

paring, according to the evidence of their loan schedules. The Hon. C. J. Parr, Minister of Education, has put the difficulties of the position into a nut-shell when he informed a deputation of educationists that he feared that he must call a halt on school building programmes unless he can get better value for the money, "because," he said, "the threequarters of a million allocated for the purpose is effectively worth to-day only £400,000." This is one of the causes of the comparative failure of the public effort in connection with housing.

Labour and Nationals.

Though all the resources of the State are behind the Housing Department, it has been so hampered by the difficulties of shortage of materials and labour that these two subjects occupy the bulk of its annual report to Parliament. Some very illuminating facts appear. It is shown that when the Government displayed the greatest activity and optimism over its housing programme—when houses were being scheduled by the hundred—no builders could be got to tender. Two hundred dwellings were wanted in one instance, and the most elastic conditions were specified. The tenderer could make his choice of materials, and submit his own designs. "yet only two small tenders were received for complete dwellings at a reasonable price." The chief obstacle to building operations has been in obtaining supplies of materials, states the Housing report. In view of the fact that practically all the dwellings now under construction are of concrete, the recent shortage of cement has greatly intensified the difficulties to be met: but the decision of the Board of Trade to allocate cement in accordance with the urgency of requirements, placing workers' dwellings second on the list, should have the effect of largely removing this difficulty in future. The shortage of timber also has been marked, but the Department has recently overcome this to some extent by arranging for the purchase of large quantities directly from the mills. In November last the Department arranged for the importation of considerable quantities of other materials, such as roofing-iron and other hardware, and these are now almost all to hand. In this connection it may be noted in justification of the Department's action that while the current price of roofing-iron in New Zealand is £75 a ton, a shipment of 200 tons arranged for by the Department was recently landed at a cost of £43 a ton. The Housing Superintendent has investigated the causes of shortage of labour in the building trade. His report goes straight to the heart of the trouble, showing that unless we have an influx of artisan immigrants, the difficulty is too deep-rooted for local solution:—"In order to disclose one cause of this shortage I have obtained information showing that in the various building trades there has been a great falling-off in the number of apprentices since five years ago. In the carpentering trade, for instance, the employers in the principal towns in the Dominion employed in April, 1914, 391 apprentices. To keep pace with the increase in population this number should have increased by April, 1919, to 405, yet the number employed by the same employers was only 245—not much more than half. The shortage of apprentices and skilled workers not

only in the building trade but in most occupations calls for serious and urgent attention."

Co-operative Building.

An offer by four of the largest building firms in Wellington to concentrate their resources for one year upon the building of small dwellings, and thus get rid of the shortage, has attracted a great deal of public attention. The scheme, on the face of it, is just the thing to grip the imagination, and raise high hopes, especially as it involves the most complete kind of co-operation between capital and labour, the building trades unions being joint partners with the employers in the scheme. Our enthusiasm is not at fever-heat over the project, because we have the evidence of the Housing Report to show that the biggest organisation in this country, the State, has not achieved much in a twelve-month of effort, and half a million sterling to back it. We suggested quite a year ago that the State might be able to do useful things if its organisation was centred on the housing problem, but the State does not seem able to rise superior to labour shortage or restricted supplies of material, and we fear that the big co-operative building scheme will fall down for similar reasons. There is more building of houses going on to-day than most people realise. There are the workers dwellings contracts, and innumerable private contracts. The latter are usually undertaken by small firms of working builders who have a team of men thoroughly accustomed to this special work of building dwellings. If they can get supplies, they are extremely efficient in their methods. What will happen to these useful working teams of house builders if a giant co-operative building organisation offers such high wages that the majority of the building trade employees are attracted thereto? And what will happen to the architects during the twelve months occupied by the experiment? Already the building trade is controlled at all points—official authorisation of the job, and official control over distribution of all important materials. If to this is added a concentration of labour under the control of four big builders, thus drawing away employees from the smaller working firms, we are afraid that the consequent dislocation of the whole industry will have worse permanent results than the evil the scheme is intended to remove. Our legislators are beginning to suspect that the small builder has already been too badly treated. The Prime Minister was questioned in the House about the operation of the rent restriction legislation, Dr. Newman, of Wellington East, suggesting that it had forced out of business the speculative builder, who—whatever his other faults—actually did build houses with celerity. Mr. Massey, in reply, hinted that the Government might have to go back a little on its restrictive legislation owing to the fact that it seemed to have frightened out private enterprise in house building, though he added that this legislation imposing an 8 per cent. limit on rent in relation to capital value does not apply to new dwellings. It is quite a novelty to find people speaking up in friendly terms for the speculative builder. It is another instance of a benefit not being appreciated until it has disappeared!