

1900.

NEW ZEALAND.

THE WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA

LETTER TO THE PREMIER FROM THE AGENT-GENERAL IN REPLY TO COMMENTS AS TO THE
ALLEGED MISLEADING NATURE OF CABLEGRAMS SENT BY HIM IN REFERENCE TO).

Laid upon the Table of the House of Representatives by Leave.

The AGENT-GENERAL to the Right Hon. the PREMIER.

Westminster Chambers, 13, Victoria Street,
London, S.W., 20th April, 1900.

SIR,—

By the two mails arriving this week I have received a considerable number of newspaper letters and articles relating to the telegrams sent to you by me between the 23rd November, 1899, and the 2nd March, 1900, about the war in South Africa.

Amongst others, I note that the Mayor of Gisborne telegraphed to you on behalf of a number of residents in that town protesting against the misleading character of my messages, and that you replied stating that, in the main, my messages had been already shown to be correct by the progress of events, and suggesting that he and other critics should suspend their judgment until they were in a position to form a final opinion. I have not been able to find the text of the Mayor of Gisborne's telegram in the newspaper files, but I assume that the points objected to by him are likely to be much the same as those taken exception to by others. If that be so, they related chiefly to my estimates of the strength of the opposing forces, and of the losses on each side.

Before dealing with these points, I would note that in certain newspapers reflections are made by writers—anonymous or other—upon my loyalty to my country. To these I decline to make any reply whatever.

Other objectors take exception to the "gloomy tone" of my messages. They appear to overlook the fact that my telegrams were addressed, not to the newspapers or to an excited and enthusiastic public, but to yourself. An official who is sending cable messages to his Government at 3s. 11d. a word is not likely to indulge in flowers of sentiment, or in spread-eagle descriptions of picturesque and interesting episodes. Nor is he called upon to consider what effect his messages will have upon enthusiastic readers imperfectly informed upon the incidents of the war. It is his business to tell his Government the driest facts in the briefest and plainest words. That is what I honestly endeavoured to do. When, at the end of last year, I became aware from the receipt of New Zealand papers that my telegrams to you were being handed to the Press for public information, I did not consider that it was my duty to modify their tone, nor do I think so now. I did foresee that some of my cables would probably grate upon the minds of readers who were being misled by inflated and inaccurate newspaper telegrams. I did foresee that the results might not possibly be exactly pleasant to myself; and I am not altogether surprised, therefore, at what has happened. Side by side with my cables were the amplified and sometimes highly coloured messages of the Press Association. In the course of transit from South Africa through London and Australia to New Zealand newspaper intelligence goes through very careful subediting, a considerable process of expansion, and some literary embellishment. Nothing of this sort, of course, was done—nor ought it to have been done—with my cables; and they may well have appeared to many to be hard, abrupt, and somewhat cold-blooded.

Especial exception seems to have been taken to my estimate of the Boer forces and losses up to the 28th February. On that day I telegraphed, "I calculate about 35,000 still in the field, with perhaps 4,000 reserve Pretoria Johannesburg. . . . Boers total losses 9,000 or 10,000, including 4,000 or 5,000 prisoners of war." In course of transmission "I calculate" became altered into "it is authenticated that"—a very different thing. First, as to the enemy's losses: On the 23rd March—that is to say, more than three weeks after my telegram went—the Boer prisoners in our hands were officially returned at 5,000 (see statement of Hon. George Wyndham in the House of Commons). A certain number of prisoners had been picked up between the 28th February and the 23rd March, so that my statement at the former date was precisely correct.