

LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONFERENCE, 1912.

FIRST DAY.

TUESDAY, 21ST MAY, 1912.

The Conference met at the Sydney Street Schoolroom at 10 a.m.

Present: The Prime Minister (Hon. T. Mackenzie); the Minister of Internal Affairs (Hon. G. W. Russell, President of the Conference); the Minister of Finance (Hon. A. M. Myers); the Minister of Public Works (Hon. W. D. S. Macdonald); the Minister of Customs and Labour (Hon. G. Laurenson); the Postmaster-General (Hon. H. G. Ell); the Hon. T. Buxton (member of Executive Council); Mr. J. Hislop (Under-Secretary for Internal Affairs); Mr. H. J. H. Blow (Under-Secretary for Public Works); Dr. T. H. Valintine (Inspector-General of Hospitals); Mr. W. Jolliffe (Law Draughtsman); Mr. M. Fraser (Government Statistician); Mr. J. W. Black (Private Secretary to Hon. G. W. Russell); Mr. T. F. Martin (Secretary, Treasurer, and Solicitor to the Municipal Association of New Zealand); and the delegates to the Conference, with the exception of Messrs. J. G. Armstrong, V. Reed, and K. S. Williams.

THE PRIME MINISTER'S REMARKS.

The Hon. T. MACKENZIE (Prime Minister) said,—Gentlemen, I have very great pleasure in welcoming you all to take part in the discussion of a measure that has been demanded for a great many years. Speaking my own personal thoughts about the demand for enlarged local government, I believe that in the abstract there has been a great demand for it, but that in the concrete it has always been trifled with. We have gathered together here to-day what, in my opinion, is, so far as local government is concerned, the concentrated experience and wisdom of this Dominion. We have called you together, gentlemen, to get constructive assistance from you. If you consider that an enlarged measure of local government is desirable, and you assist the Minister in charge with your experience and wisdom, that assistance will be highly appreciated. There are necessarily some points in the Bill which will excite considerable discussion, but we do not want to approach the consideration of this matter in any party spirit at all. If it is to be contested as a party question and a Bill is brought down to the House it will be impossible to do anything effective. Let us therefore for once in the history of New Zealand, if possible, forget that our chief duty is to tear each other's eyes out, and devote ourselves to building up and constructive work, considering every question upon its merits and coming to decisions accordingly. There is, at any rate, one feature of this question upon which I think I should make a distinct pronouncement, and that is the question of education. Although it was in the Bill submitted to the House, that Bill was rather in the way of forming the framework for consideration. Now, the question of education is much too serious a subject to be lightly trifled with, and I think it but right to make it absolutely clear that my idea in connection with the control of primary education at any rate is that what we are carrying out now is the result of evolution and development extending over a period of forty years. I believe, too, that our Education Boards are largely comprised of specially interested and trained men who are likely to do far better work than would be done if their powers were handed over to a local governing body. Therefore my view on that subject is that it is better to enlarge the powers of our Education Boards, and to restore some of those powers that were wrongly taken away some years ago. If there is any dissatisfaction in connection with the work of primary education, or of secondary education, I think that dissatisfaction is in proportion to the interference from the central authority. That is my opinion, and as we intend to get at the bottom of the increased expenditure, and of the question as to the efficiency of the system, we have set up a Commission for that purpose, and I am going to await its decision; but personally I am not in favour of the control of education being given to Provincial Councils. You may say that is a funny position for a Minister to take up, and my critics may say that I was a member of the Cabinet that circulated that Bill; but I do not care that—[a snap of the fingers]—for this criticism. I am going to tell you what I think about it, and having told you, it may or may not influence your deliberations; but I do not want to mislead you, but to give you my opinion