

THE MAINTENANCE PROBLEM.

There has been an ever-increasing number of complaints regarding damage by motor-vehicles throughout the Dominion, especially in the North Island, where metal-ling is so expensive. The regulation of motor traffic is essential, otherwise much of the expenditure that has taken place during recent years, and is still taking place, will to a large extent be wasted. The roads are built for all, and it is unreasonable that a road which is adequate and economical for 95 per cent. of the travellers and transport organizations should be ruined by a few very heavy and rapidly-driven vehicles, in order that a few may make a little extra profit. The justice of these complaints has been recognized, and Parliament must give controlling authorities adequate powers to deal with the anomaly.

The necessity for improved maintenance cannot be too strongly stressed. Good work is done by local authorities and by the Government, but too often the belief seems to exist in the minds of those responsible that, having laid down a good road, there is no need to do anything more for years to come. Nothing could be farther from the truth and no belief more economically unsound. One of the provisions of the Main Highways Act, from which one may expect the greatest results, is that which authorizes the payment to local authorities of a subsidy of £1 for £2 on their maintenance expenditure. I hope that local authorities who are spending, say, £60 per annum per mile on their roads will not interpret and apply this section of the Act as relieving them of portion of their expenditure—in other words, that in future they should spend only £40 while the Highways Board provides the other £20. This may be reasonable in some cases, but my intention when framing this section was that the local authority would continue to spend its £60 and in addition another £30 provided by the Main Highways Maintenance Fund, and thereby much better roads would result, and heavy (in many cases) expenditure for reconstruction be postponed for years to come.

When we realize that per head of population we have twice as much roadway as there is in the United States and twelve times as much as in England, it must be admitted that a standard of construction per mile as good as exists in these older, more populous, and richer countries cannot be expected in New Zealand. Nevertheless, the results that have been obtained to date in New Zealand need give no cause for complaint. While the United States has only about 13 per cent. of its roads hard-surfaced, New Zealand has 40 per cent.

If we take the total areas of the respective countries into consideration, we find that the United States of America has less than one-eighth of a mile of improved road per square mile of territory, while New Zealand has nearly a quarter of a mile.

With the provision of a reasonable amount for opening up the backblocks, and the special funds made available under the Highways Act, I am confident that as the years go by New Zealand's position, both as regards the proportion of its improved roads and as regards the actual high standard of its more intensely trafficked highways, will be still further improved.

One of the Engineers of the Department has been abroad for the past twelve months obtaining first-hand knowledge of road-construction and administration methods throughout Europe and America. The information which he has obtained will be of considerable value both to the Government, the Main Highways Board (with which he is associated), and local authorities. A report of his investigations and conclusions is appended hereto.

FLOOD DAMAGE.

Honourable members will recollect that last year floods of an exceptionally severe nature were experienced, and it might reasonably have been expected that damage such as then occurred would not occur again for some time, but I regret to say that the phenomenal rains which occurred in the early part of this year, 1924, did damage to roads and bridges, and also railways, of quite an exceptional character. In many cases the cost of restoration was entirely beyond the means of local authorities, and substantial assistance by way of subsidy, and in some cases free grants, was found to be absolutely essential to open up and provide for the continuance of means of access to any districts where such serious damage was experienced. These works are still in hand, the main effort having been in the direction of re-establishing traffic with isolated districts.