

## Conclusion

This thesis began with an analysis of a new State movement at Grafton in 1915. Grafton had a history of separation agitations dating back to the 1850s; these agitations were grievance orientated, local and unsustainable. The agitation in 1915 was shown to be typical of the earlier periods. An analysis of the earlier separatist agitations at Moreton Bay, on the Northern Tablelands and on the Clarence identified the factors which most facilitated successful and unsuccessful agitation. The factors for the successful agitation at Moreton Bay were: purpose, possibility, strong, widespread and united support, and endorsement from the decision makers; the factors which characterised unsuccessful agitations were confusion of purpose, lack of unity, and opposition from the decision makers.

Another movement, centred on Tamworth, commenced in 1920, led by Victor Thompson. The 1920 agitation was not just another example of localised separatist agitation based on local grievances, but was a regional movement which had longer term goals and strategies. The movement was initiated by the press and was supported by many of the region's political leaders at the three levels of government, but was not strongly supported at the grass roots. The 1921 Armidale Convention revealed that there was general agreement among the delegates that there should be a New State, so the Movement was not just a cynical exercise to secure government concessions.

The Northern New State Movement had an element of Sydney-bashing; this was typical of the contemporary agrarian discontent which found expression in the growth of the Australian Country Party and the Progressive Party in NSW. The emergence of these parties was discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Rural discontent in northern NSW found expression in two political phenomena - the emergence of country parties and the emergence of a new State movement. In a sense the two phenomena were twins in that they emerged from the common womb of discontent; but they had different lives and aspirations.

The 1921 Armidale Convention confirmed that future New State activity would have a double thrust. The New-Staters would seek a constitutional amendment at the proposed Federal Convention, and they would petition the State Parliament, fully expecting the petition to be rejected, thereby giving added weight to their claim in the Federal sphere where hopes were high for a successful outcome. The Armidale Convention showed that the Movement would have battles to fight. The boundary issue was contentious, because there were narrow

sectional and personal interests involved; local rivalries could tear the Movement apart, so it would have to maintain cohesion. The Movement would have to generate grass-roots support if it was to be taken seriously by 'the decision makers' - the NSW Parliament and the Federal Parliament. Above all else, the Movement would have to devise strategies to overcome the structural impediments, especially the Federal Constitution.

An identifiable movement for a New State had emerged in 1920, led by young and inexperienced State and Federal politicians, and supported by the regional press. There was local organizational support across the New State area, but the grass roots support was significantly less than the leaders expected. A political and constitutional structure had to be dealt with if the movement's aims were to be achieved. Rather than facilitating the creation of the New State, Section 124 was an impediment which had to be overcome. Short term goals and strategies had to be adopted to achieve New State aims. Strategies and the pursuit of goals could help to strengthen the movement at its grass roots by showing that something was being done and something was being achieved. Striving for the short term goals flushed out the movement's opposition, either confirming what previously had been assumed, or showing that the movement could not be non-party political. The movement's political leaders were inexperienced in implementing strategies and in setting useful short term goals, and had to confront other political realities. More often than not, the movement's political leaders were ill-prepared and were outmanoeuvred. The Northern New State Movement was a political movement, but aimed to be non-party political in an attempt to secure support from all parties; this stance, however, was naive, because the Labor Party and the Nationalists were not supportive. Accordingly, the New-Staters had to devise strategies to secure the numbers in the parliaments.

The New-Staters' principal thrust between 1920 and 1930 had been for an amendment of Section 124 of the Commonwealth Constitution. Therefore, the initial focus of separatist attention was the Federal Parliament in Melbourne. The early 1920s were heady days for the Movement; it seemed like they were being taken seriously by the highest political forum in the country, and naive enthusiasm exceeded realistic expectations. The 1921 Armidale Convention had led some of the New-Staters to believe that any thing and every thing was possible, and they had set their sights at a major revision of the Constitution. Their enthusiasm was tempered after complex political structures and diverse political agendas were encountered. By 1930, after ten years of unproductive effort in the Federal arena,

the New-Staters discovered that it would be less difficult to secure the New State via the existing Section 124, than by seeking to amend it.

