NEW ZEALAND LISTENER

INCORPORATING N.Z. RADIO RECORD

Every Friday — Price Sixpence

AUGUST 9, 1957

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How Soft Can We Get?

THE Medical Officer of Health in Auckland, Dr A. S. Wallace, was reported recently to have said that New Zealanders are at present living in a "soft" environment which is producing its own diseases. Another view of the matter, expressed in Wellington, was that some diseases appear to have a wider incidence than in the past because more people are surviving into the vulnerable age groups. It is true, however, that the environment is changing, and that some diseases not much noticed — or diagnosed — in the past will find it congenial. Equally obvious is the growth of certain characteristics which may be seen as products of our way of life. Some of them, like the diseases, may be tenacious and troublesome; but it is doubtful if they have much connection with softness, a word which in this context must have suggestions of luxury.

A tourist who reaches one of our ports at the weekend will suspect that any sybaritic features of life in this country are carefully concealed. Luxury is not confined to food and furnishings and private swimming pools; it also has much to do with services, including some of the simpler kind that are withheld here—with strict impartiality. A visitor who wishes to move around without fuss and delay must learn, like everyone else, to carry his own luggage, and take his meals at times arranged not necessarily for *his* convenience. If he should be in Wellington, where trams are still lurching noisily through the streets, and should rashly attempt to use public transport at a peak hour, he would touch a side of life entirely without softness. Nowhere else in the world, surely, are human beings packed in so tightly—or, once in, are exposed to so much pushing, trampling, minor burns from cigarettes, and other indignities. The melee is bewildering to strangers, who cannot be expected to understand its athletic background. Most male New Zealanders play football in youth, and in later years never quite lose the instinct to pack down in a scrum. The tight rucking for which their forwards are justly famous, is now obviously a hereditary gift, fostered in trams, hotel bars and eating places when playing days are over. In cities where the last tram has long since been hung about with streamers and sent on its sentimental journey to the sheds, the scrummaging habit has shifted its ground but has not disappeared. The English, a phlegmatic people, have their queues. In this country a race of footballers has perfected the Platform Dash (a response to timetable necessity and the nearness of food when trains stop outside a refreshment room) which some day will be studied with interest by anthropologists.

These examples of national softness may seem to be taken too much from sport. A wider scene can be surveyed on any Saturday —unless, of course, a Ranfurly Shield game is being played within a radius of 100 miles. A visitor who toured the suburbs would pass through a great commotion: men and women scurrying up and down ladders with pots of paint, trundling wheelbarrows from concrete mixers, clearing scrub from new sections, removing hillsides or staggering up them with rocks and boulders, hammering and digging, and behaving generally like overburdened ants. It might be said that much of this activity is the result of our own obtuseness. We like a five-day working week, and therefore must ourselves do the jobs for which skilled labour is not sufficiently available. But the pattern is not widely different in office and factory. New Zealanders abroad are surprised to discover how often large staffs are needed for what is done here by only a handful of people. In spite of the growing population, human resources are thinly spread. The times are strenuous; it seems unlikely that our special contributions to disease will be traced to a soft environment. —M.H.H.