

THE NEW ZEALAND TABLET

'To promote the cause of Religion and Justice by the ways of Truth and Peace.'

LEO XIII. to the N.Z. TABLET.

THURSDAY, MAY 22, 1902.

THE NEW ENGLISH EDUCATION BILL.



THE cables of last week announce that the new English Education Bill—on which so much interest has been centred since its introduction by Mr. BALFOUR towards the end of March—has passed its second reading in the House of Commons by the substantial majority of 237 votes, the numbers being—for the Bill, 402 ;

against, 165. The importance of the measure was indicated, in a general way, in these columns some weeks ago, but since that time the full text of the Bill has come to hand, and it will probably interest our readers to have a more detailed account of the main features of Mr. BALFOUR's proposals. Naturally our interest and attention will be most closely focussed on the provisions dealing with the assistance to be given to the voluntary or denominational schools, but in reality these provisions form only a small part of the general scope of the Bill. The Bill will, in fact, work a complete revolution in the whole educational system of England. It aims at doing away, once and for all, with the system of 'costly confusion' which has hitherto prevailed, at putting an end to the policy of 'muddling along' which has been followed in the past, and at introducing into the primary and secondary education of the country some sort of approach to the system and uniformity which have been adopted by Germany and the other great progressive countries of the world. In order to secure these objects, Mr. BALFOUR, in his opening speech, laid down that the following four things were absolutely essential—first, one authority must be established for technical, secondary, and primary education; secondly, this one authority, being responsible for heavy cost to the ratepayers, must be the rating authority of the district; thirdly, the voluntary schools must be placed in a position to bear their inevitable part in the scheme of national education; and fourthly, 'the system should be one which will not encourage for the future the perpetual dragging in of denominational squabbles into local and municipal life.' Mr. BALFOUR's Bill is the legislative embodiment and development of these conditions, and the large majority which the measure has secured in the House is evidence of a general consensus of opinion that they will prove effective.

As we have said, for us the chief interest in the measure lies in the proposals regarding primary education, and especially in the provisions with regard to the position of the voluntary or denominational schools. Under the new Bill the county councils, or, in county boroughs, the borough councils, will have complete control of every branch of secular education in all the public elementary schools in their respective districts, and all the denominational schools are classed as 'public elementary schools' for the purposes of the Act. The entire cost of the maintenance of all the schools—denominational and undenominational—is to be paid out of the rates collected by the local authority. 'We propose,' said Mr. BALFOUR, 'that on the county rate shall be thrown the whole cost of maintenance of every school under the local authority. The managers of the voluntary schools will remain responsible for using their buildings for educational purposes, for keeping them in good repair, and for making all reasonable alterations and improvements.' Ample guarantees are provided that the ratepayers' money shall be wisely and economically spent. In all that con-

cerns secular instruction the denominational schools will be absolutely subject, just as the undenominational schools are, to the local authorities which finance them. The local authorities have also the power of inspection, a veto (which is only to be exercised upon educational grounds) upon the appointment of the teachers, and the right to nominate a third of the managers. On the other hand the managers of the denominational schools (two-thirds of whom are appointed by the religious authorities) retain the right to appoint the teachers, and are relieved of the whole cost in connection with ordinary maintenance of the schools. Further, there will now be practically no limit to the number of denominational schools which may be erected. Formerly, though the Catholics of a district might be able and willing to build a school for their children at their own cost, it would be considered 'unnecessary' under the old Act, and consequently excluded from all share in the Government grants if there were sufficient places in the neighboring board schools. In the new Bill this provision is repealed, and for the future if there are a reasonable number of Catholic children (say thirty), the Catholics of the district will be free to build a school at their own expense, and then to have it regarded as a public elementary school, for the maintenance of which the local authority will be responsible.

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There are one or two minor defects, and one very serious defect in the Bill as it was originally introduced in the House. The one grave blot in the Bill lay in the permissive clause which left it optional with the local authorities whether or not they would accept the responsibility of assuming control of the schools in their respective districts. The objection to this clause from the point of view of the educationist is that it introduces still further anomaly and confusion into the administration of the system, and the obvious objection from the Catholic point of view is that in a district where bigotry was rampant it would make it possible for the local body, by simply refusing to accept the responsibility, to completely frustrate the avowed purpose of the Bill to do justice to denominational schools. There has been such a universal outcry, however, against this piece of local option that it has probably been withdrawn by this time, or at least it is tolerably safe to assume that before the Bill has passed its final stages in both Houses the objectionable clause will have been deleted and the obligation of the local body to assume control will have been made compulsory. For the rest, the measure is, so far as the interests of the Catholics are concerned, an enormous step in advance of all previous legislation and can only be accepted by them with a feeling of cordial satisfaction. It is a plain and candid recognition of the great principle that all the schools of the nation which are doing the necessary work of teaching the children of the people stand on an equal footing, have an equal claim upon the public funds, and have an absolute right to an equal wage for equal service. That is the very thing which the Catholics of this country have for so many years been striving for—the very thing which our bishops so plainly and pointedly insisted on in their late Pastoral. Once let that be conceded—as it is conceded in this new English Bill—on anything like fair and reasonable terms and the way is at once opened up to an equitable, effective, and final settlement of this great question.

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Of course it could hardly be expected that an English Education Bill which was accepted as satisfactory by the Catholics could be allowed to pass without opposition, and our Nonconformist friends have shown a very active, though somewhat unintelligible hostility to the measure. It is really impossible to discover what precisely their grievance is in the matter. As one fair and sufficient sample of the Nonconformist opposition to the Bill, we quote from the *British Weekly*, which is, generally speaking, an ably edited paper and is the recognised official organ of the Nonconformists in England.

'If this Bill is passed in its present form,' writes the agitated editor, 'we as ratepayers must allow our property to be seized for the school rate, but we cannot conscientiously pay it. The Free Church Council will, we trust, give a clear lead on this point. The Government ought to be warned promptly and plainly. There ought to be concerted action amongst all Nonconformists. The enemies of the Free Churches think that at present they can do as