

42. *Hon. Mr. McKenzie.*] Could you give the Committee any idea of the value of the rents of the block, if the leases were not renewed for five years?—I could not. I may state that the whole business portion of the town, with the exception of four or five places of business, are on the reserve.

43. Are the buildings good substantial ones?—Yes; they are wooden buildings. They are the only things the Harbour Board has to depend on for its revenue. It is deriving a very large revenue from the Colliery Reserve, and it would be a very serious thing if the lessees were to remove, which they would certainly do if the leases are not renewed.

44. *Hon. Mr. Rolleston.*] Have you read this Bill?—I have not read it all.

45. Are you aware that the Bill proposes to do away with the revenue as it stands? If this Bill does not pass, will the revenue continue?—The revenue will continue until the termination of the leases, which have only five or six years to run. I do not think any of them have longer than about six years more. They were for twenty-one years at the beginning.

46. Why should not the Harbour Board get the advantage of this, if it were put up to auction? Why should the Public Trustee not have the advantage?—The Harbour Board gets only the ground-rent.

47. But the land, if put up, would bring a higher rental?—I do not think so, I think the rent has been very excessive; some have, I think, paid as much as £20 per annum; 33ft. by 66ft. fetches £10.

48. Have there not been several valuations, the result of which has been to say that the rents are low, and there was no ground of complaint in respect of the rent?—I think not. There was a Commission appointed some time ago, and evidence was taken as to the value of the sections. It is before the Committee now.

49. *Hon. Mr. McKenzie.*] What would be the position at the end of five years? Have the people the right to remove the improvements, or get the valuations?—They can remove, but they have no right to the improvements.

50. Would the Harbour Board get tenants if the buildings were removed?—Nobody would take them up at a very short tenure.

51. *Hon. Mr. Rolleston.*] That presumes the right of removal?—The present holders have the right of removal, but no right to compensation.

*Mr. O'Connor:* Under the last Land Bill they have the right to compensation.

52. *Mr. Rhodes.*] What is the depth of these sections?—Some of them are 33ft. by 60ft., others 33ft. by 99ft.

53. *Mr. Hogg.*] I think when you were alluding to the scour, you said the position now is better than it was before the flood of two months ago?—Very much so. It is in the centre of the river, instead of impinging against the staiths. It is, between half-tide, still on the staiths.

54. As regards the harbour, you think the position is safer than it has been for years?—Quite as safe as since 1877.

55. With regard to the township, you say the present tenure is unsatisfactory and insecure?—They are insecure, inasmuch as they run out in five or six years, and the present occupiers wish to be assured that they will get renewals, so that they may know that they have the properties for a certain term.

56. Are they all wooden buildings?—Yes.

57. Then a tenure would alter the character of property and buildings?—No doubt.

58. Would it have any effect on the trade of the town?—We look to the improvement of trade as the coal industry develops.

59. Would this improve the trade? Is Westport under the control of a Borough Council?—Yes.

60. Has the Council been prevented from carrying out drainage for the preservation of the health of the place through this?—No. Within the last twelve months they have started drainage works.

61. I presume if the Railway authorities took possession, all these improvements would be wasted?—It would certainly have to be continued. We would have to continue it in the back portion of the town.

62. Is there any land available for the people behind this?—No.

63. Is there any possibility of forming a new township?—You would have to go up the river. The back sections are very swampy indeed, and are mostly held by absentees. There is no land to be bought; the most of it is in the hands of infants, and no Crown land available at all.

64. *Mr. Meredith.*] I understand the bulk of the low-lying land is not built on?—No.

65. Is it not possible to drain it into the river?—Yes; but it does not belong to the Crown.

66. Why is there any necessity for bringing in this Bill at present, as the leases will not terminate for five years?—It is a matter of security, so that tenants may know their position in the future. At the present time no one will buy a property with only five years' lease to run.

67. I ask you this question in consequence of some evidence before the Committee. If this matter stood over for a while, all parties would have an opportunity of saying whether the river encroached or not; and I suggest allowing the matter to stand over for a couple of years?—I think this is a matter which has been before the House many times for the last fourteen years. We have been continually agitating from year to year; and the tenants of the Westport Colliery Reserve were placed there by force of circumstances by the Government, when the old township was washed away. They have made the streets, footpaths, &c., and have received no compensation for it, and have not been treated well in the matter. With only a five-years' lease the lessees could not borrow money on their lands.

68. *The Chairman.*] In what condition are those buildings generally; how long would the buildings last the present tenants?—Many of them for twenty-five years. They would require piles, perhaps; but they are built of good timber.