

shortage of houses has been reduced to a reasonable extent. Further, it is not possible to proceed with a successful slum-clearance campaign until special empowering legislation on similar lines to that in operation in Great Britain is available. During the Government's present term of office it is hoped to submit a Housing and Slum Clearance Bill for the consideration of Parliament. I may add that the Government have also under consideration special provisions for dealing with the difficult problem of houses in rural districts.

The Government's house-building operations through the Department of Housing Construction have been expanded to the limit set by the availability of skilled labour.

In the 1936 Budget, when the Government's housing policy was announced, it was stated that it provided for the construction of 5,000 houses. It is expected that the five thousandth home will be delivered for occupation in less than three months' time, and by that date another 2,500 houses will be partially completed.

On numerous occasions since the commencement of the Government's house-building programme it has been stated by critics of the Government that private enterprise in house building would practically disappear and that therefore the Government's efforts would result in no more houses being available than in the past. How far from the truth these contentions were is disclosed by the statistics, which show that permits taken out for private dwellings numbered 4,140 for 1935-36 compared with 4,648 for 1938-39.

The operations of the Department have been superimposed upon the normal work carried out by private enterprise, assisted, of course, in the usual manner by State Advances loans. During last year the Housing Construction Department commenced building 3,445 houses, while the total number of dwellings arranged for was 8,093, a figure that has broken previous records by a substantial margin. The previous highest figure for permits for dwellings was 7,179 for the year 1926-27.

Results achieved.

The fact that such progress has been made concurrently with the most vigorous programme of other Government buildings on record, and in spite of the grave depletion in our sources of skilled labour as a result of the virtual collapse of the apprenticeship system during the depression years, is a remarkable achievement and reflects great credit on both the building industry and the workers engaged in that industry. Further, not only has the Government's policy resulted in the production of a record number of homes, but more people were enabled to own their own homes in 1938-39 than in any year for almost a decade. This fact disproves conclusively the statements which have been persistently circulated that the present Government's objective was to create a universal state tenantry.

It was realized at the commencement that the progress of the Housing Scheme would depend very largely on the availability of skilled labour. It was reported in the last Budget that the operations of the Department were being seriously delayed on account of this factor. It was also mentioned that the average number of artisans employed by the contractors on each house that was under actual construction was only 1.8. After the date of the last Budget the position grew progressively worse, until by November, 1938, there were only 1.5 artisans employed per house under construction. When the number of houses in progress was taken into consideration it was realized that the Department was relatively worse off in November than in July to the extent of the services of about six hundred artisans. The housing survey, together with the position disclosed by the inspections of the premises occupied by applicants for State rental houses, showed such an urgent need for improved accommodation for so many people that the Government decided to adopt the most prompt means of augmenting the supply of skilled labour—namely, by bringing artisans from overseas. Early in the present year Mr. J. Hodgins, M.P., was deputed to visit Australia for the purpose of selecting suitable men, and to date 384 tradesmen have been brought to the Dominion from this source. In addition, arrangements have been made to bring over a period of six months about five hundred artisans from Great Britain, and the first groups have already arrived.

Shortage of skilled labour.