

House time after time that there has been no discrimination against members of the Opposition so far as public works, subsidies, and grants are concerned. Dealing with the discussion of the Bill as a whole, I may say I think we have had a most illuminating and interesting discussion, the net result of which I think is that it is quite possible for me to form a pretty clear idea as to the decided opinions of this Conference. I think I shall be right if I interpret your feelings at once, gentlemen, as saying that you desire education to be eliminated from this Bill. It is further clear that you desire hospitals and charitable-aid administration to be eliminated from these proposals. It is also clear that the large harbours of the country, with their huge debts, cannot be included under any provincial scheme; because no statesman or financier would think of starting any public bodies in the country crippled with such heavy debts. So, gentlemen, having eliminated three great things—education, hospitals and charitable aid, and harbours—the provincial scheme has absolutely disappeared from the vision. But in listening to this discussion, and especially to the remarks made by Mr. Studholme, Mr. Fisher, Mr. Harley, and other gentlemen, I have been greatly impressed with what I believe is the substantial feeling of the Conference—namely, that if we are to get our local government on a thoroughly sound and scientific footing the counties that are to remain in existence must be enlarged, and, in order to secure that result, there must be taken away altogether the financial inducement by differential rate of subsidy which now exists, and causes counties to be set up that have no business to be constituted. I think the suggestion made this morning by Mr. Fisher, of Southland, is a most valuable one—namely, that an independent Commission might be established, possibly one for each Island, which would have the responsibility laid upon it of seeking to regroup the counties, so that instead of our having the farcical number of 133—many of them nothing but glorified Road Boards—we might get a scientific reduction down to forty, or at the outside fifty, and have really strong bodies, which would take the place and do some of the work that was proposed to be done by the proposed Provincial Councils. I have been very pleased indeed to hear that the explanation I gave regarding the Local Government Board has weighed with the Conference, and that the majority, I believe, of those who are now here see that the proposal for a Local Government Board is not revolutionary, but really an attempt to place upon broader shoulders than those of the Minister of Internal Affairs the responsibility of dealing with a multiplicity of questions that come before him from day to day in connection with the local government of this country. Gentlemen, I am not one who trembles at responsibility, but I may tell you that if the public at large had any conception of the constant inquiry that is made by the Department of Internal Affairs—which is only one of the Departments I control—in seeking to arrange matters as between the conflicting interests of local bodies that crop up in the rural districts and in the boroughs, and the dealing with the multiplicity of matters, some of them of minor detail, though of considerable importance to the local bodies concerned, they would realize with what happiness I should look forward to the possibility of having a Local Government Board with three departmental experts and three or four outside gentlemen that could be called upon to give me assistance and advice as to many matters regarding which I cannot make the inquiry that is necessary. I think the proposal made in that direction will be acceptable to the Government, and I can assure you it will be my firm determination, believing as I do in local self-government by the people to its extremest and most absolute condition, to see, if the responsibility is laid upon me, that there shall be no infringement whatever of the rights and responsibilities of the local governing authorities, either in the law relating to the establishment of that Board, or after it has been set up. Now, I think the speeches that were made by the Mayor of Auckland, the Mayor of Wellington, the Mayor of Dunedin, and other gentlemen who have taken great interest in connection with local government as it affects the cities, must have impressed us with the fact that the great cities, growing as they are rapidly into positions of pride and place in this country, are not disposed to allow any interference whatever in connection with their own position as local self-governing bodies. But I think we must recognize that the time may come when possibly the cities will be forced to realize the truth of what was stated by Mr. French yesterday—namely, that the responsibility of a great city does not end as soon as it reaches its own front door. We realize that our great cities must be strengthened and maintained; but what are these cities unless the development of the back country is going on in order to provide employment for their industries, and customers for the stream of commerce that is constantly passing through them? As Mr. Studholme so eloquently pointed out this morning, the idea and intention of the Bill—as I also endeavoured to point out yesterday—was to bring about some real community of interest between the cities and the more distant parts of the country. It may be said, as I admitted, that the proposals of the Bill go too far in that direction, and it may be possible that if we made strong counties, just as we are going to have strong cities, we may in the future find some method of grouping up city and country together, but in the meantime there is only one way in which we shall be able to reach them. And that is this, gentlemen: as a very large portion of our people live in our cities, while the system of subsidies to local bodies continues the cities are helping to provide their quota of the subsidy which the country districts are helping to expend. So that there is still hope for Franklin in that direction; and if they could not get money out of the City of Auckland, the General Assembly might be able to help them by increasing the subsidy for distant and out-scattered districts. This enables me to come back to the proposal I made in my speech, and which I trust the Finance Committee will consider—namely, whether a plan I sketched of following the New South Wales plan and dividing the local bodies into six grades is not desirable. Those grades would vary from the well-roaded prosperous districts such as my friends representing Canterbury know so well, where they have got railways running through their territory and roads made, largely out of the land revenue of days past and days when good subsidies were being received, to the bush and swamp districts of the North Island, where the metal placed on the roads costs 10s. and 12s. a yard. I think you will agree with me that the principle laid down, and which I trust will be indorsed—namely, that subsidies in future should be based on a careful consideration of the necessities—is absolutely sound, and one which I hope