

come here? There was an agitation by these two persons, with others, to bring back the state of things that had before existed, and which had been eminently beneficial to themselves. To promote the objects of these persons these confirmed leases were put in the forefront, for the purpose of renewing the agitation against the Public Trustee's management. One of their objects was to prevent the collection of the rents by the Public Trust Office, so that the moneys would get into the hands of a few Maoris. The mode in which the rents were collected and distributed by the Public Trustee was eminently calculated to prevent that, and also to prevent those cash orders, which Mr. Fisher spoke about receiving in the old days, passing through his hands. The whole of this agitation was directed to bring about the return of the old state of things in which these two gentlemen were interested. The Natives were led to believe that they had a serious—a real grievance. Upon this material they fomented dissatisfaction among the Natives, which is not so much a dissatisfaction with the confirmed leases as discontent created by what they are told by these few persons. They want the money distributed in the way suggested by the Native witness, who said that the Committee of Natives would consist of "rangatiras." There would be no women or children with a right to participate in the money; but these "rangatiras" would decide in what way it would be distributed. This was the state of things which the administration by the Public Trustee was intended to get rid of. I want to say this in regard to the questions I put to both Mr. Williams and Mr. Fisher: The necessity for putting them was painful to me. I assure this Committee that I did not ask those questions without weighing seriously my responsibility in doing so. There is no duty more disagreeable than that of asking questions of that description of persons who come to give evidence before a parliamentary Committee. But the Committee will do me the justice to believe that I could not bring before them the kind of consideration in which these men are held in their district without showing what were the circumstances that have brought them into prominence here. It is an exceedingly difficult thing with gentlemen like Mr. Williams, who gave his evidence with great gravity and with an apparent sense of responsibility, to bring before a body of gentlemen, who are entirely unacquainted with him or the Coast, the whole of the circumstances connected with his conduct, without which they cannot know what weight should be attached to the statement he makes without at the same time bringing before them some part of his past life. Nothing could be more discreditable than the account he gives of his own transactions: he, a licensed interpreter, sworn not to derive profit while acting in that capacity, buying in his own name, witnessing the signatures, according to the regulations, to deeds in his own favour, but taken, for the purpose of concealment, in the name of another; subsequently receiving large sums from the Natives, and paying the money into his own account, then becoming bankrupt immediately afterwards for the purpose of evading a debt, as he states; then, having a claim of £1,000 against the Government, but quietly refraining from putting it forward, and being now in the position of an owner of 40 acres of land on which he is living at Stratford. I desire not to say anything against him, but I submit whether it is fair to us to bring forward persons like Messrs. Fisher and Williams as evidence to carry weight with a body having to consider a question of such gravity as that now before this Committee. I say it is not fair. With regard to Fisher, I need only to refer to his record and the charges which a Committee of this House has found against him. I do not know how any man can be entitled to credit if such things can be said against him. I therefore submit that neither Fisher nor Williams are entitled to the slightest credit as regards what took place on the Coast in connection with these leases. Both Fisher and Williams gave some evidence as to value. Mr. Williams was a blacksmith, and was connected afterwards with some land-purchase transactions. He has been for some time past living on this small bush-farm. He is not, I submit, a man whose opinion the Committee would trust in regard to value. So with regard to Fisher, I endeavoured to get from him some particulars of his experience in valuing, but the answers he gave were not satisfactory. However, he did give some evidence on one or two points with regard to the high rents paid by persons who leased from Europeans. In those cases I am informed that the circumstances are altogether exceptional. Some of them are leases for very short terms—in some cases for a year—to put sheep on. I am told that the land in this district will not carry sheep, and I will adduce the evidence of people from the district, who will prove that men are by some special circumstances forced to pay rent for land which is not at all worth the amount. I undertake to prove that these arbitrations were fair; and, if I do that, it seems to me it would exclude evidence as to whether the values ascertained by the arbitrators are correct. I submit that if you have a tribunal set up by Parliament for the purpose of making inquiry, and the tribunal so set up has arrived at a conclusion, based upon evidence with which they are satisfied, and justice is done, you are bound to accept their judgment as final. I will undertake to prove that these were honest arbitrators.

*Mr. Stewart:* Do you not want something more than honesty in an arbitrator? Would you not require some intelligence and ability?

*Mr. Bell:* I apprehend, the tribunal having been selected by Parliament, the arbitrators having been chosen for their intelligence and experience, there arises no objection on the ground that they are incompetent and that their award should be accepted as final. They constituted a tribunal set up for a particular purpose; they took evidence; they were men of ability and knowledge of the matters brought before them; and that you, this Committee, are not in the nature of things competent to review their decision. Any twelve of us could probably deal with an ordinary matter as well as a selected jury; but, a jury having arrived at their decision, we cannot review the verdict.

*Mr. Peacock:* Have we not a right to consider whether the values were fair? Is it not our duty to go into that?

*Mr. Bell:* What you have to ascertain is whether the proceedings were just—whether the tribunal was a fair, just, and equitable one: if you find that was so, I submit that you would have to report that such were the facts, and you could only say that you were not competent to decide whether the arbitrators had fixed the values correctly. I undertake to prove that the tribunal was a fair, just, and equitable one; the persons who composed it were men of the highest honour and in-