

CROWN LANDS DEPARTMENT.

Organization of
department.

Since the abolition of provinces the control of this department has been vested in the Minister of Lands, with a Secretary, Under-Secretary, and clerks in the central office, and a Waste Lands Board, Commissioner, and staff in each of the provincial land districts, of which there are ten. The Land Act in force is applicable to the whole colony; but embodied in it are portions of the old provincial enactments, which are made applicable in each district. The result of this is, that on many of the more important details there are as many land laws as there are land districts. This fact has greatly increased the difficulty we have found in arriving at a sound conclusion on many points. In order to enable ourselves to do this we have not only taken a large amount of evidence, but have personally inspected, so far as time would permit, some portions of the colony.

Small sales to be
anticipated.

Both evidence and inspection convince us that the amount of land in the hands of the Crown which is likely to sell within the next few years is very small as compared with the large sales effected in the past. This being the case, and finding the staff employed about the same as, and in some cases even larger than, it formerly was, it appeared at first sight that with less work to do a reduction in cost of the department would be possible.

Work of depart-
ment not
decreased.

On examination, however, we found that, though the lands sold and amounts received are so much less, the work to be done has not materially decreased. This arises to a great extent from the fact that sales have been made on terms which involve periodical collection of small amounts from the purchasers, as well as the necessary supervision to enforce the conditions agreed on. This being the case, we cannot at present satisfy ourselves that any material reduction in staff can be effected, though it is possible that some saving may be made by amalgamation of offices.

Mistakes in
dealing with
land.

The evidence shows that, in consequence of want of proper precautions having been taken, orders have been given, in some cases by the Boards and in others by the Crown Lands Department, to prepare for sale blocks of land which, from their character, are unfit for the purposes intended, and have therefore necessarily proved unsaleable. The result of this has been a very large waste of money, as we shall show more clearly when dealing with the surveys. This does not merely apply to the past, as we find the same wasteful expenditure going on in preparing blocks for sale where the land is of such a character that the result cannot fail to be most unsatisfactory. We would strongly urge the necessity for putting a stop to this, and recommend that before any block of land is dealt with the Government should be satisfied that it is fully suitable for the purposes to which it is intended to be put. Under no circumstances should money be spent on sectional surveys until this is done.

Want of
definition of
responsibility.

There appears to us to be a great want of definition as to responsibility between the Government, the Boards, and the Survey Department; so that when such mistakes are made as we have pointed out, it is difficult, if not impossible, to say with whom the responsibility rests. The Boards appear to act at times on the information and opinions of their own members, at others on the reports of Chief Surveyors, and in some instances on the evidence of some irresponsible persons, which there is reason to believe is too often far from unprejudiced.

Chief Surveyors
not clearly
instructed.

The Chief Surveyors have no sufficiently definite instructions as to their relations with the Boards, and either do not consider themselves bound to make reports to them, or do not feel responsible for the opinions they give. We are of opinion that these officers should be held strictly responsible to the head of their own department, and should feel that they cannot relieve themselves of this responsibility except by reporting their opinion to him. Practical recognition of the importance of defining the position and responsibility of each branch of the department will, we believe, result in avoiding the recurrence of the errors of the past, and this will undoubtedly tend so to lessen the work as to make a reduction in the staff employed practicable.

Receivers of
Land Revenue.

The appointment of Receivers of Land Revenue, who in some instances have their offices at a considerable distance from those of the Commissioners, we find results in increased work to the department, and in some inconvenience to the public, every purchaser having to visit the two offices before he can complete a