

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON WEIGHTS AND MEASURES AND ADULTERATION OF FOOD.

REPORT.

YOUR Committee, having entered upon an investigation of the matters referred to them, beg to report as follows:—

Weights and Measures.

They find that, by “The Weights and Measures Act, 1868,” all then existing laws in force in the Colony, whether under Acts or Ordinances of the Colonial Legislature, or under Acts of the Imperial Parliament, were repealed; but all districts theretofore defined as districts for the purposes of the repealed laws were, until altered, to be considered as districts under the new Act, and all Inspectors previously duly appointed were to retain their offices until resignation or removal. The Committee find that the “standard” weights and measures obtained in accordance with the provisions of the Act, and directed to be deposited in the office of the Colonial Secretary at Wellington, and kept by him under his control, are now deposited in the Laboratory annexed to the Colonial Museum, under the control of Dr. Hector, the Director of the Geological Survey, to whom has, in fact, been committed the entire discharge of the duties which by the Act are imposed upon the Colonial Secretary. Although this course is not in accordance with the law, it has proved convenient in practice; but your Committee find that the accommodation afforded to Dr. Hector for the custody of the “standards,” and for making the comparisons from time to time required by the Act, is very insufficient. They are informed by Dr. Hector that he finds it impossible to keep the instruments in that condition of cleanliness, and freedom from the effects of atmospheric action, which is so essential in such a case, the buildings in which they are kept not being in any degree fitted for the purpose. Your Committee feel that, in a matter which may most seriously affect all interests in the community, as one affecting, for example, the accuracy of all surveying operations, too great care cannot be taken for the preservation of the “standards.” In all foreign countries in which provision is made for securing uniformity of weights and measures, the detailed arrangements are placed, by law, under the authority and responsibility of a member of the Executive Government, who is usually charged with the duty of drawing up regulations, from time to time, for directing the method by which weights and measures in ordinary use are to be compared, verified, and stamped, both originally and periodically; how the duties of verification, &c., are to be performed, and by what officers, and what persons engaged in trade shall have their weights and measures and balances subject to verification; and usually official regulations made under such provisions are framed so as to include the minutest details. Your Committee recommend that this course should be adopted in this Colony, and that, although it may be attended with convenience that the custody of the standards and the duty of comparison should still remain with the Director of the Geological Survey, all responsibility should rest with the Minister charged with the department in question. They further specially recommend to the immediate consideration of the House, the necessity of providing proper accommodation for the custody of the “standards,” and for comparing and verifying the authorized copies issued to Inspectors.

With regard to the general working of the Act, your Committee find that, under the repealed laws, one Inspector had been appointed for each Province and one for the County of Westland, and that each of them had been supplied with authorized copies of the “standards;” but, from the evidence of the Inspector acting for the Province of Wellington, and from such information as your Committee were able to obtain in regard to other districts, it would appear that little is ever done to protect the public against the use of fraudulent weights and measures. It is true that the Act prohibits the use of any weights or measures which have not been compared, and imposes penalties on those who use them, or commit other breaches of the Act, as defined in section 45, but your Committee find that, in practice, this is of little use in protecting customers from frauds. Under the Act, Justices of the Peace and Inspectors may enter shops, &c., for the purpose of examining weights &c., but as no positive duty is cast upon them to do so, this part of the law is rarely if ever carried out. Your Committee cannot treat the power which purchasers undoubtedly have of taking proceedings for infractions of the law, as sufficient protection against the class of frauds referred to, for it rarely happens that private persons are willing to take upon themselves the trouble and certain degree of odium which attaches to informations of this kind, and it can scarcely be expected that other persons will voluntarily undertake such a duty.

Your Committee, after examining witnesses on the subject, are of opinion that it would conduce to the due observance of the law, and tend materially to secure to the public the advantages of a uniform system of dealing by weight and measure, if the duty of enforcing the provisions of the Act were cast upon the police force throughout the Colony, more especially by the appointment of special members of the force in the character, as it were, of revenue officers. They find that such is the case in Ireland, and that it has there been attended with great success, not only as securing the due working of the law, but also as a matter of financial economy. Upon this point your Committee find the following passage in the report of the Warden of the Standards in England for 1868-9:—

“Since 1866 the inspection of weights and measures in Dublin has been transferred to the Constabulary, as in other districts in Ireland. The remuneration to the Inspectors of Weights and Measures in Great Britain, who are police officers, appears to be nominal only, and merely sufficient to defray their district expenses. Out of the whole number of Inspectors who are not police officers, forty-three only appear to have no other occupation, their salaries and emoluments amounting to £6,378.”