

59. How much of the country on the Stratford route do you regard as fit for settlement?—Well, after you get out of the pumice country, about ten or twelve miles down the Ohura Valley, very good country; right away to Stratford, good grass country, broken in parts, and of calcareous rock formation.

60. Is there much of it that you would class as agricultural land?—No; I should say about 20 per cent. was ploughable, if that is what you mean.

61. How much did you see of the country on either side of the route?—About five or six miles. You can get an idea by that. I should say that 50 or 60 per cent. more was good grazing country.

62. And you think that applies to at least five miles on each side of the route?—So far as I am able to judge. The balance—about 20 per cent.—consists of razor-backed spurs and precipitous cliffs.

63. Then, as to the central route, starting from the point of divergence at Ongarue, how much of that is fit for settlement?—I should say the productive power of the country between the point of divergence and Taumarunui almost nil; it is wretched country, of pumice formation. A very poor class of country like that, extending across the Island from Rotorua—rhyolite rocks cropping up to the surface—is a sure indication of poor land.

64. We are not dealing with Rotorua: if you can, limit your information to the district served by the railway. What is the character of the country from Taumarunui southwards through the Waimarino Plains?—There is table-land extending from the base of Ruapehu; very poor, covered with pumice, rendering it pretty well unfit for agricultural purposes. Towards the Wanganui the land gets better.

65. How are you able to judge of that?—I have travelled about from Ohakune down to Pipikiri.

66. You are aware, of course, that in describing the country from there you are describing a very small portion of the Waimarino Block—the bulk of the block lies altogether to the north-west of that?—Any portion of the block that the railway goes through is pretty well pumice; the good land lies towards the Wanganui River. There is certainly a lot of fine land on the Waimarino Block, but it lies to the westward of the railway-line.

67. Do you think that settlement would proceed rapidly if the railway were carried through the Waimarino Block; is it country calculated to foster settlement; would it be readily taken up?—They have taken up about the best of the land; I think the rest is very poor—only fit for sheep—the land being allotted in 2,000-acre holdings.

68. Is it not very near all forest?—Yes, at the present time.

69. Well, from your knowledge of the country, which line do you think would be most profitable for the country to undertake?—Well, I think, as regards the central route, it has gone now to a point where it will be productive. It is really good land so far as Murimutu Plains. It will tap all the good country; but to go any further would, I should think, be a waste of money. A succession of viaducts would be required to be constructed, beyond the power of the colony to carry out, they would be so expensive. They have been passed over lightly, but they will be found to be a big undertaking.

70. Can you indicate one or two of them?—I refer particularly to three or four on the Waimarino Plains.

71. Can you give them any names?—Wangaumotonu and Mangitoto. The country there is of very broken character. In parts there are precipitous gorges, sometimes as deep as 150ft. below the table-land, and of course they would have to be bridged.

72. You referred to a succession of viaducts: you have only indicated two?—Well, there are three I know that would require viaducts; the others would be required to be bridged.

73. Will any of these viaducts be as expensive as Makohine? We have some knowledge of the cost of that work?—They would run into between £30,000 and £60,000, each of them.

74. Then, as to the district from Waimarino Plains to Taumarunui, what is the country like?—It is pumice.

75. I mean, as to its character for railway construction?—The land is about thirty miles in length between the Waimarino Plains and the Wanganui River, and it will require grading. There is a fall of 2,000ft.—something like that—and it would require a uniform grade. They would have a very great difficulty in getting a grade there; the country has not been explored properly yet.

76. You think the difficulty will be greater than the department anticipates?—Yes; I do not know of any gullies or anything of that sort crooked enough to get a grade of the prescribed limits. I am sure they would have a great difficulty in getting a grade; but it is not an impossibility. The country falls away towards the Wanganui River.

77. Would it, in your opinion, pay the colony to open up the Ngaire route by means of a railway?—Well, I should think it would warrant the expenditure either by rail or road, because there is a big patch of fine country lying there unimproved which should be opened up by some means or the other.

78. Would it be sufficiently served for settlement purposes with a good road?—Well, hardly; it is a long distance. They could only use it for grazing purposes; they could never grow any crops to pay.

79. *Mr. Blake.*] It would be some years before they could grow crops?—Yes, it would; but by means of a road they could never grow crops that would pay.

80. How long would it take to clear?—I dare say the roots would rot out in fifteen or twenty years, but settlers as a rule stump a few acres for cropping purposes immediately after the bush is felled.

81. *The Chairman.*] And in the meantime the product of the country would be principally cattle and sheep. Could it be used for grain growing?—No; for grazing purposes only it would be good country.