

as the head of the Government, and as the Minister in control of primary education. I do not intend to take up much of your time. My colleague the Hon. Mr. Russell has devoted himself with a great deal of energy to the duty of evolving something for your consideration, and we shall await the result of your deliberations—your recommendations—with very great interest indeed, and we hope that what you will evolve will be some improvement upon the existing condition of affairs. You may take it that the Government will give the very widest and best assistance possible to carrying into law what your decisions may include. I am sorry that my colleagues and myself will not be able to stay longer with you, as we have a great deal of very important business to transact, but if required I shall be only too glad to meet you again. Mr. Russell will now take on the presidency of your gathering, and I wish you very great success in the operations you are about to undertake. (Applause.)

The Hon. G. W. Russell, Minister of Internal Affairs, then took the chair as President.

THE PRESIDENT'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS.

The PRESIDENT (the Hon. G. W. Russell) then delivered the following address :—

PRELIMINARY AND HISTORICAL.

GENTLEMEN,—

I have to thank you for coming to Wellington for the purpose of taking part in this Conference, which is probably the largest and most important that has yet been held in New Zealand.

The subject we have to deal with is the reform of local government in the Dominion. It is one of vast importance, because local government comes home to the people day by day, and reaches them in their daily life to a far greater degree than does the General (or Central) Government. I fully recognize the work that is being done by the local governing bodies of the country—work that is done without any reward, and often with but little recognition in the way of honour. And yet it is the work upon which has depended the expansion of settlement, the pushing-back of the confines of civilization, the development of the interior, and the general progress of the people of New Zealand.

Upon such an occasion as this one cannot help glancing back at the record of past days. History tells us how first this country obtained Responsible Government, and how subsequently, through the genius and statesmanship of Sir George Grey, the provinces were established. Although the provinces then were isolated centres of settlement, without the constant communication by rail and post and telegraph of modern days, the Provincial Governments did splendid work in developing the different sections of New Zealand to the extent and in the manner they did. Supported as they were by the Land Fund—their revenue largely provided by the sales of the State lands, which were passed over to them—they were able to do excellent work in their day and generation. They left a record of good service, and the names of many of the Superintendents hold a high and honoured place in the history of the country. One cannot on such an occasion as this forget to mention the names of men like Grey, Williamson, and Whitaker, of Auckland; Carrington, of Taranaki; Ormond, of Hawke's Bay; Featherston and Fitzherbert, of Wellington; Rolleston and Moorhouse, of Canterbury; Macandrew, of Otago; and Menzies, of Southland; besides others connected with the smaller Provinces of Marlborough, Nelson, and Westland.

But in due time conditions changed. The provinces were found to be proving a disadvantage in the government of the country rather than a means of progress, and in 1876 they were abolished and the county system was established. That system has been in force ever since. It was intended as a means of providing for the government of the rural districts of the Dominion, side by side with the municipal form of government provided for the towns and cities, while the Town Boards were established as a means of leading up to municipalities in growing centres.