

1924.
NEW ZEALAND

PUBLIC WORKS STATEMENT

BY THE HON. J. G. COATES, MINISTER OF PUBLIC WORKS.

MR. SPEAKER,—

In placing before you this my fifth annual Statement of the activities of the Public Works Department, I desire at the outset to emphasize the fact that if more money could reasonably be placed at my disposal, works in hand could be finished in less time, and others, which cannot now be commenced, might be added to the year's programme of work.

Much as we all desire to see public works of every description expeditiously carried out, great care must be exercised in selection, and decisions arrived at only after ascertaining both the advantages to be derived from the completed works and the country's ability to meet the cost. Furthermore, New Zealand is now practically in the stage when all its able-bodied competent workers are fully employed. To increase the rate of expenditure means increasing the number of men employed by the Department on public works. This can only be achieved by taking men out of other avenues of employment, which would inevitably result in wage competition. Those who carefully observe what happened in the two years immediately following the war—the high cost of works and the small output of labour—will not, in the general interests of the people, willingly allow such a state of affairs to recur. It seems to me an economic necessity that growth of production, population, revenues, and capital expenditure out of borrowed money should at least march together, but it is undeniably better for the future of the country that capital expenditure should be kept strictly in arrear of the other factors.

Works of development are necessary in order to increase production, but very careful consideration must be given to so balance the developmental work with the man-power available that the development of new works shall not be hampered and yet at the same time that the country shall not arrive at a stage where a considerable proportion of its breadwinners shall look upon borrowed money as their regular source of livelihood.

Before dealing with the construction work of the Department in detail I wish to express my appreciation of the excellent work done by the Engineers and their staffs, and of the loyal assistance they have invariably given me. By every means in their power they have been indefatigable in endeavouring to obtain the best results. To the men who have toiled, in all weathers, often in inaccessible localities on the outskirts of civilization, I also wish to convey my thanks. They have made a splendid response to the call upon their energy and endurance. They are men whose work does not come much under the public eye, yet it is largely through their efforts that we are able to provide the last link in the line of communication between the hard-working pioneers of the backblocks and the markets of the world. By their work we are able to increase the number of people in the rural areas and lay the foundations for the larger population to follow.

It is especially worthy of notice that during the past year there has been an absence of serious difference between the Department and its workers. In place of trouble there has been reason and understanding, to the mutual advantage of all concerned.