Two Federal politicians were significant in the separatist movement. The 1915 agitation had resulted in the emergence of Earle Page, a New State advocate whose political rise saw him well-placed to promote separatist agitation and to give it a political focus. There was an unresolved tension in Page: was he a true believer or merely a pragmatic opportunist who saw the political advantages of running with the New State issue? While in Opposition, Page had strongly advocated New States, so his supporters and opponents expected him to take definite steps in that direction, but when he was in Government he was singularly inactive in the matter in the Parliament, even though the issue remained a plank on the ACP's platform. While in Government, Page could not force the issue, because it was strongly opposed by the Nationalists, and he was not prepared to rupture the coalition and lose Government. For Page, the pragmatic opportunist, the New State issue was useful for making suggestions when in Opposition, and for electoral victories, which would allow him to achieve other goals while awaiting a time - if ever there would be a time - when the New-Staters would have the numbers. Given that the ALP and the Nationalists were opposed to New States, Page never had the numbers.

Victor Thompson - "the high priest of the new States crusade" - had been elected to the Federal Parliament at the December 1922 elections. He was enthusiastic and energetic but lacked political skills. In particular, there was little evidence that he understood the political difficulties or the hurdles to be overcome. Thompson's role in the New State agitation in the Federal arena was superbly summed up by Hughes when Percy Stewart was attacking the ACP for abandoning its former principles. Stewart made an exception in the case of Thompson, saying he "had continued to press his New State ideas". Hughes cracked: "Yes, like a hen with a china egg".<sup>1</sup> Thompson was sincere, dedicated and tenacious, but totally unproductive. This interpretation differs from Harman's; although he acknowledged that Thompson was a "devoted idealist", his newspaper's involvement in the movement was seen by Harman as a cynical exercise, initiated and promoted by the *Tamworth Daily Observer / Northern Daily Leader*, to boost its "circulation in country areas".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with C.L.A. Abbott, 8 August 1956, Graham Papers, NL, MS 8471/40.

<sup>2</sup> G.S. Harman, 'New State Agitation in Northern New South Wales, 1920-1929', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 63, pt. 1, June 1977, pp. 29, 36.

In the final analysis, the fundamental reason why the New-Staters failed in the Federal arena was that they never got over the first hurdle, they never secured majority support in the Parliament, even though the ACP was in the Government.

In 1921, however, it was all ahead of them. Despite the focus on the Federal arena, the New-Staters could not ignore the importance of the NSW legislature. Section 124 of the Commonwealth Constitution allows a new State to be formed only with the consent of the parent State's Parliament, but securing that consent was a formidable task for the New-Staters. They needed a majority in the NSW Parliament, which clearly revealed during the 1922 debate that it would not give its consent. The New-Staters described Section 124's provisions of as "the lion in the path". Throughout the 1920s, the New-Staters hung their hopes on amending this provision, and their various approaches to the NSW Parliament were mostly ploys to strengthen the case for a constitutional amendment. At most, the New-Staters expected only two concessions from the NSW Parliament, a boundary commission (to define the New State's boundaries), and a referendum within the defined area. The New-Staters believed that if they could achieve these concessions, then everything else could be secured via the proposed constitutional amendment. Between April 1921 and December 1923 the New-Staters made three attempts in the NSW Parliament to initiate the separation process.

There could be no boundary commission and referendum unless the NSW Parliament could be won over or coerced. The New-Staters would need the support of a majority in the Parliament. The NSW general election in March 1920 had brought the Progressives into the Parliament as a third party, and the next elections in March 1922 resulted in their holding the balance of power. The genesis of the Progressives ran parallel with the origins of the revived New State Movement with similar aspirations. The 1921 Armidale Convention had resolved that the Movement would "recognise no political party in or out of Parliament", because they were after the support of every political body.<sup>3</sup> So, initially, the Movement was officially non-party political. On the other hand, the Movement resolved "to support only those candidates at Federal and State elections who declared themselves in favour of New States".<sup>4</sup> The Movement would endorse any candidates who would further the cause. The problem for the New-Staters was that neither Labor nor the Nationalists would actively support the New State.

