

specifications, unavoidable delay has resulted. The first and second proofs of the draft of the contract have been received, and have been carefully considered. Suggested alterations and amendments have been cabled to the Agent-General, and I have every reason to believe that the contract for a very satisfactory service will be signed almost immediately.

Arrangements are being made by which a weekly report of prices current for produce in London will be cabled direct to the Department of Industries and Commerce. These reports will on receipt be promptly circulated throughout the colony.

The House will be asked to make provision this session for the appointment of three Trade Representatives—one in South Africa, one in Great Britain, and one in Australia. Their services can also be availed of for the purpose of helping the tourist traffic to our colony, particularly from England and Australia.

RAILWAYS AND ROADS CONSTRUCTION.

Substantial progress has been made with the several railway-construction works in hand during the late financial year, the expenditure thereon having been greater than for many years past.

The expenditure during last year practically absorbed the whole amount voted for the purpose, the unexpended balance on the vote being only £813. I am not aware of any precedent for the expenditure on railway-construction so closely approximating to the amount voted for the purpose. An examination of the votes and expenditure for railway-construction purposes during the last twenty years shows unexpended balances at the end of the year ranging from £16,931 to £751,441, the smallest being in 1895–96, and the largest in 1884–85.

Honourable members will recollect that the total of the detailed authorisations was £602,024, but the amount voted for expenditure during the financial year only amounted to £561,524.

The progress made was especially marked in the case of the trunk lines, as is shown by the following table, giving particulars of the actual amounts voted for same, and the amounts expended thereon—first exclusive of permanent-way materials, and secondly with the value of the permanent-way materials issued to the line added:—

Line of Railway.	Actual Amount of Vote.	Expenditure on Construction.	Expenditure on Construction with Value of Permanent-way Materials added.
	£	£	£
North of Auckland	27,980	27,545	41,874
North Island Main Trunk Railway	149,236	155,979	184,561
Blenheim-Waipara	41,973	48,382	65,824
Otago Central	93,271	93,779	103,273

The North of Auckland line includes both the Whangarei-Grahamtown and the Helensville Northwards Railways.

Similarly with regard to the construction of roads under the Department of Roads and Bridges. I find that £337,643 was voted, and £338,669 was spent. My colleague was therefore obliged to ask for authority to charge "Unauthorised" with £1,026 to cover the excess of expenditure which has taken place. The work done comprises 579 miles of engineering survey, 527 miles of dray-road, 268 miles of bridle-track, and 134 bridges (of a total length of 13,221 ft.) constructed; also 793 miles of dray-road and 83 miles of bridle-road improved, and 2,578 miles of dray-road and 1,247 miles of bridle-track maintained. In addition to this sum £47,906 was spent by the Mines Department for roads on goldfields, or a total expenditure (including cost of supervision) upon roads and bridges of £406,108.

WORKING RAILWAYS.

I desire to offer a few remarks concerning that great national asset, the railways. People have become so accustomed to the daily running of the railway system of the colony that very few take the trouble to institute a comparison between the present means of locomotion and those which existed prior to the