

PART I.
Parliamentary
Debate, 1873.

There were also laws in America, passed by Congress, providing that the farmers must attend to the conservation of the forests. The destruction of the forests of New Zealand had been, for a great part, caused by wilful and culpable fires. Those fires must have been seen by every honorable member, and had been most destructive. It was not many years since 20,000 or 30,000 acres of forest land in Canterbury was destroyed by fire, and the loss was calculated at that time at about £70,000. One firm alone, Messrs. Holmes and Co., who owed part of the forest, lost 5,000 or 6,000 acres, and obtained damages to the amount of £3,000. They could not be too stringent in their rules and regulations about the forests. In other parts of the world the effects of destroying timber had been clearly seen. In one of the departments of France, at the head of the Rhone, where the forests had been burnt down, the excessive degradation of the mountain slopes, caused by the rapid drainage and violence of floods since the clearing of the forests, silted up river beds, and laid waste large areas of fertile land; in short, reduced to a shingle bed the land which had previously supported 27,000 people. In modern times, Ali Pacha burnt down the forests of the Peloponnesus, and there came famine and drought. Then the Russians burnt down the fine forest of the Caucasus, for the purpose of routing out the brave defenders of the soil, and the climate of the country changed completely: the land became barren, drought ensued, and whole tribes had, in consequence, been obliged to seek new homes in foreign lands, their own soil having become unfit for human habitation. Other parts of the world showed the same result; parts of Spain, Palestine, Asia, Northern Africa, which were once fertile and flourishing, were now arid wastes by the destruction of the forests; and even in New Zealand the climate, he believed, had been altered considerably by the effect of forest fires. They need not go far from Wellington to learn that the Hutt River had changed its course—that bridges had been broken down and land carried away by the overflow of that river, which had been caused by the great floods arising from the forest having been burnt. They should, moreover, be particularly careful at the present time, when they were constructing large public works—railways, bridges, piers, jetties, and houses of all kinds—of the conservancy of their forests. It was a question which affected all the inhabitants of the country. It affected the poor man more than the rich, for a time would come when timber would get so scarce and valuable, that houses would cost more to erect, and rents would become higher, which the poor man would feel more than the rich. Unless they took prompt action for the preservation of their forests, they might depend upon it that millions would be lost to the Colony. He trusted the Government would see its way to accept the motion. A Commission would be able to supply valuable reports not only upon one district, but upon the whole Colony. Doubtless such a report would take some time to get up; but the importance of the subject demanded that they should spare neither time, nor labour, nor expense in trying, to the best of their ability and knowledge, to devise some means whereby the forests of the Colony might be conserved, and future generations might not have to look at barren wastes where noble forests once flourished.

Motion made, and question proposed, "That, in the opinion of this House, it is expedient that prompt steps be taken for the conservation of the forests throughout the Colony, with which view it is resolved that a respectful address be transmitted to His Excellency the Governor, requesting that he may be pleased to appoint a Royal Commission to inquire into and report upon the state of the forests, and the best means for securing their conservation and permanency."—(*Mr. O'Neill.*)

Mr. McLEAN said this subject appeared to have been well considered by the honorable member, who last year made a similar motion, when the Government promised to bring in a Bill on the subject. A Bill was accordingly prepared during the recess, but owing to the press of work, and the many matters which had been brought before the House, the Government had not seen their way to introduce it this session. There was no doubt at all of the importance of the subject. The rivers in the country were gradually shallowing owing to the disappearance of the timber; the climate, also, had very materially altered. He believed that in some parts of the Province of Auckland there was much less rainfall than there was some years ago, when those parts were covered by forest. He did not know, however, whether the best or wisest course, or the least expensive, would be the appointment of a Commission. He felt that time might be thrown away, and that the subject would not be dealt with in a practical manner, by simply appointing a Commission to inquire into the case. The evidence of practical men in that House all went in the same direction—that something should be done for the conservation of the forests; and all the Government could promise was to look into the matter during the recess, with the view of introducing a Bill next session.

Mr. T. KELLY said it was very desirable that a part of the forests should be conserved, but he did not see what a Royal Commission could do; for even if it made recommendations, they might not be carried out. In some parts of the Colony—in Taranaki, for instance—a great area of the country was covered with forest, the preservation of which they could not desire, because they could only settle people on the land by getting rid of the forest. They found, too, that when a private individual wished to preserve a piece of forest, he had great difficulty in doing so; for, even if he succeeded in preserving it from fire, it died away when the surrounding bush was cut down; and he (Mr. Kelly) did not see how the Government could do on a large scale what individuals could not do on a small scale. The only way, perhaps, was for the Government to make large reserves of forest land in different parts of the country; but although some standing forest might thus be preserved, it would always be liable to be set on fire by accident, and no care on the part of the Government could prevent that. He did not think it was at all desirable that