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<sup>3</sup> *Official Summary of Proceedings of Convention held at Armidale on April 19, 20 and 21, 1921*, Tamworth, 1921, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Minutes, NSM Executive Meeting at Lismore, 5 July 1921, Minute Book II.

Although the Movement was officially non-party political, only the Progressives in State politics actually supported the Movement. Labor had its own policy for subdivision and did not support the creation of another sovereign State. At the 1922 elections, the NSW Nationalists said they would allow New States to be discussed, but did nothing practical to help the cause. The formation of New States was a plank on the Progressives' platform, and the party was committed to the New State cause, but it was just one of several items on their platform, and initially the party was not prepared to bring down the Government on the issue, for fear of repercussions at the ensuing election. Bruxner supported the Fuller Government until the Armidale Convention in 1923, when he was pressured to bring down the Government if it would not agree to a boundary commission. By the end of 1923 the New-Staters were identified with and dependent upon the Progressives in State politics. As Aitkin concluded, the Progressives had in effect become the parliamentary wing of the New State Movement, but the Progressives had a broader political agenda than just separation.<sup>5</sup> Harman claimed that "there were no formal ties" between the Movement and the Country Party, and noted that the Movement tried to be "non-partisan".<sup>6</sup> This is a limited interpretation. Although he noted that the Nationalists were "unsympathetic" to the New States issue and the Labor Party "was antagonistic", he did not make the connection to show that the 1922 New State motion in the NSW Parliament clearly showed that the Nationalists and the ALP would not support the New-Staters, but the Progressives did, and therefore the New-Staters became dependent on the Progressives during 1923.

Bruxner and Drummond were prominent New-Staters. It seems they were committed to the New State cause, but, impeded by Section 124, neither was prepared to risk his political career on this single issue. Their commitment to their party was stronger than their stance for the movement. Bruxner's leadership of his party complicated his involvement in the movement, and Drummond wanted more than the New State, he also wanted significant constitutional amendments. Committed to the New State, but unable to secure it because of "the lion in the path", Bruxner and Drummond set about fulfilling their other political aims, especially northern development.

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<sup>5</sup> D.A. Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: A Study of Organization and Survival*, Canberra, 1972, ch. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Harman, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-7.

The main achievement of the 1920-23 period - securing the Cohen Royal Commission - was a hollow victory because the New-Staters lost control of the terms of reference. The Royal Commission was a testing time for the New-Staters; their credibility was tested, and the leading New-Staters were tested with regard to their political skills in a fairly tough arena. On both counts the test was failed. Not only were the New-Staters tactically incompetent, but the movement was shown to be weak. It had panacea characteristics; there was support, but when it came to specifics, many northerners began to re-think the issues and to see a cynicism in the movement. Nonetheless, it was a movement, and its supporters were impassioned. There were some true believers, and they sustained the movement from 1925 to 1930.

The Cohen Royal Commission had forced the New-Staters to articulate their case, and had brought into the open the opposition to the movement. The Commission showed the movement was essentially a limited populist movement based more on passion than logic; on panacea more than solution; and on assertion without evidence. The degree of support or antagonism was such that the Commission was unable to make a conclusion. The testing time, however, showed that, for all its weaknesses, the movement had credibility for many northerners, and presented a believable solution to general and localized grievances and rural discontent. The Report concluded that New States were "neither practical nor desirable", and recommended that there should be an extension of the system of local government and there should be further decentralization of administration. Despite the Cohen Royal Commission's adverse report, the New State Movement would live to fight another day.

