

regret; and, in regard to the work of partition and succession, that can be done by the Stipendiary Magistrates and such of the Native Land Court Judges as may be required for the purpose.

LAND- AND INCOME-TAX.

Notwithstanding the breaking-up of large estates upon the death of the owners, and the policy of acquisition of private lands by the Government, the land-tax has been well maintained.

The revenue collected from the land- and income-tax during the past year was £377,813, being £17,813 in excess of the estimate.

This increase chiefly comes from the Income-tax, and is naturally the result of the improved commercial conditions of our colonists. It will interest members to tell them that the income-tax produced nearly £68,000 the first year of its collection, in 1892–93, while for the year ended 31st March last the tax received amounted to £105,000. These figures have not been reached without careful and energetic administration; at the same time they clearly indicate the progress in the welfare of the community.

I propose during the present session to introduce a measure having for its object the consolidation of the Land and Income Assessment Acts of 1891, 1892, 1893, 1894, and 1895. The want of a Consolidating Act has been felt for some time, considerable inconvenience being experienced in following the provisions of the several statutes dealing with direct taxation.

ADVANCES TO SETTLERS OFFICE.

Up to the close of the financial year, no less than 4,501 applications for loans on mortgage, representing an aggregate sum of £1,404,065, had been granted in whole or in part by the General Board, while 1,112 applications, representing £360,268, were declined. Of the above 4,501 applications, 581 were not completed on the terms offered by the Board; consequently the actual number of completed loans was 3,920, and the amount was £1,112,775.

Taking the past year by itself, the total number of applications received was 2,687, and the amount applied for was £862,179.

On the 31st March, 1897, there was a sum of £333,319 temporarily invested in Government securities, such as could be readily realised from time to time as money is required by the Board for lending purposes. The department, under this arrangement, reaps the benefit of the interest from these investments during the period the money is waiting to be lent out on mortgage. Since the close of the year, I may mention, the greater portion of the securities held in London have been sold at a considerable advance on the price at which they were purchased. The profit arising from this transaction has been devoted to reducing the advances from the Consolidated Fund.

For the future the expenses of management will be largely reduced, as the provisions of the Government Valuation of Land Act will enable the department to obtain its valuations at a much cheaper rate than hitherto.

In "The Government Advances to Settlers Act Amendment Act, 1896," provision was made enabling the General Board to lend money on mortgage for a fixed term not exceeding ten years. The applications for loans under this new provision have not, however, been so numerous as those under the instalment conditions, thus proving that the instalment plan is more popular than the fixed-term system.

It has been found desirable to frame regulations for the better control of funds placed in the hands of the office solicitor for payment to mortgagors. These funds are Government moneys until they reach the hands of the mortgagors, and it therefore was deemed advisable to place the solicitors upon a somewhat similar footing to Government officers having public funds in their hands for disbursement, who have to render proper accounts of the same.

THE PUBLIC TRUST OFFICE.

The business of the Public Trust Office continues to show a satisfactory and steady increase in all its branches. The number of all descriptions of estates in the office has increased from 1,678 at the close of the year 1890 to 2,334 on the