

So it comes to pass that large areas of excellent country, well adapted for settlement, remain locked up, because, forsooth, the Natives refuse to accept the 3s. an acre offered by the Government, when private parties are prepared to give them more than six times that amount. While still on the question of the pre-emptive right, perhaps I may be permitted to quote the words of Mr. Alfred Domett: "In governing masses of men we must look upon a wrong really felt as a real wrong. It mattered not that on abstract principles of justice or theories it ought not to be considered a wrong—if it was really felt by them, then it must be treated as a real wrong. And this was the case with the Maoris, and their feeling about the Crown's right of pre-emption." It is nearly thirty years since those words were uttered in the New Zealand Parliament, and they are as pregnant with truth now as they were then.

Not only in regard to the exercise of the pre-emptive right should Government interference with the Natives be avoided, but in many other respects. A race that has been in contact with the most civilised nation on earth during the past half-century, a race admittedly intelligent, and possessed of great territorial estates, may in reason be expected to have sufficient discernment to distinguish between governmental treatment properly and improperly bestowed.

For the special purpose of meeting the requirements of the aboriginals, the Native Office, I understand, was constituted. This was to be the avenue open to the Maoris for communicating their desires to the pakeha world.

When the Imperial Government relinquished its control of Native affairs, it was a condition precedent, I understand, that a sum of £7,000 was to be devoted annually to purposes of a character deemed specially beneficial to the Natives.

This sum is and has been for years annually expended. It is understood that it is exhausted in maintaining the Native Office; but for what specific purposes remains shrouded in mystery. Efforts have been made, even by Parliament itself, to have some light thrown on the matter; but without success. Of this, however, no doubt need exist: that the Native population, who presumably may be regarded as primarily interested in the disbursement of that annual sum, are thoroughly dissatisfied. So far from the Native Office being to them an institution to look up to, or view in a favourable light, they regard with the utmost suspicion and undisguised dread its questionable operations. Scarcely is there a portion of the North Island where the Natives have any experience of the Native Office but they remember it with feelings of regret. Everywhere one hears complaints of its deceitful practices, over-reaching, unfulfilled promises, and treachery, in all of which the Natives are, of course, the helpless victims.

As to these grievances, some of them are of a serious character. It will not redound to the honour of a possession of the British Crown if those grievances are not impartially investigated. With experience so gained, can it be wondered at that proposals emanating from a source so tainted—the channel of communication between the Government for the time being and the Natives—are regarded as new devices for still further victimising them? Deceived and misled, can it be a matter of surprise that Governments, as they have known them, together with the Native Office, are jointly viewed with the profoundest suspicion? The situation has been so forced upon the Natives throughout the Island. Partly in despair and partly in hope they have now sought a way out of the difficulty. The mysteries of the Native Office they cannot penetrate; the policy of past Governments they have learned to mistrust: their only hope and outlook is centred in the prospect of the Legislature granting them the power they ask for to control their own affairs. After all, what they ask for is only a species of local self-government, exercised in a manifold degree by their European neighbours.

A strong desire exists among them to become useful settlers, and contribute to the productive wealth of the country. I believe they are capable of doing so if unimpeded by obstructive legislation. Too long has it been the fashion to regard the Native race as one rapidly becoming extinct. This idea has permitted the sentimental nonsense to be indulged in that the duty of the Legislature was, as some one has expressed it, "to smooth down their dying-pillow." For my own part, and after careful observation, I am forced to the conclusion that it is a mistaken theory to assume that the Native race will rapidly decrease. The abnormal state of affairs that prevailed during and some time after the wars with the Natives to some extent, perhaps, warranted such a conclusion; but that turbulent period in their history has happily passed away, never to return. Where they have adopted European habits and followed industrial pursuits a steady increase is perceptible. This, I think, will be borne out by the recent census returns.