

69. Speaking generally, you think they are good for another twenty years?—Yes, most of them have iron sides and wooden frames.

70. *Mr. O'Connor.*] I want you to put to the Committee the conditions on which the tenants entered the land: what position they had first, why they were changed, and what promise of prosperity (increased) they have been granted by these leases?—As far as I understand, the position that the holder of a reserve lease occupied was: In 1872 the original township was washed away, and a Commission was appointed to inquire into the circumstances, and the people were placed on the present land by the Government of the Province of Nelson, by drawing lots, and each got a section for that which he had lost; they were divided into three classes.

71. Is that not equivalent to a perpetual lease?—After a great deal of trouble the section-holders obtained a lease for twenty-one years as they are now held.

72. Was the rent started at £2 10s.; and afterwards increased every seven years?—Yes, it was according to the class of section; the first seven years the rent was low, the next it was higher, and the last rent was £10 per annum.

73. The tenants had to accept these terms of increasing rent or forfeit their buildings and improvements?—Yes.

74. Was the rent made so on account of the increased prosperity and increased value?—It was thought so at the time. Before the goldfields were well opened, the prospects were thought great, and the progressive value was put on the land.

75. Have these anticipations been borne out?—No. I do not think we are as prosperous as in the time of the goldfields. From a business point of view we are not. Nearly the whole of the goods which the colliers require go direct to the mines. Westport is simply a depôt.

76. Is the rent in some cases found to be a rack-rent?—Such is the case; not in the main street, but in the back part of the town.

77. Will not the excessive rent be a ruinous thing for the bulk of those on the reserve?—It will be so indeed. They will have to shift their buildings, and those who have freeholds will want an enormous price for it.

78. Independent of that, are not the business men on the Colliery Reserve, and will it not ruin the business?—Certainly it would.

79. Has not the money borrowed by the Harbour Board been borrowed on the security of that property?—That is so, partly. It is looked on as a splendid endowment, too. The longer the leases the longer it would insure a revenue to the Board.

Mr. HUGHES was next called, but stated that he had nothing to add to what had been adduced already.

Mr. NAHR had nothing to say in addition to what had been said by other witnesses.

Mr. SAMUEL RILEY said that he had been a master of a small boat at Westport for twenty years, and there was hardly a change in the river which he would not have noticed. He did not think it had been brought before the Committee that it would be a matter of impossibility for the banks to be washed away. The Harbour Board had the railway running alongside the river, and all that was necessary to be done was to load the trucks with stone and tip them into the river.

No. 2.

Mr. PILCHER, Secretary to the Railway Commissioners, to the CHAIRMAN, Waste Lands Committee.

New Zealand Government Railways, Head Office, Wellington,

SIR,—

13th September, 1893.

With reference to your letter of 5th instant, enclosing the Westland and Nelson Coalfields Administration Act 1877 Amendment Bill, and asking for report thereon, I am directed to inform you that the Railway Commissioners, being of opinion that the whole of the Westport Colliery Reserve may be required for railway and shipping purposes as the coalfields become more developed, think that it would be unwise to hamper the future trade by granting leases on the reserve for twenty-one years, with right of renewal for another twenty-one years. It seems to them that it would be better to delay dealing with the existing leases until they are more nearly run out, as new coalfields are now being opened out at Granity Creek and Mokihiui, and there is every appearance of a greatly-increased trade within the next few years, which will necessitate a greater area of the reserve being used for railway purposes.

In reporting, in May last, to the Commission appointed to inquire and report on the reserve, the Railway Commissioners, while not approving of granting leasehold tenures of the reserve for long periods, admitted that certain specified portions might be re-let for twenty-one years. But as, since then, the training-wall recently erected has so deflected the current of the Buller River as to threaten the washing-away of part of the reserve, the Commissioners would seek to withdraw their countenance from any dealings with the leases on it at present. The uncertainties in connection with the river-works, the future requirements from expansion of trade, and the fact that the interests and convenience of the port are the paramount considerations in this matter, lead them to the conclusion that there should be no dealings with the reserve in anticipation of the expiry of the existing leases on it.

I have, &c.,

The Chairman, Waste Lands Committee,
House of Representatives.

E. G. PILCHER, Secretary.