

The Board which it is proposed to set up here, according to the Bill, is to consist of the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Under-Secretary for Internal Affairs, the Under-Secretary for Crown Lands, the Under-Secretary for Public Works, and three other persons appointed by the Governor.

I propose to eliminate the Under-Secretary for Internal Affairs from the Board, because I think that officer should be the Secretary of the Board, and to substitute for him the Valuer-General. With regard to the non-official members, who would in the ordinary course be appointed by the Governor, you will recognize that men who are specially suitable would be selected for the position—men who had taken an active part in local government, either as members of Parliament or of local bodies, or as Civil servants.

When we consider the enormous powers that are vested in the Governor—such as dealing with division, union, and grouping of local authorities, the granting or refusing the formation of boroughs, settling disputes between conflicting local bodies, determining as to the erection of fresh bodies, and the multiplicity of other duties that are now cast upon the Minister of Internal Affairs—you will see the importance of his being able to refer these matters to the decision of a body of experienced men, whose business it will be to form a decisive opinion upon the figures, facts, and evidence placed before them.

I think, therefore, you will see that instead of the establishment of the Local Government Board being, as alleged, a tendency towards centralization, it will be the opposite, and the means of doing incalculable good. It will certainly be a democratic measure.

One of the functions that may have to be placed upon that Board will be the consideration of the question of town-planning. When the Town-planning Bill was before the House last year it was suggested that a Local Government Board should be established for such purposes—and I know of no question that is more important in consideration of the future of New Zealand than a proper system of town-planning—and I feel perfectly sure that if this question could be handed over to the consideration of a Local Government Board, subject to the undoubted rights and responsibilities of the localities affected, it would be far better than that it should be left in the hands of the Governor in Council.

One very great advantage of the establishment of the Local Government Board that is proposed in the Bill would be that it would be its duty to present to the House an annual report on local government, dealing with all phases of this most important subject; and in my opinion this would be a matter of great advantage not only to Parliament, but also to the whole of the local bodies throughout the country. The various tables of figures, statistics, &c., being grouped together in the one paper would provide a mass of information immediately available to the local bodies throughout the country, which would be of great use alike to members of local bodies and the public generally.

Another advantage would be that to this body could be relegated some responsibility, at any rate, with regard to the payment of subsidies upon works that were to be prosecuted by the local bodies, but which had a legitimate claim upon the State for assistance; but to this phase I have already referred.

If, after this explanation, the Conference is of opinion that the Local Government Board proposal is a revolutionary and retrograde measure (as has been frequently asserted at the local conferences for the election of delegates), and if this Conference considers it is better that the powers proposed to be given to the Board should continue to be exercised as hitherto by the Governor in Council, I shall bow to your decision and lay that decision before the Cabinet.

SUGGESTED ALTERATIONS OF THE BILL.

Coming now to the Bill itself, I have to indicate changes that I propose should be made in the Local Government Board. I may say at once that I do not think it would be practicable for the members of the Board to be elected. The responsibility for the appointment of the unofficial members must rest with the Government.