

We direct public attention to the correspondence which has taken place between the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture and the manager of the New Zealand Dairy Association, published in another column. The matter is important enough to form the subject of a parliamentary inquiry, and we hope that Mr. Spragg will take the necessary steps to bring the whole of the facts out by petition to the House of Representatives. Otherwise, there is good reason, from past experience, to fear that effect will be given to the threat contained in Mr. Ritchie's letter, "that, unless better arrangements are made for the proper coastal consignment of butter to final port of shipment, it will be necessary for the Department to consider whether the present facilities for freezing provided at Auckland can be continued." The menace is one which neither farmers nor manufacturers can lightly ignore, for its execution would be fraught with the gravest consequences to the butter industry of Auckland. It is a matter of public notoriety that the Department has, for the past two years, endeavoured to withhold from Auckland the freezing facilities which are granted by the Government to Taranaki, Wellington, Canterbury, and Otago. Notwithstanding that we labour under the special disadvantage of greater distance from the shipping port, the Department has done its utmost to compel Auckland factory-owners to submit to the freezing of their butter at Wellington instead of providing local facilities, and justice has only been grudgingly conceded after prolonged correspondence and appeals to Ministers. Evidently the Department has not been vanquished, for we take it that Mr. Ritchie's letter is the prelude to another attack. With regard to the merits of the question raised over the "Ruapehu's" butter, the case is so clearly stated in Mr. Spragg's reply to Mr. Ritchie that we need hardly recapitulate the facts. The stranding of the "Ruapehu" on New Year's Day threw the arrangements for shipping butter home this season very seriously out of gear, and caused heavy losses to manufacturers. Under the circumstances, one might reasonably have expected some consideration from the Department of Agriculture. The manager of the New Zealand Dairy Association behaved in a most commendable spirit when he waived his claim over the "Takapuna's" storage-space in order that the Taranaki people might get their butter to the port of shipment. But this friendly and public-spirited act was very ill requited. We are told that the enforced refreezing of its butter at Wellington entails a loss upon the association of about £100. Mr. Spragg contends that this cost was unnecessary and vexatious, and if, as appears from the correspondence, only the outside packages of the 70 tons of butter, packed solid, were examined, and the highest temperature registered in these outside packages amounted to no more than 46° to 52°, the reflections cast upon the butter by the Department seem to be most unwarrantable, and are also unaccountable in view of the statement made by Mr. Spragg that "on previous occasions your Graders have passed butter at a higher temperature than that, and the shipping companies have accepted it." It is difficult to conceive that the bulk of 70 tons of butter, packed solid, at a temperature of 20° in the forehold of the "Rotomahana," could have been reduced below freezing-point in fifty-four hours. But, assuming that a fifty-four hours' passage from Auckland to Wellington renders butter which was hard-frozen unfit for shipment, what becomes of Mr. Ritchie's proposal to compel Auckland manufacturers to send their butter to Wellington unfrozen? One of the Government Graders who was questioned on the subject admitted that in all probability butter so carried would be running through the boxes before it reached its destination. Does Mr. Ritchie then seriously mean to deliberately close the ports of New Zealand altogether against Auckland butter, or is it merely his intention to handicap Aucklanders against all the rest of the Dominion, and ruin our exporters by unfair competition with more favoured manufacturers? Mr. Spragg takes a reasonable view of the matter when he says, "I assume that the time will come when the whole of the help now given to dairying will be withdrawn." When that happens we shall be content; but while the present system exists, Auckland, which from its position requires rather more than less help, will ask for at least the same advantages as are given to other districts. We may add that not only will Auckland ask for this, but if our members are worth their salt we shall get it, despite the determined hostility and obstruction of the officials of the Department of Agriculture. There is a feeling of distrust in the country with respect to this Department, which is daily gaining strength, and, unless the policy of vexatious interference and obstruction which has characterized the official administration of the Department is materially modified, public discontent will manifest itself in a manner that will surprise the Government as well as the officials. The fate of the eighteen thousand carefully selected vine-cuttings imported by Mr. F. D. Fenton, which, through the stupid obstinacy and red-tape of the Department, were sent from Auckland to Wellington and back to Auckland, with the result that only five hundred out of the eighteen thousand grew, has already been recorded. We have been shown the correspondence which has passed between Mr. Fenton and the Minister and officers of the Department. It ought to be printed with Mr. Spragg's correspondence in pamphlet form and scattered broadcast over the country. We are glad to see that the Vinegrowers' Association lately formed in the North have taken up the subject of viticulture with an energy and spirit that will brook no tomfoolery at the hands of officials. They have already addressed some strongly worded letters to Ministers which will, we trust, be the means of saving other enterprising settlers who are anxious to embark in the industry from meeting the fate which befell Mr. Fenton. The great question is this: Does the Department of Agriculture exist for the purpose of assisting the productive industries of the Dominion, or simply to harass and worry them? Surely the Acts that have been passed and the expenditure incurred were intended to foster and assist deserving settlers; but one might easily suppose, from the arrogance with which irritating regulations are sometimes enforced, that the intention was merely to provide snug billets for a number of officials bent upon magnifying their office. Parliament should seriously inquire whether the large sums voted annually for the Department of Agriculture are really productive of any useful results. The arbitrary powers that have been intrusted to officials are capable of being used most tyrannically. It is possible, indeed, for enterprising settlers to