

WESTPORT COLLIERY RESERVE.

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

TUESDAY, 26th JULY, 1881 (Mr. BUNNY, Chairman).

Mr. E. J. O'CONOR, examined.

1. *The Chairman.*] Can you state if the whole of the statements made in the petition are true?—They are correct in every particular. I can support them all from my own knowledge, except with regard to one clause, No. 15, and although I have heard a great deal about that, I am not in a position to make any positive statement. With regard to the position of the petitioners themselves, I may state it is simply this: In the first place, that Colliery Reserve was thrown open to occupation under the Gold Fields Act, and the majority occupied under that Act. Afterwards the Provincial Government of Nelson threw it open, as compensation, to persons washed out of their holdings by the encroachments of the sea and river. The terms offered by the Provincial Government at that time were terms of a liberal character; but the whole arrangement was only tentative. Nothing was positively and finally decided. Upon abolition, the General Government took this reserve over. I was at that time in the House of Representatives, and, upon a resolution of mine, a Commission was appointed to inquire into the matter. The Commission's decisions did not give satisfaction to the people of Westport; they felt that they were absolutely at the mercy of the Government and the Commission, and that they had no option but to accept their decree. The evidence taken before the Commission was that, although the value of property in Westport at that time was small, yet as the public works there were proceeded with, it was expected property would rise very much in value. People were swayed to a certain extent by this opinion; and Government dictated certain terms which many were unwilling to accept. The prospect of a largely enhanced value of property induced many to accept the Government terms. It has since been found that, although the coal trade has developed, and that the Government went on with the railway and harbour works, the expected enhancement has not taken place. The development of the coal trade has resulted more in the development of townships close to the mines, than in adding to the value of land at the port. The result is that people find themselves handicapped with a very heavy and oppressive and increasing rent, and that the prospects held out to them when they took the liability have not been realized. The people have come to the conclusion that short leases with increasing rent—with a fast decreasing value of property—has the effect of completely crippling all energy in the direction of building, and other ways. No man can put up a brick building, because the term of his lease expires in a few years, and the sections are so small that it requires a number of them to be taken in order to put up a building of any size. The result is that no person is making that advance, nor is the place generally progressing, as might be expected but for these retarding conditions. Under these circumstances, seeing that the Colliery Reserve was thrown open to these people as a measure of compensation, in the first instance, and that even the Commission professed to treat the people with the greatest leniency on account of their loss, it seems to me very hard that the Government should adhere to the present charges on account of the people of Westport having made a bargain with them. It must be well known the bargain was one-sided. No matter what terms the Government might have proposed, the people must have accepted them; there was no option but acceptance or forfeiture. Seeing that the Government have taken up that position, the petitioners can do nothing but petition, and ask that this matter may be adjusted in such a way as not to operate so unjustly against individuals. If the tenure of the land were more favourable to the holders, a better class of buildings would be erected, for providing better protection against fire. The rule has been on the Nelson South-West Gold Fields that, where a lessee has improved his section by expending not less than £50 on it, if he is able to prove that, he is entitled to purchase at a certain upset price. These people ask that such a privilege should be extended to them, and that they shall be allowed to occupy on the same terms as in Reefton and other towns. They say there are no grounds for refusal, because there is a large amount of waste lands which can be taken as reserves, and ample authority under which they can be made if required. I have lived in Westport fourteen years, and was connected with the Provincial Government and the action taken since, and I am in a position to give minute information on every point with the exception I have stated.

2. *Mr. Thomson.*] Is this land at all necessary in working the colliery?—No, it is not at all necessary. There is ample provision for all the storage required, and to meet all probable requirements for the next one hundred years; and there is a quantity of land along the railway line which would be available for further storage if it should ever be wanted. The collieries are ten miles away. As to the deterioration in the value of property, I may state that I myself had an eight or nine-roomed house on a section, which I sold for £50. The materials were worth nearly the money if sold for removal. In point of fact I was glad to get rid of the lease, and that was my object in selling.

3. *Hon. Mr. Rolleston.*] The petition states, "the report of the Royal Commission was neither acted upon by the Government nor accepted by the tenants. In July, 1877, terms were submitted as final, leaving no alternative but acceptance or forfeiture." Were the terms submitted those recommended by the Royal Commission?—No.

4. *Mr. Bastings.*] These buildings denoted on the plan, [are they buildings or only sites?—On many of the sites there are buildings.