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Fair Play

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 30, 1898.

How About that Report?

ONE of the very first subjects which should be taken in hand by the press of the colony during the first months of the new year, and discussed with all possible fullness and freedom, is the question of the defences of the colony. With six months' handling—without gloves—by the press, there will then be some fair reason to hope that the new Parliament will pay special attention to this important matter, and will force the Government, whether it likes the job or not, to put our defences in a proper state of efficiency. The present state of affairs is a disgrace to all concerned, but the largest share of the responsibility undoubtedly lies with the Government. The Premier humbugged the House last session most shamefully over the report sent in by Colonel Fox, a report which was, in its way, one of the most admirably compiled and most valuable state documents ever seen in the colony. But for some reason or other Richard the Fourth does not like Colonel Fox, and what is more he didn't like the report. That being the case, careless alike of the efficiency of the volunteer service and of the colonial defences, regardless of all claims of the duty he owed both to the officer in question and to the House, he mercilessly burked all proper discussion of the report, snubbed the officer, and held over the question of the defences altogether. Perhaps he may have taken this course with the mistaken idea that thereby he would gain the goodwill of the volunteers and their officers, but we fancy it was more to soften the feelings and pander to the personal prejudices of certain members whose finer feelings the outspoken Colonel, scorning all political humbug, and above any base toadying to the powers that be, had rudely offended by telling them some wholesome, if unpleasant, truths. Others have it that the Premier shelved the report because he knew that its adoption would involve the expenditure of a good round sum of money. Now the value of public

money expended, is, in the Seddonian mind, in exact proportion to the number of votes to be got, and Richard the Fourth preferred to keep a few thousand "co-op." men employed in useless and very costly public works in constituencies where the Government candidate was weak, to spending it in putting the defence of the colony in better order. Whatever may have been the cause, the result is the same. The volunteer service is at present in a woefully disorganised and disheartened condition, and the colonial defences are in a state which can only truthfully be described as chaotic. And this is what we are confronted with at a time when the European air is so full of rumours of war, when the British Government have promised to materially increase the strength of the navy, at a time when the Victorian Commandant, Major-General Tulloch, alleges that the colonial commerce is at the mercy of a foreign foe—at a time when more than ever previously, it is necessary that we should be fully prepared for the most serious contingencies. We like Mr. Seddon for many things, and we give him and his Ministry a general support, but we cannot blind ourselves to the fact that the apathy and negligence of the Premier over this question of our defences is well-nigh criminal. Mr. Seddon, like many ill-educated and self-made men, is very narrow at times, full of petty prejudice and of dislike of advice. He has, moreover, of late shown signs of becoming intolerably autocratic, and of aiming at playing the part of Dictator or Chief Boss of the colony. We can tell him plainly that the colonists will not stand this foolish assumption of an infallibility which so ill befits him, and that he may go too far in his bumptious indifference to the opinions of the press and the public. Most certainly his policy of deliberate disregard of defence matters, of snubbing a British officer of high experience, and of shelving a valuable and costly state report, will not receive the commendation of the colonists. We hope, however, to see the matter taken up in real earnest by the daily press of the colony, and to notice the creation and solid growth of a sound public opinion on the subject of our defences, an opinion which Mr. Seddon, who is quite cunning enough to back down when he ever sees which way the wind blows, will not be able—will not dare to disregard. We shall return to the subject of Our Defences in another issue.

Fair Play

A

JOURNAL FOR SENSIBLE MEN & WOMEN

An Unprejudiced New Zealand Weekly.

"FAIR PLAY IS A JEWEL"

PROPRIETORS:
THE FAIR PLAY NEWSPAPER CO. LTD.

PUBLISHERS:
MCKEE AND GAMBLE,
6, CUSTOMHOUSE QUAY, WELLINGTON.

PUBLISHED EVERY FRIDAY.

Cheques, Drafts, etc., and all Business Communications, to be addressed to THE MANAGER. Literary Communications to THE EDITOR.

THE EDITOR will always be glad to receive contributed items, paragraphs, verses, sketches, and short tales on local or colonial topics, social, political, or otherwise.

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The subscription to FAIR PLAY is 15s. per annum, or 7s. 6d. half-yearly, post free, payable in advance, and may be forwarded in stamps.

Alterations of standing advertisements must be sent in not later than Tuesday at noon. The latest time for receiving casual advertisements is Wednesday, 5 p.m., P.O. Box 240, Telephone 709.