By 1930, the twins who had emerged from the common womb of discontent - the country parties and a new State movement - had lived their different lives and aspirations. The Progressive Party (which changed its name to the Country Party in 1925) had worked within the NSW political structure. The Northern New State Movement was a different political movement, because it was uncompromising and radical; it wanted to separate from NSW. Between 1920 and 1925, the Northern New State Movement had tried to use Section 124 to secure the New State, but had discovered the constitutional provision was an impediment rather than a facilitator. After 1925, the Movement stopped knocking on the NSW Parliament's door. Throughout the decade the New-Staters had sought a constitutional amendment, but no amendment was secured.

Meanwhile, the Country Party's less radical approach had triumphed. After the 1927 election, the NSW Government could no longer be depicted as offering

sops to quell separatist discontent; rather, the Country Party was in the Government, and well-placed Country Party Ministers started winning concessions, the two most important for northern NSW being the Armidale Teachers' College and work commencing on the Guyra to Dorrigo Railway. The conditional support strategy used by the Progressives between 1920 and 1925 gave way in 1927 to the coalition strategy, and it seemed to be the way forward. The Indian Summer of achievement, however, came to an end in 1930; Labor was returned to Government and the Country Party was returned to Opposition, where it again became frustrated. By 1931, the north was aroused by a new agitation and the call to separate from NSW. The new movement's efforts included a call for a revolution. Although the 1935 report of the Nicholas Commission defined boundaries for a new State in Northern NSW, no new State was formed. The 1930-35 agitation is another story and an analysis of the issues must be left to another time.

The call to separate was a catch-cry based on claims of perceived injustices. There was a clamour for the right of self-government stemming from dissatisfaction with distant State/Colonial governments. Separatists claimed there had been a lack of resources for their regional development. They felt politically powerless, unable to control their elected government and to direct the allocation of resources. They felt particularly constrained about not obtaining a greater return for their primary production. Such resentment was intensified when disasters such as floods, droughts and depressions reduced the earning capacity in rural districts. The call for separation became a panacea. There can be no doubt, for instance, that the overwhelming coalition victory at the NSW election in 1932 was due to the promise of new States as remedies for perceived grievances.

Yet, for all the agitation and rhetoric, separatists never convinced the general populace that the expense of the paraphernalia of an additional parliament and its bureaucracy could be justified in a country which was perceived to be over-governed. The movement was a reflection of the age old tension of the country versus the city and found expression in the ideology of countrymindedness, which had emerged by the turn of the century. This ideology helped to unite country towns and hinterland rural zones with a common sense of grievance which, in various forms, persists.

The agitation for separation from the Sydney government was a protest about the allocation of resources; it was economically based. Thus, it was different from current movements in places such as Canada and Spain, where separation is being sought because of ethnic, cultural and religious reasons. Agitation for

separation from the Sydney-based government is as old as white settlement (which commenced in what we know today as northern NSW in the 1830s), and has continued to the present day. As recently as September 1996 there was a call at Tamworth for the New State to be formed. In 1995 there were two agitations, one at Moree, for the State's administration to be moved to that sparsely populated inland centre from the highly populated coastal area, and another agitation at Glen Innes, where the Mayor advocated moving the Queensland border southwards so as to include the towns of northern NSW. So, the movement which many people thought had died a natural death by 1971 after failures at the 1967 referendum and the State elections in 1968 and 1971, continues to raise its head from time to time.<sup>7</sup> This thesis, therefore, is relevant to our times, and offers guidelines to enable distinctions to be made between separation cries when they are local, grievance orientated and concession seeking protests, and movements which are genuinely aimed at securing the New State. In particular, this thesis outlines the constitutional difficulties which exasperated New-Staters between 1915 and 1971, and which modern day New-Staters will still confront.

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<sup>7</sup> Keith Richmond, 'The New England New State Movement: Electoral Activity in 1968 and 1971', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, No. 23, March, 1980, pp. 101-111.

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