

STATEMENT RELATIVE TO LAND PURCHASES, NORTH ISLAND.

Under Immigration and Public Works Acts of 1870 and 1873.

BY THE NATIVE MINISTER.

MR. SPEAKER,—

I consider it due to the House that a statement should be made by me in reference to the expenditure of moneys authorized under the Immigration and Public Works Acts, 1870 and 1873, for the purchase of Native lands in the North Island. I think this has become necessary, as I am aware that much has been said during the recess calculated to lead to the belief that sufficient care had not been taken to guard the public interests. I hope to be able to disabuse the minds of honorable Members if they entertain such ideas, and to show that the Government have at great disadvantage endeavoured faithfully to carry out the views of the House, and have succeeded as well as could be reasonably expected.

When it was decided by the General Assembly that a public estate should be acquired in the North Island for the purposes of colonization, the difficulties which had to be encountered were of no ordinary character.

From the year 1840 to 1862 the task of acquiring land from the aborigines was not so difficult, the Crown having the exclusive right of purchase. The Constitution Act maintained the right of pre-emption; but, through the action of this House, the Crown abrogated this provision of the Constitution, relinquished its right of pre-emption, and passed a law throwing open lands held by the Natives to private purchasers. Capitalists were not slow to avail themselves of the wide field thus opened out to them of profitably investing their money, and from time to time valuable tracts of country were obtained by them.

Able agents, many of them formerly officers of the Native Department, were employed. They were to be found in every district buying up the very choicest portions of the country, and year by year, through their operations, the carrying out of any large colonial scheme of land purchase was rendered more and more difficult.

In the year 1870 the Immigration and Public Works policy rendered it necessary that large tracts of country should be acquired for settlement. Accordingly the General Assembly voted first a sum of £200,000, and then a further sum of £500,000, to acquire land from the Natives. In undertaking this task the Government found itself with scarcely any officers of experience to carry out the delicate work of land-purchase negotiations. Men of ability were in the employ of the Government, but, with few exceptions, they were unacquainted with this peculiar duty, and could not therefore cope successfully with the experienced agents in the employ of capitalists to be met with in all parts of the Island. It must be remembered that lands which had passed through the Native Land Court were open to all alike—there was no exception in favour of the Government. A slight advantage only was gained by the colony under the provisions of the Immigration and Public Works Acts over lands which had not been adjudicated upon, which gave the Government protection for two years.