

1944  
NEW ZEALAND

# POSTAL CENSORSHIP COMMITTEE

(REPORT OF THE)

(MR. H. E. COMBS, CHAIRMAN)

*Laid on the Table of the House of Representatives*

## ORDER OF REFERENCE

*Extract from the Journals of the House of Representatives*

SATURDAY, THE 25TH DAY OF MARCH, 1944

*Ordered*, "That a Select Committee be appointed, consisting of ten members, to inquire into and report upon the allegations made by members of the House in regard to the operations of the postal censorship: the Committee to consist of Mr. Bowden, Rev. Clyde Carr, Mr. Coleman, Mr. Combs, Mr. Doidge, Mr. Lowry, Mr. McCombs, Mr. Oram, Mr. Sheat, and the Mover."—(Right Hon. Mr. FRASER.)

## REPORT

By direction of the Postal Censorship Committee, which was set up by order of the House "to inquire into and report upon the allegations made by members of the House in regard to the operations of the postal censorship," I have the honour to present the following report:—

1. From the evidence given before the Committee it seems that there was some misunderstanding in the minds of members of the House as to the division of authority between postal censorship, press censorship, and military censorship. The Committee, by the Order of Reference, was concerned only with postal censorship of private letters. With respect to some of the complaints under this heading the Committee did not receive conclusive evidence, and in respect of others adequate explanations were forthcoming, while in other cases it was admitted that Censors had exceeded their duty.

2. The postal censorship organization in New Zealand consists of a Controller of Censorship, a Chief Postal Censor, Supervisors of Censors, and Censors. In all, there are some two hundred and fifty Censors engaged in the censorship of letters. In matters of policy the postal censorship is under the direction of the Censorship Board.

The Committee obtained copies of the relevant written instructions issued to Censors, which were as follows:—

*Dominion of New Zealand*

General Post Office, Wellington C.1,  
5th December, 1939.

Confidential.

P. & T. 24/2(2)

Memorandum for—

The Postal Censor,  
Wellington C.1.

### POSTAL CENSORSHIP: CRITICISM OF GOVERNMENT'S POLICY

DIFFICULTY may be experienced at times in deciding to what extent criticism of Government policy is permitted in censored correspondence. In this respect each case is to be considered on its merits. The Controller of Censorship has laid down that generally most of the views expressed in letters which have so far come under notice are merely personal views. Where, however, these views are likely to mislead, are exaggerated, or are likely to damage the reputation of the country the portions should be excised.

A different political opinion is of no moment if it is not likely to be damaging to the country's standing, and what might be passed in domestic exchanges might be open to objection if addressed to business firms overseas.

It is appreciated that Censors have cases which are difficult to decide. They can only use a wise discretion, submitting to this Office any letter about which they are uncertain.

(Sgd.) — Chief Postal Censor.

Controller of Censorship, Wellington C. 1,  
5th February, 1940.

Confidential.

Cen. 5.

Memorandum for—

The Chief Postal Censor,  
Postal Division,  
General Post Office,  
Wellington C. 1.

#### CENSORSHIP OF CORRESPONDENCE

You will see in the *Dominion* of Saturday, 3rd instant, that complaint is made that matter of strictly political criticism has been, allegedly, cut from letters to England. Today's *Dominion* contains my report to the Government, and it appears necessary to draw the immediate attention of all Postal Censors to the fact that legitimate criticism of the Government is not a matter for censorship. The British regulation defines for elimination from letters matter which would come under the rule "Political—containing matter inimical to national interests, especially propaganda." Note should be taken that "national interests" is not to be confused with "party interests," and criticism of the Government from the point of view of the opponents of the Government should not be eliminated so long as it does not affect *the interests of the nation*. On the other hand, two references which have come under my personal notice are quite rightly damaging to the nation—one a reference to "corrupt Government" and the other to "trickery Government" and "trickery land." These are definitely damaging to New Zealand and are quoted to assist Censors in their work. Even if they have been used "loosely," they are dangerously destructive to British interests.

Censors have a difficult and monotonous task. The elimination from correspondence of anything which might endanger our shipping or our Armed Forces is, of course, a paramount duty, and if this excision means, where letters are written on both sides of the paper, the suppression of other news, it is likely to cause annoyance, but is unavoidable.

