

The Building Slump.

A report was recently cabled from Sydney showing that there had been a slump last year in building operations. It was subsequently questioned by a well known builder, who made a comparison in expenditure, but the fact remains, that if proper allowance is made for the increased cost of building, there has been a slump in building activities in New South Wales, and the same unfortunate position prevails in New Zealand. The mainstay of building in normal times is the provision of dwellings. There are fortunate people who can provide themselves with new houses, regardless of the commercial side of the proposition. These owners have gone on, to a limited extent, in spite of the disadvantages occasioned by the war, but building dwellings as a commercial proposition is quite out of the question in New Zealand to-day, though the demand for dwellings in such centres as Wellington is absolutely unsatisfied. If private enterprise cannot do it, the State or the municipality must come into the business, for dwellings are a necessity, and the lack of them at reasonable rents constitutes a serious handicap to industrial concerns employing large bodies of labour. We are emphatically of opinion that the municipalities of New Zealand have here an opening for their enterprise which will bring enormous benefit to the people. They have ample power to undertake housing schemes, but it is spread over several statutes, and requires some research to discover the full powers. By turning up various amendments of the Municipal Corporations Act, and the Housing Act, it will be found that municipalities have power to borrow for the purpose of providing houses for their residents. These can be built either as simple renting propositions, or for sale on time payments. Auckland a year or so ago, decided to go in for some such scheme, and advertised for competitive plans, which were submitted. We understand that the architects were able to submit plans for good dwellings, of nice appearance, which were capable of being built at a reasonable cost, and could therefore be let at low rentals, and bought by the workingman tenants under an easy system of payments.

The War or the Ratepayer

Possibly the war is the cause of delay in carrying out this excellent scheme, but it is more than likely that the veto of the big ratepayer was responsible, for this influence is exercised most mysteriously in some of our cities. In Wellington, for instance, there is a Greater Wellington Town Planning and Municipal Association. It takes an interest in town planning, but its constitution is such that if a comprehensive municipal housing scheme came forward, the last body to give it official support would be this Association, which is first a ratepayers' protection league, and after that—a long way after we are afraid—a Town Planning Association. The leading spirits in this association are opposed to a betterment clause in any Town Planning Act. They are opposed to raising loans without the sanction of the ratepayers, who can be guaranteed to block any important money-spending scheme which is calculated to interfere with private profits from houses. Private enterprise has

given up the task of building rented dwellings, but the ratepayers of Wellington would have to be carried off their feet with campaigning before they would sanction a loan for municipal dwellings. So a state of stagnation prevails, though the need in Wellington is urgent. Wellingtonians are accustomed to see in every issue of their daily papers advertisements offering a bonus—sometimes as much as £10—to persons who will secure for the anxious advertiser a house to live in. The system is so ingrained that recently someone wrote to the press protesting against house-owners adopting it, by demanding a bonus for themselves before they would let their houses.

A Joint Responsibility

Municipal and State housebuilding is a well recognised responsibility in England, and is being taken up at present with renewed vigour. The necessity of properly housing the hundreds of thousands of war workers has been largely responsible for the revival of the housing question, and it is so general that all classes of workers will benefit. We can depend on the numerous housing and town planning associations in the Old Country to take full advantage of the tide of public opinion which is helping them so wonderfully, and we can only hope that a similar movement will arise here, as a result of the serious famine in houses in some parts of New Zealand, notably in Wellington. It is reported to be bad all over the North Island, so much so that railway workers, who are liable to be transferred when promoted, often refuse promotion if it means moving from the South to the North Island. We would like to give some facts showing what is being done in England at the moment. Bristol Council have adopted the scheme for building 2,000 houses in five garden suburbs, and have instructed the Committee to report on the probable cost of 8,000 additional houses. It is evident that the National Ministry is thoroughly alive to the situation and is closely co-operating with municipalities in a great public duty. The President of the Local Government Board, the Rt. Hon. W. Hayes Fisher recently announced that replies to recent official circulars indicated the probable need of 300,000 houses. He was able to announce that 900 local authorities had intimated their willingness to provide more than 150,000 houses. Those authorities added that something, but not much, might be expected from private enterprise. Mr. Hayes Fisher indicated that there was to be a kind of partnership in this matter between local authorities and the Government. The Treasury had agreed to find 75 per cent. of the estimated deficit, leaving 25 per cent. to be borne by the ratepayers—in any case not more than a penny rate. The local authorities had been informed that the Department would expect that there should not be more than 12 houses to every acre in an urban district, and not more than 8 in a rural district. We hope that the English example will stimulate New Zealand townplanners to a vigorous housing campaign. It has such a direct practical bearing on the people's welfare that the campaign would at once become popular. And popularity for an idea is the open sesame to the attention of New Zealand politicians.