

APPENDIX H.

REPORT ON PUBLIC BUILDINGS BY THE ENGINEER IN CHARGE.

The ENGINEER IN CHARGE OF BUILDINGS to the Hon. the MINISTER for PUBLIC WORKS.

SIR,—

I have the honour to report to you upon the public buildings of the colony, and on the work executed in connection therewith, during the financial year 1889–90.

I have, &c.,

ARTHUR BELL,
Engineer in Charge of Buildings.

REPORT.

GENERAL.

As population increases, and settlement spreads, the wants of the community grow proportionately. Some spot which last year was merely a road-junction with a carriers' inn and a forge may this year develop into a township demanding facilities for postal, judicial, police, or other services, accommodation for the administration of which must be provided. Buildings in established places utilised or built for the public service which a few years ago were sufficient for the then needs, are to-day, as the village, borough, or town advances in importance, unequal to the demands made upon their space. Offices which have been housed in rented or purchased tenements have to put up with the inevitable inconveniences; and, in many cases, such buildings were originally erected a long time ago, perhaps on a cheap plan, and are now suffering from the effects of age and a general deterioration which no efforts of maintenance can economically or successfully cope with. Some, even, of the buildings originally erected by and continuously utilised for the services of Government in a less degree suffer from the same causes. The paramount necessity for economy, and the exigencies of the consolidated revenue, out of which all public buildings have to be upheld (only new buildings and materially extensive additions to larger existing buildings being charged against loan), have, during late years, prevented many recognised and much-required works of maintenance and upkeep and general repair being effected, the votes granted having been barely sufficient to overtake those requisitions which came under the category of urgent and pressing necessities. These conditions and circumstances, amongst many others, create a continuous and widespread demand from all corners of the colony for new buildings, enlargements, additions, removals, increased facilities, external and internal repairs, alterations, painting, maintenance, furniture and fittings, and a vast variety of other general improvements.

The experience of a comparatively short period of office in charge of public buildings has produced a firm conviction that the large majority of these demands are only too well founded, and unless they are early met in a liberal spirit by the provision of larger votes, the economy which at present bars their accomplishment will be not an economy but a waste. The Government is really in the position of landlord, and there is no private owner of house property but is aware that failure to uphold a fair and proper degree of maintenance will only in the end result in loss, and that it is his interest and economy to preserve that property to the greatest degree possible, not only structurally, but as regards appearance both externally and internally.

Moreover, on first principles surely, public buildings, as such, should, for the credit of the colony, be not only maintained in a very complete manner, and enabled to present at all times a neat and finished, if not imposing, appearance, as well in themselves as in their outbuildings, compounds, and fences; but also should be so dealt with from time to time as to afford full and complete space and facilities for the unhampered transaction of the business of the country, for the requirements of the public service, and for the convenience and comfort of the community in whose interest and for whose service they are designed and erected. These aspects of the case are perhaps not so painfully obvious to those not intimately connected with the general charge of public buildings; but an officer whose duties are established in that field of the service would be failing in the first of them if he omitted to urge as strongly as possible that economy is a quality that cannot be practised beyond a certain point in connection with such very concrete matters as buildings—which cannot be done without, and must be upheld unless the public service and convenience of the country are to materially suffer—without stultifying itself. It is the case, as a matter of hard fact, that a too facile practice of economy for some years past has already so far acted that the public buildings of the colony are far from being in the condition in which they ought to be; and it would be as well if this position were faced as boldly as it has been thought right to represent it strongly.

So far as the necessity of keeping within the limit of the vote of last year on the Consolidated Fund would permit, efforts have been made to cope with the exigencies of the situation; but these