

# · N · Z · BUILDING · PROGRESS

## CEMENT.

The report of Mr. Justice Sini on allegations by the Member for Stratford cleared the cement companies and the Board of Trade completely from any suggestion that there had been combination to exploit the public. It was shown that cement had throughout the war been cheaper in New Zealand than in outside markets. As for the famous agreement, it was found not to be illegal or criminal, and the Commission acquitted the Board of Trade of any laxity as a protector of the public interest in any of its price fixing efforts. The survey of the financial condition of the principal companies made by the Judge in his finding showed that they did not receive what would be regarded as a fair dividend on their capital during the period of price fixing. It is satisfactory to have thus cleared the air and reassured the general public that they have not been exploited by the general agreement which preceded the closing of the Golden Bay works. Cement is so important a raw material that the conditions under which it is produced in New Zealand have much to do with the general progress of the building industry. It has been shown that, for present demand, the cement manufacturing industry appears to be over-capitalised, and its possible output in excess of requirements. There are ample supplies of raw material, though one essential—coal—is somewhat too dear. When business becomes normal, there is no reason why the cement production of the Dominion should not prove to be of the most important of the secondary industries, and not altogether unprofitable to those who have invested very large sums on which, so far, they have not received too good a return.

## STATE HOUSING POLICY.

References in Parliament by the Prime Minister and the Hon. G. J. Anderson, Minister of Labour, show that the Government is becoming more than half-hearted over its housing policy. Tenants, according to the official view, badger the Labour Department for houses, express the utmost thankfulness for the facilities promised until they have actually been provided, and then they commence to complain. This is getting on the nerves of the

Minister and his officers. Quite wisely, they are determined not to have any State tenantry as a permanent institution. The houses are being purchased under an easy system of time payments, the scale of interest and principal being somewhat less than the rent of a house of similar size let as a private venture. The State has not been any more superior to circumstances than the ordinary citizen in overcoming the handicaps to successful and speedy construction. After valiant efforts to get over some of the troubles of the times, the Labour Department finds itself compelled to frankly confess that probably the local builder is in a better position to do work economically than any central scheme run by the State. On this point we quote the annual report of the Housing Department:—"In a previous year's report the advisability of establishing workshops and of purchasing materials was mentioned in anticipation of a large number of dwellings being put in hand in the chief centres. Under such circumstances this course would, no doubt, have led to economy and efficiency. The work of the Department appears to lie, however, in the direction of spreading its dwellings over many towns of the Dominion, both large and small, extending from Auckland and Wellington on the one hand to such places as Te Puke and Fairlie on the other. The erection of only, say, 500 houses in one year would, therefore, not provide for a large number in any one centre, yet it would involve the expenditure of nearly half a million of money per annum. While the establishment of workshops and the purchase of materials in the chief centres would probably result in some economy, which the Department has already been able to demonstrate in regard to the importation of roofing iron and other materials, the cost of storing the materials and distributing them to the jobs all over the Dominion would largely nullify the advantages anticipated. It would be scarcely possible, therefore, for the Department to compete with the local merchants and builders who carry on business in nearly every town, have their own shops and supplies on the spot, and know the local conditions. The letting of complete contracts would thus appear to be the most satisfactory method of carrying on the Department's housing work.