

Defence Construction he was equally at home in negotiating with contractors, breaking supply bottlenecks, or discussing policy with the heads of the Armed Services.

In this section it is proposed to set down briefly the circumstances which led to his appointment, and to indicate something of the nature of the administrative problems with which he was faced.

By the end of 1941 the system of carrying out defence work by peacetime methods had become badly strained. Some contractors were attempting to take on more work than they were capable of executing, whilst others who had man-power and plant capacity were not sharing in the work because their tenders were not low enough. It was disconcerting also to find that private building was still drawing off an unduly large share of man-power and material resources, and even taking priority at times over the defence work which required to be executed.

With the entry into the war and the southward drive of Japan it became clear to the Government that drastic action would have to be taken at once to co-ordinate the whole resources of the building and constructional industries and to direct them with absolute priority into defence work. It was accordingly decided to place the whole constructional task under the single centralized control of the Defence Construction Council and to appoint Mr. Fletcher as the Chief Executive Officer with the title of Commissioner of Defence Construction. The members of the Council were the Right Hon. the Prime Minister as Chairman, the Commissioner as Vice-Chairman, and the Minister of Defence, the Minister of Public Works, the Engineer-in-Chief of the Public Works Department, the Director of Housing Construction, and a representative of Treasury. Mr. Fletcher was subject to the control of the Prime Minister and given wide powers to ensure that every interest was subordinated to the immediate task in hand. The warrant for Mr. Fletcher's appointment was signed in War Cabinet on 11th March, 1942. Colonel E. R. McKillop, 2nd N.Z.E.F., then returned from the Pacific and was appointed Deputy Commissioner on the 23rd March. Mr. Fletcher retained a very small staff, administrative action being obtained by direct contact with the Departments or authorities concerned.

Outstanding amongst the measures taken or initiated by the Commissioner at that time were—

- (a) Review and fixing of relative priorities as between the highly competitive construction projects of the Armed Forces and the American authorities:
- (b) The stepping-up of working-hours in the constructional industries to fifty-four per week:
- (c) Suspension of virtually all private building activity:
- (d) Establishment of rigid control over scarce building materials:
- (e) Extension of systems of standardization and prefabrication into many phases of defence work, particularly buildings of all kinds:
- (f) Suspension of private tendering for defence contracts, and replacement of this by a system of allocation of work and pooling of resources by master builders: