

Mr. J. B. FISHER, M.H.R., examined.

5. *The Chairman.*] Will you state, Mr. Fisher, what you know of this case?—In 1871-72-73, in the whole of this part of the town of Westport which I am pointing to on the plan, there were no streets whatever made. When the floods came, in 1871-72-73, they washed away almost the whole of the then inhabited portions of the town, so there was no place at all for the people to go to except what the Government gave them. The whole of the land was in the hands of the Provincial Government with exception of a few town sections. The Government opened this land, making Palmerston Street only; and the people had no choice but to go on it: they were obliged to accept such terms as were offered. The people were compelled to put up houses to live in immediately. The Government would make no definite arrangement with reference to the leases. The people were never independent—they never had the Government at arm's length in the matter. Having once located themselves, they were obliged to take such terms as they could get. They were in a helpless condition. They had all been washed out of their homes. It was just as if they had been swept out by a fire. They were obliged to build immediately, for shelter; and of course at first could only put up shanties, and improve from time to time. In 1875, the Government appointed a Royal Commission to investigate the whole of the matters. The report is to be found on page 183 of the *Gazette* of 1876. The Commission made certain recommendations, which were to a very great extent based upon the absurd opinion then held by the people there—and which they gave in evidence against themselves—as to what effect the carrying out of the railway and opening the coal trade would have on the place. The general impression was—and it was not confined to the people of the place—that it would have an enormous effect. The result has been that there is no increase of population whatever. The population of the town, in fact, has fallen off very largely in respect to adults, and has only been kept up by the large increase of children. When I went there in 1870, there may have been 1,000 men and about 50 women. Now, the men and women are pretty equally divided, and there is a very large number of children—there are about 300 attending the State schools. Three or four years ago, every house in the place was occupied; now, in spite of the increase in population, about 60 houses are empty. So, although the total number of the population has increased, the number of tenants, the producing and working part of the population, has decreased. The big expectations that were formed as to the effect of the opening of the coal trade were all founded on smoke, because the place has been steadily going down-hill. The case referred to by Mr. O'Connor, as to the value of property on these leases, is a very good illustration. The Government are taking from this miserable community about £700 a year in rent.

6. *Hon. Mr. Rolleston.*] How long has the coal been in active work?—Since September last. They are doing now the very utmost business they can possibly do, until the harbour works are carried out. Even when that is done, no benefit is likely to accrue from it to the town itself. The coal mines are ten miles away, and the coal simply passes through. If the Government have the interest of the community at heart, they will give the freeholds of these lands at a reasonable price to the lessees. They could take the average price of the land sold opposite for an upset price. As it is now, the Borough Council cannot make any by-laws for the prevention of fire, because the people hold their sites by such a flimsy tenure, and, of course, the buildings they put up are pretty much of the same character; naturally the character of the buildings is always influenced by the tenure of the sites. There is ample ground for the railway trade ever likely to be done. There is one of the best and largest railway yards in New Zealand there.

7. *Mr. Bastings.*] What did these sections [indicating them on plan] fetch at the upset?—£64 a rood; and it takes four of these leased sections to make a rood. So the value of the leaseholds is about £16 a section.

8. *Hon. Mr. Rolleston.*] At what rates can these leases be sold?—You cannot get anything for them now. They have been sold, before 1877—in the fever time—at large prices. None change hands now except where there are buildings, and then the value of the buildings cannot be obtained. I have seen the sections sold, when everybody was dreaming about what the public works were going to do for the place, at £40 a piece; but that was madness.

9. What was the tenure when they were sold?—Merely the occupation tenure. These freehold sections were sold within the last year at £64 a rood. As soon as the people were on this reserve, the Government opened 800 freehold sections for sale, which had the effect of still further decreasing the value of this leased property. If the Government threw it open on purpose to decrease the value of the leases, they could not have done it more effectually.

10. *Mr. Macandrew.*] The population is 1,000. What proportion of that population is represented by the petitioners?—More than half. Looking at the petition, you might say that everybody in the town has signed it.

11. Can you give any idea of the number of souls represented here—men, women, and children?—Why, I should say about 750 out of 1,000.

12. *Mr. Fulton.*] When do these leases fall in?—In the year 1898. The rents are on a sliding scale, and go on increasing. Now, the people are complaining of having to pay £5; while next year or the year after it will be £7 10s., and by-and-by £10.

13. *Mr. Macandrew.*] If Government transferred their right to the Buller County Council, how would they do with it?—It would be more to do with the Borough Council. The Borough Council have been compelled by public opinion to reduce the rents on their sections by half. If the Borough Council held these reserves, public opinion would compel them to sell them, if they had the power to, or to lease them for very long terms at a very small rental, if they had not the power to sell.

14. *Hon. Mr. Rolleston.*] What is the amount of rent the borough is getting for their sections?—From £1 to £2 an acre, it was getting, and now it is reduced to about 15s. or £1.

15. *Mr. Bastings.*] Assuming this land were put up to auction, what do you consider would be a fair upset price?—I think it would not be fair to charge more than about £16 or £17 a section; but I think the people would be willing to give more than that. Probably they would rather pay 15s. to £1 a foot for the frontage, than continue as they are. Government are now getting from £15 to £20 per cent. per annum on the money value of these sections, and that will increase next year or the following year. It is an enormous percentage—5 per cent is a good return on land investments.