

Open Council.

Controversial articles and comments on current events are invited for this column, the Editor not holding himself responsible for such contributions, however, whilst yet reserving the right to reject. Each article must have the author's initials, another one attached, and personal attacks must carry the writer's full name and address.

THE COOLIE QUESTION.

THE Coolie question has been undergoing some energetic discussion on the Coast. An important meeting was held in Durban a fortnight ago, at which the principal speaker was Mr Binns, a clear-headed member of the Legislative Council, and one largely interested in Coast industries. He went into the subject with some fulness; expressing himself altogether in favour of having the Coolie in the Colony, even at the price he costs in money and otherwise. His labour, Mr Binns held, is a necessity, and when, after he completes the service for which he hires himself, he takes to industry on his own account, he is a factor of gain in the economics of the Colony. A meeting of sugar, tea and coffee growers in the Umzimkulu district, held immediately afterwards, also pronounced the Coolie to be essential to their industry, but would have his presence in the Colony at an end when his service period expired. Other speakers declared against the Colony having anything to do with bringing the Coolies here, and against their having any place amongst us except as the servants of those who might import them at their own cost for labour under hire. The question forms an element in the electioneering speeches and contest which Durban is at present having. The planting interest looks upon it as if a struggle is at hand for the maintenance of the Coolie importation system, at all events in as far as Government assistance to it goes.

Most people—differing from the Durban candidate, Mr King—are satisfied that for the Coast industries the labour of coloured people is essential, and of those people the Asiatics are alone those whose labour is available. The difficulty lies in the conditions on which the labour is to be got. The Coolie is at present brought over the Indian Ocean to us on an agreement which gives him, for a stipulated period, a certain rate of money wages besides food, and further gives him the option of remaining in the Colony to shift for himself after his period of service terminates. This last condition most people would be willing to see absent. Why is it not excluded in making terms with the Coolies? Simply, no doubt, because it cannot be; they will not come to Natal without it. It is legitimate for them to stipulate for it, as it is legitimate for the importing agency to decline acceding to it, and if each holds out there will be no business. It is all a question of price; the conditions are the lowest on which the Coolie labour can be got. We have to assume so until other terms are tried and succeed. What gives some people who cry out against the Coolies a position foolish and worse, is that they fight shy of asking that the bargain at first should distinctly exclude a condition of liberty to remain in the Colony at their freedom; they seem merely to say, When the Coolie ceases to be a servant, drive him out of the Colony. We believe they are in reality in the minority who are prepared to say, Rather than have anything else of him than his service, abstain from bringing him into the Colony. People intelligent and unprejudiced hold that the Indian, even when working for himself, is a gain to the Colony. The man who can more successfully than another, or who alone can work our soil cannot but be a means of the country's enrichment, and it is undeniable that a Coolie can and does make a living out of ground that a European with his own hands could or would not turn to profitable account. It is for his success in drawing produce from the soil and supplying the market with it that some Europeans would have him driven away—he is in competition with them! The idea is against laws of economy, and Englishmen should feel above expressing it. In fact, generally when it is expressed, it is with some appearance of the utterers being conscious that it is weak or a thing to be ashamed of; press them a little in the argument, and you will find them shifting the ground—they will tell you that it is the Asiatic's inferior place in civilization and moral life that makes him objectionable. It is at times even

convenient to hold up the opposite quality of plodding industry as being the evil which makes the free Indian an infliction. An Umzimkulu champion of the planters' claim to Coolie labour says, in a letter to the *Messenger*, that they do not want to have the 'idle, dissipated, reckless, so-called free Indian.' The complainers of the India's too determined industry and the asserters of his idleness have a settlement to make with each other. The Natal Colony is in the curious position of having to get Coolie labour weighted with the condition of having to give room to a large side body of free Indians who are inconveniently industrious, and then to get its native labour weighted with the condition of having the source of supply many times too large, in other words, of having to give room to a large population of blacks, all of whom, excepting the fraction given to do work as servants, live, as it said, in sloth and idleness. But let the question be asked, If the Colonists were to be offered to-morrow to be relieved of the presence of the whole, labourers and non-labourers, would they agree to it? We have little doubt the answer would be No; they would sooner have things as they are. This should be remembered by the declaimers against the Government for not 'ruling' the natives into labour. Let sufficient and natural time be given, and the education of direct instruction, of the example of the whites, and of circumstances in limiting land in relation to population will bring the blacks to be industrious. Attempts at 'ruling' in the way meant would come to grief.

In justifying the £10,000 given by Government to assist the Coolie importation, Mr Binns is on weaker ground. The principle of it is an unsound one, and it is difficult to see anything in the special circumstances to form a good exception. Sugar growing is an industry that can be pursued on any scale, and is therefore suited to various classes of growers; in this respect differing from railway construction, which, when beyond the means of individuals, may lawfully be taken in hand by the State as a thing necessary for the country. There is no such call to take the burden of sugar growing either in whole or in part. If the industry will not remunerate individuals, it will be difficult to show where the advantage lies of carrying it on. Mr Binns gave analogies in his own support, but they are not true ones. The grants given by Government as payment of scab inspectors, veterinary surgeon, and the like are given for purposes of its own in the interests of the general community. There are others than sheep farmers and horse breeders interested in animal disease being kept away, and they cannot look after their own interests except through the Government. The State employing and paying the functionaries mentioned is not on all fours with subsidising sheep farmers and horse breeders to carry on their industry, any more than erecting lighthouses and harbours of refuge is the same thing as it would be to subsidise ship-owners.—M.

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