

Enclosure in No. 37.

MEMORANDUM by Mr. HALL.

Wellington, 20th March, 1868.

THE following Memorandum on the origin and working of "The County of Westland Act, 1867," is respectfully submitted to His Excellency.

The County of Westland comprises that portion of the Middle Island of New Zealand lying between the Provinces of Nelson and Otago and the mountain range which runs through the island in a North and South direction. The greater part of this tract of country is broken and mountainous, and, with trifling exceptions, it is covered with dense forest. It was included in the Province of Canterbury when the division of New Zealand into Provinces was effected in 1853.

Until the year 1865 this district was almost unknown to and unvisited by Europeans. At that time, however, rich gold deposits were discovered, and in a few months not less than 15,000 or 20,000 miners and persons connected with gold mining had located themselves in Westland. This number has since that time much increased. In accordance with the usual practice in New Zealand the management of this gold field was delegated to the Provincial Government of the Province within which it was situated, and that Government without delay took the necessary steps for the administration of the affairs of the district and the maintenance of law and order among its population. It was placed, however, at a considerable disadvantage in discharging this duty, by the difficulty of communication between the East and West Coasts, between which no road had at that time been formed. The Westland gold fields remained under the administration of the Provincial Government of Canterbury until the end of the year 1867, and although the dissatisfaction to which its management has given rise has been such as to induce the General Assembly to put an end to it, it is but just to the Provincial Government to state that this result appears due rather to the inherent difficulties of the case, than to the absence of efforts on its part to provide an efficient local administration. Two representatives from the gold field were soon, after its proclamation, admitted into the Provincial Council of Canterbury, and this number was afterwards increased to five, and legislation on local subjects, adapted to the special wants of the Westland District, occupied a large share of the attention of the Council. The whole of the revenue collected in Westland by the Provincial Government was spent in public works and in maintaining the necessary establishments of Government, and even large advances for the same purpose were made from the funds of the eastern part of the Province.

Notwithstanding these endeavours, considerable dissatisfaction was expressed in Westland at the manner in which the revenues of the district were expended and its affairs managed, and this dissatisfaction continued to increase until it had culminated in a desire for separation from the Province of Canterbury. The explanation of this failure appears to lie in the fact that these two portions of the Province had no local interests in common. They are separated from each other by a lofty and rugged mountain range, which extends from the northern to the southern boundary of the Province, forming a natural barrier between the two districts. Their physical features, their interests and resources, and the character and pursuits of their inhabitants are in every respect entirely dissimilar. The eastern portion is a purely agricultural and pastoral country; the land has been either sold or let for grazing purposes, and its inhabitants look upon the district as their home. The western side of the range, on the other hand, is a dense forest, which, but for its vast mineral resources, would have remained unoccupied for many years to come. The residents there are all either engaged in mining or in supplying the wants of miners; their attachment to the soil is of a less permanent character than that which characterizes the East Coast settlers. They come chiefly from Victoria, and are unaccustomed to the local institutions of the Province of Canterbury.

The attention of the Colonial Government had for some time been directed to the above circumstances, and upon the presentation to the General Assembly of numerous signed petitions from Westland praying for its separation from the Province of Canterbury, Ministers were able to satisfy the Assembly that the time had arrived when new provision ought to be made for the local government of this important district. For such purpose it appeared desirable to devise some machinery less cumbrous and costly than that of the Provincial Governments as they are now constituted. It was therefore proposed that the District of Westland should be constituted a County, in which the management of roads and public works should be placed almost entirely in the hands of local road boards, and where a County Board or Council should be created by whom the funds available for those works should be distributed among the road boards, and which should advise and assist the Government or its local agent generally in the management of the affairs of the County. This proposal was embodied in a Bill which received the assent of the Assembly, and a copy of which is annexed to this Memorandum.

Owing to the circumstances under which this Act was passed, it was necessarily very imperfect, and many of its provisions were of an experimental character. The evils of the then existing system were, however, so pressing that it was thought desirable that the experiment should be initiated without delay, and that necessary amendments should be made in the Act as soon as practical experience of its working should have indicated the direction and character of the amendments which it required. Accordingly the Act was brought into force on the 1st January last; the Road Boards and the County Council have been elected; and the latter has held its first sitting, at which, by appointment of the Governor, I occupied the position of chairman.

The proceedings of the Council induce the Government to believe that the experiment will be a success. Many subjects of considerable local importance were discussed by the Council with judgment and moderation. The elected members brought to these discussions an amount of knowledge and experience which was found extremely useful, and the views and feelings of the residents in the County, whose interests were involved in those subjects, were effectually represented.

Among other questions the important one of the disposal of Crown Lands within the County in such a manner as to encourage agricultural settlement without unduly restricting mining enterprise, was fully considered, and recommendations have been furnished which the Colonial Government believes will form the basis of a satisfactory solution of this important question.