

Speech by the Acting-Premier.

PROGRESS OF THE COLONY.

A REMARKABLE IMPROVEMENT.

SUPPLIES FOR SOUTH AFRICA.

THE PARLIAMENTARY PROGRAMME.

PUBLIC WORKS POLICY.

Sir Joseph Ward addressed the electors of Awarua at Winton last Tuesday evening. The Mayor presided, and the Oddfellows' Hall was crowded to the doors. The Acting-Premier was accorded an enthusiastic reception, and applause was frequent throughout the address.

Sir Joseph Ward, after referring to the pleasure he felt at meeting his constituents, said that a remarkable improvement was noticeable on all sides, and it was evident that people were not content with the antiquated condition of things which prevailed in former years, which prevented the power of the State being used for the uplifting of humanity. The gloomy predictions that the colony, as a result of experimental legislation, would gradually drift into a state of chaos, were by no means fulfilled, and we had passed through the budding stages into the full fruition of success and prosperity. America was frequently pointed out as the land of freedom and progress, but most of the inquiries concerning the conditions prevailing in New Zealand came from America. That country was behind us in the use of the State for the well-being of the people. In New Zealand the people owned the railways, the post and telegraph services, and the telephone system, and the State had its own Public Trust Office, Insurance, and Advances to Settlers' Office, not one of which was controlled by the people of the United States of America, where the god of wealth overshadowed almost every one of the great industries upon which the people had to depend for their existence. In regard to State-owned Departments, we were 50 years ahead of the United States, and so far as railways were concerned of England itself.

FINANCE.

The revenue and expenditure for the year ending March 31, 1902, was of a rearming character. The balance of £270,400, considering that remissions in Customs duties, railway charges, and penny post ran into £300,000, could not be regarded as other than a wonderful result. The liabilities for the year were £184,000 or £230,000 less than the previous year. Of course, it was impossible to include all the liabilities when the books were closed, but last year's revenue had to bear an expenditure of £207,000 of liabilities for the preceding year. Naturally, the interest upon loans had increased with increased indebtedness, but it ought to be recognised by all that a great deal of the loan money was remunerative to taxpayers. The Public Works expenditure was undoubtedly high, but they had a great and growing railway service, and it would be disastrous not to give this branch of the industrial life of the colony the attention necessary. The Westinghouse brake had been applied to rolling stock of nearly the whole colony, and the rest would be equipped shortly. The rolling stock had been enormously added to, and the railways were paying over three per cent. interest upon the total moneys expended, and that interest was provided by the people who used the railways. The member for Bruce referred to the one per cent. underwriting upon our loans, but this was the fee fixed by the Stock Exchange. The member also mentioned the old age pensions, but Ministers could not be blamed for the matter to which he alluded, as all claims were investigated by magistrates, and Ministers could not interfere. The member also made a mistake of three millions in the public debt, and said that the public works liabilities were £600,000, whereas they were £218,000. The expenditure

from Public Works Fund was £834,231 more than in the preceding year. The growing tendency to clamour for expenditure must be resisted, and reason should predominate in this connection. It was absurd and fallacious to say that the increase of income tax from £81,031 to £179,000 was due to extra taxation. The same remark applied to Customs taxation. Since 1893-96 the Government had not increased duties, and the growing receipts were due to increased trade, and in spite of enormous reduction in the duties.

THE RAILWAYS.

Sir Joseph went on to deal with the finances, and then came to railways improvements. He said that a new time-table would come into operation on July 1. A reduction of 45 minutes would be made in the Christchurch expresses. The goods service between Invercargill, Riverton, and Nightcaps would be rearranged so as to allow the whole of the settlers in the western district getting stock through to Dunedin in one day.

THE WAR.

After reference to allowances to settlers, which had lowered interest 3 per cent., thus saving £750,000 per annum, the Tourist Department, which had already exerted a good influence, and the Health Department, Sir Joseph alluded to the justice of the war, and the exceeding happiness of its issue, and referring to its commercial side, he said that 202,665 tons of produce had been shipped in 55 steamers, the net value being £1,371,501. Horses worth £45,980, had been purchased in the colony, and £675,574 had been paid to the Defence Department for the pay, equipment, gratuities, horses, forage and transport, so that the total expenditure made in the colony was £2,095,758. The Government had been trying to obtain a direct line of steamers for South Africa, and a tender had been received from the Blue Star Line. After negotiations the Government offered them the service, and the matter was referred to London, where it was receiving the attention of the solicitors for the colony and those for the contractor.

HELP TO THE FARMERS.

