

in the machinery could be made. Of what form that would take it is absolutely impossible for me, and, indeed, for very few people, I should think, to say at present. But if some inducement were offered sufficiently large I have no doubt that some good machine could be obtained that would improve the dressing—and not only improve the dressing, but reduce the cost. There seems to be at present a very large proportion of cost attached to the working of it. I do not know if it is practicable, but I should certainly think that if a large sum was offered some machine would be brought forward that would, at all events, improve the present system, because the present work is tedious and laborious for the most part, especially in wet weather. The other point, as I understand it, is that the Government desire an expression of opinion in regard to the necessity or the advisableness of inspecting the fibre before shipment. All I can say on that point is this: that I can hardly conceive that there should be two opinions on so important a question. To my mind it presents various advantages, the chief one being that it would have a deterring effect. The mere appointment alone would have a deterring effect upon all persons who are now alleged to be careless in the manufacture of their fibre. And it would also have the effect of securing some absolute certainty to the honest producer. And then it would do away with the questions hereafter of arbitration cases, which are now frequent in the City of London on flax questions. In Ireland, I understand, it is customary—in fact, I know it to be absolutely the case—that butter, for instance, in the South of Ireland—in Cork—is examined by experts and branded, and the butter is sold upon a basis in that way. As an instance, every farmer sends his butter to the butter exchange, and there it is branded with the Government brand. There are two inspectors who examine the butter, and if they have any doubts about it they refer it to another, and so on to the end of the chapter with the whole lot of casks, some thousands of which are examined from time to time. That being the case, there is no uncertainty with regard to the sale of the particular produce, because it is branded, and it goes to the outer world—to London, for instance—with the Government brand upon it; and it insures for the farmer a price according to the value of the market at the time. Some of the gentlemen present would know that Russian tallow is dealt with in a similar way—it is sold on what is termed the “brack” of one season as compared with the “brack” of another season. In that way the producer is enabled to get the standard value of his article without any reference to arbitration, which unfortunately takes place in the sale of New Zealand hemp at present. We have had one or two cases in point, and there is one upon which my mind is refreshed at the moment, where we have sold at what we call the f.a.q., or fair average quality, basis, and on its arrival in the London market it was found that hemp had fallen in the interregnum, and Mr. Bell was met with the statement, “This is not f.a.q.” In my opinion, if the Government brand were placed upon it before it was shipped that would have settled the question. As it was, we had to submit to arbitration on the point, and, although we maintained that our flax was equally good, it was a difficult matter to set it up, and the result was we had to suffer. Some gentlemen may reply, “You had your remedy;” but, really, when you appoint arbitrators in London, even though they are not prejudiced exactly, they are more or less guided by the state of things that exists when the produce is landed there. I think for those reasons alone it is certainly advisable that the Government should appoint Inspectors to examine the flax before shipment. As I said this morning, “A word to the wise is sufficient.” I will not go into the past history of flax, for producing large quantities of which we have many mills. We have set up many mills both in this and other provinces in the colony, and are consigning from about 175 to 200 tons monthly, and therefore have some knowledge of the fibre trade. My partner, who lives on the spot in London, also points to the necessity of some system of examination and branding beforehand. That would insure some definite sale, and need no hereafter references. As to the form the bonus would take, I should think it should be a substantial bonus, with as liberal conditions as possible; and not confine it to flax-dressers alone, but make it so that the Government may have as wide a scope as possible in getting information and suggestions—and, indeed, even machinery—from other parts of the world as well as New Zealand, for the reason that engineers, to begin with, are more practical, and more able to give an opinion with regard to the usefulness of the machine, and would not stand upon the question of expense if they thought a bonus of £5,000 or £10,000, or whatever it might be, could be secured. If you keep it in the hands of flax-dressers it means that the advantages are necessarily restricted.

178. *Mr. Marchant.*] If the earning of the bonus were connected with the export of a certain quantity of flax, taking a certain price, that would debar engineers from competing?—I think it would.

179. *Mr. Wilson.*] It is quite obvious that no Government could possibly be the first to state that a machine would turn out flax of a certain quantity, and therefore some such suggestions should be made?—There are tests you might put it to. For instance, you could see if it were approved by the majority of a committee who would be appointed to see its working at a particular place. As to the cheapness by which the fibre can be turned out and placed on the market, I do not attach very much importance as to the price the fibre is going to be turned out at at all. It has been cogently remarked that you can turn out fibre in a wash-hand basin, if you take time enough to produce, at a value of £40 per ton; but that is not a merchantable commodity. There are many conditions which might be attached—first, that it shall produce equal quantities to the present output; second, that there should be a saving of labour; and third, that, above all, it shall be marketable at a given price per ton.

180. *Mr. Marchant.*] You have not much hope of the fibre being turned out in such a fine condition that it will realise excessive prices—from £50 to £60 per ton—as has been suggested?—I do not think so.

181. Not for mixing with other textile fibres?—I do not think the evidence on that point is of any value, for the reason that for the most part it is only hearsay evidence: it is really of no value: we cannot say of our own knowledge. All that I can say on the point is that my partner in London, Mr. Bell, writes to say that the majority—in fact, the whole—of the hemp is used for