

I do not wish to infer that all Natives are defaulters. On the contrary, in some of the older-settled counties Natives are often the largest ratepayers and the most prompt in settling their liabilities.

Another question which has been the subject of discussion at every Counties Conference, but on which there is yet no sign of unanimity, is that of the date of elections in counties. The feeling that they should, as far as possible, be held at the same time as municipal elections seems to be growing steadily.

In concluding this phase of the subject, I would urge the necessity of a new Counties Act. The present one, which dates from 1886, is not only hopelessly out of date, but some sections are so conflicting one with another as to be altogether unintelligible.

*Road Districts.*—Thirteen road districts went out of existence during the year by merger in their respective counties. This gradual abolition of a form of local government that has been of inestimable value to New Zealand, in respect both of the lasting work accomplished under it and of the class of men whom it brought into public life, though a matter perhaps for sentimental regret, is after all an indication of the growth of the wider and more complete form of county government.

With the growth of the country population and improved means of communication from one part to another the number of counties will be reduced, and the County Council of the future, governing a largely increased area, will wield extensive powers, embracing matters at present the particular concern of special bodies.

Side by side with the decline of Road Board government in the settled counties is the phenomenon of a revival thereof in districts now feeling for the first time the need of local government.

The Counties Act is still not in force in Taupo West County, but full advantage has been taken of the provisions of section 27 of the Reserves and other Lands Disposal and Public Bodies Empowering Act, 1916, five road districts having been constituted thereunder in that county with excellent results.

*Land-drainage and River Districts.*—Three new drainage districts were constituted and the boundaries of seven existing districts were altered during the year. The activity in this particular sphere of local government is a very fair indication of the amount of development-work going on in connection with the settlement of swamp lands.

Though the only petitions under the River Boards Act, 1908, received were for the abolition of an existing district (Palmerston North - Kairanga) and an alteration of another (South Orari), the year was one of unparalleled departmental activity. The long-standing matter of a comprehensive scheme of protective works for the Wairau River was brought to a head by the appointment of a Commission, the report of which it is hoped to make the subject of special legislation during the coming session of Parliament.

The Waikato River is another of our important waterways that sooner or later will have to be dealt with specially.

A Commission to inquire into troubles arising out of the construction by the Akaaka Drainage Board of certain drains emptying into the Waikato River was appointed, and its report showed clearly the danger of piecemeal operations. The Waikato River has problems peculiarly its own. It is a navigable waterway, with many square miles of swamp country adjoining. It will be a difficult matter to devise a scheme of river-protection which will at once allow of the swamp lands being drained and safeguard the river for navigation purposes. A *sine qua non* for this is undivided control—one body equipped with all necessary powers, including those contained in both the River Boards and Land Drainage Acts—which shall have sole charge of the river from Lake Taupo to the sea.

A petition for alteration of boundaries of the South Orari River District reopened the question of the Orari and Waihi Rivers, upon which Mr. Furkert, Inspecting Engineer of the Public Works Department, furnished a valuable report a few years ago. There again the obvious course to pursue is to constitute one district comprising the whole of the watersheds of these two rivers.

A considerable amount of the Department's time was taken up in a correspondence with the Hawke's Bay Rivers Board respecting the Hawke's Bay Rivers Amendment Bill, 1917, which was passed into law with a provision requiring the appointment of a Commission to inquire into certain matters connected with the district. This Act was rendered necessary by the impossibility of making any alteration of the boundaries of the district under the River Boards Act. The Commission, with the Chief Justice as Chairman, was duly constituted, and its decisions are now law.

The petition praying for abolition of the Palmerston North - Kairanga River District revived a long-standing contention between the River Board and the Borough Council. The matter was still under consideration at the end of the year.

The River Boards Amendment Act, 1917, which enables the Governor-General to set up a Commission to report as to the failure by a River Board to provide river-protection works, and empowers the Minister of Public Works to carry out any works recommended by the Commission, the cost of the same to be recovered from the River Board, is a valuable piece of legislation. Action is at present being taken under it in respect of the Otatau River District.

*Lake Coleridge Water-power Act, 1915.*—Powers of Borough Councils with respect to lighting and the supply of electricity were conferred on the Waimairi and Heathcote County Councils.

*Cost of Living Act, 1915.*—I have to report that no Borough Councils have applied for the issue of regulations under section 13 of this Act. The cost-of-living question seems to be regarded by local bodies as a subject for discussion rather than definite action.

*Alien Electors of Local Bodies.*—The existing law being anything but clear, legislation defining the rights and powers of aliens with respect to local elections and polls was enacted last year (sections 11 and 12 of the War Legislation Act, 1917). Alien enemies are disqualified either from voting at any local election or poll or from being elected or appointed as members of a local authority. Alien friends may not be elected as members, but are not disqualified from being enrolled as electors of local bodies or from exercising their votes as such.