

AFTER THE WAR.

My remaining remarks will have reference to the large questions which will require solution when, on the declaration of peace, demobilization commences and the men returning monthly will be numbered by thousands instead of hundreds. So far as the invalids are concerned the Department will continue as far as possible its existing methods; every man will be personally interviewed, and there will be no relaxation of efforts to look after his welfare and find him employment suited to his condition and wishes.

The situation which will arise when demobilization commences will present problems of an entirely new character, and I have already dealt at some length with the question in a statement which I recently made in connection with criticisms and suggestions by members of the Returned Soldiers' Association on the question of the employment of discharged men. I recognize that we in New Zealand, in common with all countries affected by this terrible war, are in our degree face to face with new and grave problems. We are treading an unknown road without precedent to guide us, and I welcome suggestion and criticism having for their object the benefit of the men who have made sacrifices in the service of the country and to whom we all owe so great a debt of gratitude.

The following briefly indicate the conclusions I have come to as to the line of action to be adopted by the Discharged Soldiers' Information Department in tiding over the difficult period which will intervene between the commencement of demobilization and the resumption of the normal life of the community, when our soldiers will have once again found their places in the ordinary civilian occupations which they left to join the Expeditionary Forces overseas.

I think it may be assumed that every effort will be made by the military authorities to secure the return of our men to New Zealand gradually and by drafts at regular intervals. The question of shipping will, of course, vitally affect the course of events, but it will be essential to keep steadily in view the necessity of avoiding unreasonable fluctuations in the stream of returning men. So far as the Discharged Soldiers' Information Department is concerned, it is clear that the personal interview must be abandoned. As I have already mentioned, we shall continue it in the case of invalids, but with the able-bodied men returning at the rate of several thousands per month it will be entirely impracticable. The course which I propose to follow is for representatives of the Department to meet each transport on arrival as at present, and hand every soldier a printed letter in the form set out in Appendix VI (A). This form explains itself; but to avoid the possibility of any soldier being missed it is proposed, where no reply is received after a reasonable interval, to send a second communication in the form shown in Appendix VI (B). If this also fails to elicit a reply the matter will not be pursued further; but the Department will always be happy to reopen the subject if later on the soldier asks for assistance in obtaining work.

The early days of the demobilization will involve the disbandment of many thousands of men in camp and on board transports in or near New Zealand waters, but I have hopes that the difficulties in dealing with them will be mitigated by the fact that many of them will only recently have left their old work, and the general shortage of labour will provide numerous openings for men who will be in robust health and whose employment will not present the difficulties which surround that of invalided men. Later on the soldiers will come back in smaller numbers, but this will be neutralized to a certain extent by the avenues of employment being necessarily less numerous as the process of reabsorption draws towards a close.

GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL PUBLIC WORKS.

To meet the exigencies which will certainly arise a system of public works on a considerable scale will, I think, be necessary to tide over the critical interval and nurse matters, so to speak, back to normal conditions. For this purpose a substantial sum of money will have to be provided both for Government and local works, and under instructions from the Government various Departments of State (the Public Works, Lands, Railways, &c.) are already giving attention to the matter. The object to be attained is the provision of works of public utility suitable for the employment of discharged soldiers, and the problem will be to have arrangements for such works advanced to such a stage that they can be promptly taken up when the emergency arises, and be equally capable of postponement if that emergency is deferred.

The co-operation of local bodies should, I think, be also invoked to assist in dealing with the great problem which lies before us. The financial arrangements necessary to enable them to do so must be the subject of future consideration, and it is possible that for the smaller undertakings the money will be advanced by the Government. In connection with this aspect of the question I have expressed the opinion that Parliament should be asked to provide that the consent of the ratepayers may be dispensed with for works proposed by the local authority and approved by the Government after inspection and report by its advisers. I am of opinion that this is desirable to avoid the delay and uncertainty which might otherwise prevail. I recognize that this is somewhat of a departure from the usual practice, though special works have from time to time been similarly authorized by Parliament under unusual circumstances. If adopted in the present instance provision would be made for any proposals to be the subject of special investigation and inquiry by a person or persons nominated by the Government in that behalf. The inquiry would be held in the locality affected, and opportunity would be given to opponents of the scheme to appear and give evidence.