A great deal had been done for the farmers. The Government had relieved them from an unfair imposition under which they were previously living. Cheap money had been obtained for them, and the practical results from the Agricultural Department show that it had been of inestimable value to farmers. The grading and inspection of butter and cheese had lifted the trade in those articles to a high level, and legislation for the purification of mangroes had done an immense amount of good. The lowering of the rates on farming produce upon the railways meant a great saving. A system was established in London by which regular prices were cabled out for the benefit of the farmers, and a trade representative had been sent to find additional markets, and to furnish information which would be of benefit to farmers. The land laws had been broadened in a way which had enabled thousands to get holdings at rates at which they would be able to make a livelihood. Fifty thousand pounds had been authorised for cool stores in South Africa for farmers' produce. There was no reason for the farmers turning against the Government, because they had endeavoured to do good also to the artisans and workers in towns. Any person who attempted to create a class prejudice of this sort was an enemy to his country.

THE COMING SESSION.

The work of the coming session was in a very forward state. In the last session of Parliament too much should not be attempted. If they kept the finances in sound position, and laid out a practical, progressive and a prudent railway, lands and road policy, they would be doing what was of paramount importance to the colony. The legislation to be submitted would, while dealing with many important matters, be found to be within the limits of practical procedure. The colony should agree to

adopt a referendum, so that large social questions should at certain times be referred to the people for consideration and decision. The electoral law required attention, and an effort would be made to enable members to be returned who represented a majority of their constituents. Steps had already been taken to have every adult placed on the roll. Attention would be given to all important matters concerning the export of our products. A measure would be submitted dealing with the question of a system under which railway employees could be superannuated upon retirement either as the result of accident or old age. A proposal would be placed before the House for the regulation by the Government of sharebroking, and some necessary improvements would be made in the Factories Act. An important proposal would be submitted concerning the depravity which existed in all parts of the colony. Amendments dealing with rating on unimproved value would be considered, and attention would be given to the conservation of rivers. Safeguards for the public doing business with second-hand dealers would be made law, and important amendments of the Coroners Act would be introduced. The land laws would be still further amended, and proposals made for dealing with the question of rebate to Crown tenants. State fire insurance would also have consideration. He did not think that any attempt would be made to deal with the licensing laws during the session. Further remissions in railway charges would be announced during the sitting of Parliament, and a means would be introduced for classification of civil servants.

TAXATION AND EXPENDITURE.

In regard to expenditure, he said that some advocated wholesale retrenchment, but he had come to the conclusion that, excepting where actual necessity compelled a wholesale reduction, it should be avoided, or, at any rate, it should not be done from any light consideration, or the outcome of a mere party cry. As far as he had been able to follow the effects of such a policy, it had proved disastrous in many directions never contemplated. Unnecessary expenditure should be avoided, and that upon public works should be made primarily upon reproductive works. At present there was no reasonable ground for the cry for the retrenchment of officers of the Civil Service almost indiscriminately. The spending power of a community was of vital consequence to the body politic. If they dislocated this unnecessarily, and to an appreciable extent, in the Government service, it did not end there, but spread through every avenue of occupation in the country, and produced consequences which tended to reduce the volume of trade and bring about a depression. The colony must see that the taxation of the people is not too high, that the revenue is in excess of expenditure, and, if it turned out that financial equilibrium could not be maintained by reason-

able taxation, then, without creating panic, and without dislocating the service from end to end, a prudent reduction should be made in permanent appropriations. In his own Department employment had only been given when there was work to do, and when work was slack those in excess of the number of hands required for the time being had to stand aside.

PUBLIC WORKS.

There was an apparent effort being made in some parts of the colony to force the hands of the Government, and make them go in for lavish public works expenditure. Well-wishers of the colony should carefully ponder over the position which presented itself in connection with its progress and development. To expect a colony such as this to go on borrowing enormous sums of money annually for public works was to expect the impossible, and if public men did not realise the fact they would be plainly told that such a policy would ultimately lead to a disastrous position. He was far from feeling at all nervous of the position ahead of the colony. They required firmness and courage, tempered with caution and reason, and these characteristics had not been wanting on the part of the Government in carrying on its responsible duties since their accession to office. The constituents should be reasonable. Requests had been made to enable local bodies to increase their spending powers in various directions, the Government to apply the necessary money by way of loan. This should and must be checked. The financial stability of the colony must be maintained in a strong position, and our credit must be utilised for colonial purposes in contradistinction to local ones. Railways already begun should be carried to the point at which it is intended they should stop. Having made up its mind what railways are to be completed, the colony should inaugurate a system of finance for obtaining the money for first class reproductive works. The main trunk lines already commenced should have precedence, and he was of opinion that the connecting link of the North Island Trunk railway should be vigorously prosecuted. The surplus revenue from the Consolidated Fund, estimated at £500,000 this year, would be used for opening up lands and roading the country. Extensive settlement in the interior and greater development of produce for export could only be carried out by giving those in the interior necessary facilities for getting produce to the seaboard. There was a great deal to be done, and while the Government would not shirk its legitimate responsibilities in doing its best to accomplish it, it would not be driven upon a course which it believed to be unwise or unsafe for the colony to follow. In conclusion, there were no grounds for apprehension; the outlook was hopeful, and he felt a thrill of pride in being able to call New Zealand home.

A vote of confidence in Sir Joseph Ward and the Government was carried unanimously.

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