed with Normanby to Colonial Office, 30 July 1883, C-3863, op. cit., p. 9

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At the time of this meeting Higinbotham was a Supreme Court Judge, having been appointed to the Bench in 1880. He had a long career of opposition to Colonial Office interference in Australian affairs. As a result, after he became Chief Justice in 1886, he was not appointed to the vacant Lieutenant Governorship of Victoria, an office normally held by the Victorian Chief Justice for the time being, or his immediate predecessor. In 1890, at the time of the Maritime Strike, he outraged conservative opinion by giving £50 to the strike leaders with a promise of £10 per week while

‘... the United Trades are awaiting compliance with their reasonable request for a conference with the employers.’ 3

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... Mr Justice Higinbotham, who was received with loud and continued applause, said, Mr Mayor, ladies and gentlemen, I have been requested to move the following resolution:-

‘That in the opinion of this meeting it is essential to the future well-being of the Australasian colonies, and to that of the native races of the islands themselves, that New Guinea and the Pacific Islands lying between New Guinea and Fiji, including the New Hebrides, should be annexed to the British Crown.’ (applause)

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3 The Australian Encyclopaedia, op. cit., sub. nom., Higinbotham