

as seems to us, with little cogency, of placing in the hands of the firm of car-makers in America already referred to—whom the brother of the Colonial Treasurer (or Finance Minister) represented as local agent when the sample vehicle was purchased—an extensive order for these vehicles. A report had, however, been received from the acting locomotive engineer—the locomotive engineer being then absent from the colony on leave—in reference to the sample vehicle, which was not favourable to its adoption for traffic purposes. It was not unnatural therefore that the Minister should desire, before taking further action in the matter, to fortify his position by a personal examination and trial of the sample waggon. A meeting of the officers of the Railway Department was accordingly convened, though, apparently, in a somewhat informal manner, to attend the minister on the occasion. No expression of their opinion appears, however, to have been invited either by the Minister, or by the Commissioner, either then or subsequently, as to the result of the trial and examination. Yet, notwithstanding this, the circumstance of their having been present was advanced by the Minister, when called upon by the Committee for an explanation of the transaction, as a reason for holding the locomotive officers responsible for the defective construction which the evidence disclosed as existing in the waggons supplied.

The informal nature of the meeting is shown by the answer of the Minister to a question asked by the Committee. The question and answer were as follows :

"Do you know whether they" (the locomotive officers) "were asked to examine the car personally?"—"They were not specially asked to make any examination, or to give any report, or to advise in any way; but they were present, and were freely conversing with me, and I consider it was unnecessary to ask the question. Had our positions been changed, I should have felt it my duty to have pointed out to my chief any defects that I observed."

Such an avowal on the part of the Minister at the head of an important Government department as to the happy-go-lucky way of conducting business at the public expense is certainly remarkable, and it is hardly consistent with the honour and position of a "minister of the Crown" to seek to throw upon the technical officers of the department the onus of the situation caused by his own act, and by the neglect either of himself or of the Commissioner, to obtain in a business-like and official manner the opinion of those officers before entering into the contract. Neither was it becoming of the Minister to call as a witness against his fellow-officers (as it appears from the evidence he did) the engineer of another branch of the Railway Department in support of his (the Minister's) contention that the locomotive officers had evaded their duty in not volunteering an expression of their opinion on the occasion. Such proceedings are not calculated to contribute to that harmonious working of the department which is so essential to the proper and safe conduct of a railway, and we cannot but think that any engineer imbued with a proper sense of what was due to his position or to his fellow-officers would allow himself to be made a party to such a proceeding. The Minister, however, feeling no doubt that his expression of opinion would, if unsupported, have little weight under the circumstances, thought proper to call to his aid the witness already referred to, who appears to have been in attendance on the Minister on the occasion, but who, nevertheless, as not belonging to the locomotive branch, seems to have thought himself not only free of responsibility in the matter, but even at liberty to criticise the conduct of his fellow-officers. In justice to both the Minister and his witness, we give the question and answer verbatim as follows :

"Would you consider that any officer present who saw anything that was decidedly deficient would fail in his duty unless he called attention to it?"—"Certainly; I know the acting locomotive engineer in speaking of the dump-car—of the under carriage particularly—drew attention to the style of it and pointed out how simple and good it was, and that it was all that was necessary for a car of that description to carry goods."

At a subsequent meeting the chairman of the Committee, having read the above question and answer to the acting locomotive engineer, asked if he desired to make any explanation and received the following reply :

"Any officer of the department would naturally call attention to anything defective or dangerous, but I had already done that in my minute of April 17, 1883, as I have said before, and if I had done so again on that occasion I should have

been offensive; I consider I should have been forcing my views on the Minister. I would have run the risk of being checked; in fact I have been checked for doing my duty in that particular respect."

We leave it to our readers to form their own opinion as to whether there was or was not, in the circumstances, the neglect of duty contended for by the Minister, but, either way, we are of opinion that no stronger evidence could be afforded of the false position in which the technical staff are placed, or of the unsatisfactory relations and want of confidence existing between them and the individuals for the time being in power as the outcome of the pernicious influences at work.

As regards the Commissioner's share in the matter and the part he took in endeavouring to fasten upon the locomotive engineers responsibility not warranted, as seems to us by the circumstances, we need only quote one answer given by him to a question put by the Committee as to whether any officer in the Locomotive department was referred to, to say if the sample car was safe, before the order for the 200 additional cars was given. The Commissioner's answer on that point was as follows :

"I was particularly careful, in making the contract, to stipulate that the cars supplied should be to the satisfaction of the locomotive engineer—that all its details as regards its draw gear and its buffer arrangements should be in strict accordance with the requirements of our locomotive engineer. If it should turn out that the stock has not been supplied to the satisfaction of the engineers—if they have any doubt as to the stability of the draw gear—it will be their duty to bring it under my attention, and I shall call upon them to show cause why they did not provide for the due stability of all these working parts."

But as, in reply to the next question put by the Committee, the Commissioner admitted, although in somewhat halting terms, that the officers concerned had not been specially made aware, prior to the giving of the order, of his desire to have the additional vehicles manufactured, and that provision for the proper connection of the bodies to the wheels was "not embodied in any formal document between the Government and the contractor," but was left to a "general stipulation"—taken in conjunction with the fact that the vehicles were constructed in America beyond the observation of the locomotive staff, and merely put together in the colony—we fail to see how the opportunity was afforded the engineers for "providing for the due stability of the working parts," for which the Commissioner desired to hold them responsible. This portion of the case is, however, only in keeping with the rest of the transaction, and affords additional evidence of the false position in which the technical staff are placed when a non-professional man, in the position of the Commissioner, attempts to deal with such matters.

Further comment is unnecessary, and we need merely remark, in conclusion, that, in view of the unsatisfactory conditions which are characteristic of the public service of the Australian colonies under existing political influences, the Governments of these colonies need not be surprised if they fail to retain in, and to draw to, their service men of character or standing in the profession.—*Eng.*

—THE new dredge City of Paris, built for digging out the Panama Canal, arrived at Aspinwall on the 28th ult. in town of the steamship "Portia". She will be immediately put to work.

—A curious invention especially designed for navigating the Nile, but which is applicable to other rivers, has been brought out by Messrs. Yarrow of Vickburg. The object of the invention is to notify the Pilot of the existence of sand-banks or rocks lying directly in his pathway. The invention consists of two poles projecting about fifty feet ahead from the post and starboard sides at the end of which are suspended two vertical iron rods. The bottom extremities of these come about one foot below the level of the boat itself. Attached to each of these two vertical iron is a wire rope which passes inboard, and is connected with the whistle on the boiler; and the gear is so arranged that immediately this indicator touches a rock or sand-bank it instantly causes the steam whistle to blow. This plan in the first instance draws the Pilot's attention to the fact, and also points out to him on which side of the steamer the sand-bank or rock exists, so that it gives him warning in which direction to steer.