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No 55.—HON. STEPHEN RICHARDS, Q. C.,
COMMISSIONER OF CROWN LANDS, ONT.

Among the members of the Ontario Cabinet it can hardly be said that any one holds a more important portfolio than that of the Crown Lands Commissioner. The administration of the Crown Lands of the Upper Province has ever been a matter of much concern, and no little embarrassment to the Government, and of late years the feeling had grown so strong in favour of a total revision of the system, that the continuation of old rules and regulations was only tolerated because of the belief that the then expected accomplishment of Confederation would soon put an end to it. In the autumn of 1864, when the Hon. D. L. Macpherson successfully contested the representation of the Saugeen Division against the Hon. Mr. McMurrich, the previous member, the Crown Lands policy was a theme of earnest discussion, and Mr. Macpherson attacked it with such persistency and vigour that he may be said to have utterly undermined its foundations. He advocated the adoption of the free homestead system on the most liberal basis; the commutation of the claims against Crown Lands settlers, based upon the speculative prices of eight or ten years before; the appointment of a commission to appraise and determine the value of lands purchased but unpaid for, &c, &c., and, altogether, he set the mind of the western peninsula, especially of the counties of Bruce, Grey, and Simcoe—and, we may add, of Wellington and Huron—thinking seriously on the Crown Lands administration, and the universal verdict was that it had been faulty, and ought to be changed. Other parts of the Province were not slow to sympathise with these views, and when, during the session of 1865, Mr. Macpherson brought the subject before the consideration of the Legislative Council, he received very general support; not only in that body, but throughout the two Provinces, the press and many public men being in favour of the reforms he urged. However, it was the season of delays; "Wait until after Confederation is accomplished" was the invariable answer to every

demand for change; and notably so with respect to the Crown domain, because it was very properly argued that, as the Crown Lands were to be handed over to each Province, it would be unfair, or at least unwise, to introduce a new system that, in a year or two, might be set aside. Thus it came to pass that, though for several years the

are accepted by all parties, without hesitation, as decided improvements. It has been in the Crown Lands Department that some of the most important alterations in previously existing laws have been made. The free grant system and home-stead law; the reformed mining regulations; the comparison with settlers in arrears on all save the school lands—a special trust—have all been measures introduced and carried by the Ontario Government, immediately connected with the Department over which the Hon. Mr. Richards presides. In addition to the preparation of these measures, an immense amount of arrearages has had to be dealt with—cases pending for many years, the papers relating to which had grown musty in the pigeon-holes of the Department—and these, we understand, have been brought to a settlement with a promptitude unknown under the old régime. Vigorous efforts have also been made to collect from all settlers, who were able, but unwilling, to pay the arrears due on their lots, thinking it better to hold the Government's money at six per cent., simple interest, so long as they could make double the percentage upon it and compound it too. In this matter Mr. Richards has encountered no small share of censure, and perhaps the mode adopted was not always the best one; but, in simple justice to those who had paid in full, it was only right that the Government should endeavour to collect from the defaulters. The plan now adopted, however, is likely in time to close up the whole business, and to give fair consideration to those who, having inferior lands, ought not



HON. STEPHEN RICHARDS, Q. C., COMMISSIONER OF CROWN LANDS, ONTARIO.
FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY NOTMAN & FRASER.

public mind was ripe for a change, the old system continued in force, everybody condemning it, until the Local Legislatures were organised.

The Ontario Ministry, under the leadership of the Hon. J. S. Macdonald, was composed of men distinguished for their adhesion to principles of constitutional, rather than of administrative, reform; yet, amongst the measures they have passed, since coming into power, there is scarcely one that does not bear the character of a thoroughly practical change, and many of the changes

to be expected to pay at the same rate as those who got the choice lots in the Province. In all these important reforms, the course of Mr. Richards has been marked by extreme caution. No whim has been rashly adopted; but every change has been introduced after mature deliberation, and, when put in force, has speedily developed its wisdom, until now it may be said that Ontario has the most efficient and progressive land policy in the Dominion.

Stephen Richards is the son of the late