Censors are enjoined to avoid permitting their personal opinions to intrude into their work. The Censor must always act impersonally and remember that every person has the right in New Zealand to express his own opinion on political matters. It is only when in doing so the writer suggests misbehaviour in administration that action is necessary in the nation's interests.

So that a check may be taken on what officers are doing in this matter, senior officers should direct that for a while all letters which apparently contain objectionable matter should be marked in pencil by Censors and referred for decision to the senior Censor on duty.

In conclusion, it may be said that New-Zealanders are not likely to take kindly to censorship, and complaints are likely to come in thick and strong—some no doubt justifiably and some as an indication of annoyance. So far the work has been well done, but perhaps some Censors have been a little hard in their "cutting" of matters criticizing the Government.

(Sgd.) G. MACNAMARA, Controller of Censorship.

#### *Dominion of New Zealand*

General Post Office, Wellington C. 1,  
8th February, 1940.

P. & T. 24/2(2).

Confidential.

Memorandum for—

The Postal Censor,  
Wellington C. 1.

#### CENSORSHIP OF CORRESPONDENCE: POLITICAL CRITICISM

ATTACHED is a copy of a memorandum from the Controller of Censorship on the above-mentioned subject, together with copy of extracts from the *Dominion* newspaper to which reference is made.

The contents of the attached correspondence is to be noted by all Censors under your control, and the requirement outlined in paragraph 4 of the Controller's memorandum brought into effect forthwith.

The instructions contained in my memorandum P. & T. 24/2(2) of the 5th December last are cancelled, except for the provision that in cases of doubt this Office is to be referred to for instructions.

Please acknowledge receipt of this memorandum.

Encl.

(Sgd.) — Chief Postal Censor.

It was found in practice that the early instructions, which were founded on the British regulations, were, on occasion, so widely interpreted that the Controller issued the more clearly defined instructions dated 5th February, 1940.

#### 3. The Committee finds—

- (a) That there was no evidence to show any serious departure from these instructions; and
- (b) That no instructions had been given by the Board of Censorship authorizing the excision of political comments from letters opened by any Censor.

4. The following comments are made in respect of some of the individual allegations which came before the Committee and were within its Order of Reference:—

- (a) A censored air-mail letter was posted up in the Officers' Club in Cairo with its uncensored duplicate (which was sent by surface mail) alongside. The excision made in the air-mail letter seemed senseless to the officers who saw the letters.
- (b) A letter from a resident in Waipawa addressed to his son in the Navy was censored. The son was able to piece together the meaning of the excised part, which was political but of no real moment.

(c) A page of a letter from a Wellington resident to his son in the Middle East was returned by the son with part of a sentence excised. What the particular words were the father could not remember, but the sentences before and after the excision were political in so far as they commented on the result of the general election.

(d) A newspaper was addressed to a civilian in Egypt, but transmission was prohibited by censorship order.

*Explanation:* Newspapers addressed to civilians in Egypt are prohibited by English War Regulations, and New Zealand follows British practice. This does not apply to newspapers sent to troops.

(e) A letter addressed by a father to his son, a prisoner of war, was returned by the Censor.

*Explanation:* Under International Convention the length of letters addressed to prisoners of war is limited to one sheet of ordinary note-paper, both sides of which may be written on. No reference to the naval, military, political, or economic situation is allowed. The reason for returning this letter was its length.

(f) Letters from a northern area in New Zealand were opened by the Censor over a period of about a month.

*Explanation:* The military authorities were carrying out certain experiments in the area and the Security Service had requested that all letters from the Whangaparaoa Peninsula area be censored during the period of the experiments. This censorship has now ceased.

(g) A soldier's letter from the Middle East was censored twice in Italy by military Censors and was alleged to have been opened by a Censor in New Zealand.

Positive evidence was given that the letter had not been opened by a Censor in New Zealand.

(h) The correspondence of a certain family in New Zealand was being opened by the Censor.

Evidence was given that this correspondence was being censored at the request of the police and the Security Service.

5. It is not possible to examine *all* private letters without a greatly increased staff, but all air-mail letters are subject to a careful censorship, as well as the correspondence of aliens within New Zealand.

*Conclusion.*—It is clear, and was admitted, that some errors of judgment were made by Censors. The Committee, however, is of opinion that the postal censorship has been carried out with a maximum of consideration for the convenience and susceptibilities of the public, having due regard to the vital security duties involved.

13th October, 1944.

H. E. COMBS, Chairman.

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