

Natives, and on the other hand the opinions of the settlers, to enable us to find out exactly where we are. There has been a great deal of misunderstanding in this matter. The Natives themselves think various things as to the attitude of the settlers towards them. I am aware that a great many of the Natives think the settlers are entirely hostile to them, and prepared to exact from the Natives the pound of flesh to the last scruple—are prepared to make no concessions whatever, but to stand upon the assumed rights of the Act of 1887. That is the opinion of a great many of the Natives, and it is the opinion of a great many of the advisers of the Natives too. But I do not understand, however, that is really the opinion of the settlers. If I am rightly informed, it is the desire of a great many of the settlers to come to a fair and equitable agreement with the Natives respecting their leases, quite apart from any legislation that has taken place, or anything that has taken place in the past—that all the settlers require is an equitable and fair arrangement with the Natives upon the basis of the existing leases. They are not prepared, as I understand, to go back to the Act and say, "The Act gives us certain things, and we are prepared to enforce those conditions." And here I would like to inform you that I do not myself wish to interfere with pending litigation. If I had thought that any considerable number of the settlers were determined to pursue the appeal to the Privy Council, as some of them had resolved upon, I should not have been here to-day. But, so far as I can gather from some of the settlers, their desire was to waive litigation, to waive that appeal, if some fair and equitable settlement could be arrived at. All these questions are merely matters of rumour; they are statements made irresponsibly by settlers. What I require to know to-day is something that would be official and authoritative from the settlers themselves on this question, and which will enable us to proceed next session with a full knowledge of the position before us. The Natives say they want the land back again. That is their demand at the present moment—that where the leases have expired the lands shall be handed back to them; and, in the case of the other leases which have not expired, that the land should be handed back to them when the leases do expire. That is the position of the Natives, taken up to-day: and that is the position of the Natives generally. I am not prepared to accede to the justice of that demand. I have always held that the settlers have rights, and those of you who remember the Bill of 1879 which I brought into the House will know that was my opinion then, and my opinion has not changed since. If, however, you have any particular suggestions to make with regard to what should be done upon this question generally, I shall be very pleased to hear them, and then I will give you my opinion in reply. Let it be clearly understood I am not intervening between those settlers who have appealed to the Privy Council, and what they believe to be their rights, if they think they can get their rights by an appeal. I have assumed, as I have said, that this appeal has been dropped, and that you will be prepared to have legislation on a fair basis, and that you want no more than an equitable consideration of the question. If you say you think the appeal to the Privy Council should be prosecuted—if that is your conclusion—I have nothing further to say. Now, it has occurred to me, if the settlers were allowed to make agreements with the various Natives—the Natives in the various grants individually—that that might be done upon some basis—either the basis of the present valuation, or the basis of the land-tax valuation, or some other basis. And then, these agreements which would have been entered into between the settlers and the Natives, quite unofficially and without having any legal basis, should be validated by a Bill next session. My own idea as to improvements in 1887 was that we should recognise the fact that the settlers had put up houses, and give to them the improvements of the nature of houses which they had erected; but that the grassing, fencing, and other such improvements belonged to the Natives, and that the rents should be based upon those improvements. My desire is to know the minds of the settlers, in order to assist you, if we possibly can, without injuring or prejudicially affecting the Natives, with a view to legislation next session. If you can assist me I shall be very pleased, because nothing is more at the heart of the Government than to see this question settled once for all, as we think it is injurious to the cause of settlement, injurious to the settlers, and injurious to the Natives that it should remain unsettled; and we desire to see an arrangement made between the two parties as soon as possible. That is my desire in coming here to-day—to effect a reconciliation, and to see if something cannot be done to give the Natives their titles on the one hand and to satisfy the lessees on the other. As to the Public Trustee, he is here to-day, but he occupies quite a distinct position from what I do, as representing the Government. The Public Trustee, after advice, has conceived it to be his duty to take action to get in back rents. He believes that to be his statutory duty, and he has pressed those who owe rents to pay them, with the object of handing the rents over to the Natives. That is his position; but that is not my position. My position is rather to see what we can do by way of legislation to be brought in in the future to settle this question once for all. We have not interfered with the Public Trustee in carrying out what he believes to be his statutory duty; he has done that quite independently, and after being advised as to what the law says on the subject. My position is this: We want to see if we cannot bring in legislation next session to satisfy all parties, and put the settlers in the proper way of getting their titles. Now, I shall be pleased to hear what Mr. Symes has to say.

*Mr. J. R. Lysaght, sen.*: I am glad Mr. Symes is deputed to speak on the matter, inasmuch as I labour under a physical defect in not being able to hear freely what is going on. I am glad Mr. Symes has been placed in the position of spokesman.

*Mr. W. Symes*: As I have remarked, it is almost necessary, to follow up the course of events, to go back to the year 1879. Prior to that we had leased the land from the Natives, and expended considerable sums of money in improvements, and carried out the terms and conditions, and everything went smoothly with the Natives so far as we knew—we never had any complaint from them. About that time (1879 and 1880) a Royal Commission was appointed to investigate the Natives' titles, and to examine the leases. The Royal Commission, I think, was composed of Sir William Fox and Sir Dillon Bell. As a result of the Royal Commission, an Act was passed in 1881 prohibiting further dealings with these lands, and it was made retrospective—made to apply to leases