

possible. He might have paid rates on some occasions, but generally he has refused. I have a number of letters from local bodies complaining bitterly of the position taken up in this matter by the Public Trustee. Now, with regard to valuation, the gentleman who was appointed knew absolutely nothing about the value of land at all. His whole life-time has been spent in town. He doubtless knows the value of buildings as well as any man, but he knows absolutely nothing about land, and the consequence is that he put values on the land regardless of position or quality.

3. *Mr. Meredith.*] You mean on the improvements?—Yes. He valued the prairie value too high, and also the improvements. He was evidently unable to understand the value of the land prior to the improvements being put upon it. In some places the land had been covered with furze, which had been eradicated by the tenant. He does not understand the value of that, nor does he understand the value of some of the land off which stones had been taken at great expense. He was altogether unsuitable to make these valuations. The charges, legal and other, made by the Public Trustee are too high, and are apparently made in the interest of solicitors, &c. The cost of valuation and other charges in the case of Mr. Allan Bell comes to £16 15s. 3d. on an area of 160 acres previous to receiving a new lease. From these you can understand what the expenses have been. And others have had to pay large sums, although the valuer was able to walk from one place to another and do his work in a few hours, making £10 in that short time. I think that these charges are extravagant, and made without any consideration for the unfortunate and struggling farmer. There are many cases which are very hard indeed, and I am certain, from conversations that I had with Mr. Ballance, that if he had lived he would not have tolerated it for a moment. There is not a settler interested in the matter who does not deplore his loss. I might say, just before I finish, that, as regards the Natives, it might be well to strike out this clause in the petition with reference to the Government obtaining power to purchase these lands. If the Committee does not see their way with reference to that, of course we will have to submit; but, with reference to getting the management of the land under the Land Board, the Public Trustee must know that a man like himself, who has spent his life in an office, cannot know anything of the values of land, and in the interests of the Natives themselves he ought to be pleased to have the land brought under the control of the Land Board; and I think if that is done that is all that would be required. The rents for the lessors would be paid over to the Public Trustee, so that he could pay it over to the Natives. But the land would be under the management of gentlemen who understand the value of land, and what could be made out of it. The settlers are oppressed and settlement retarded because of the want of knowledge and want of will on the part of the Public Trustee.

4. *Mr. Warburton.*] You said that the improvements belonged to the lessees; by their contracts the lessees obtained leases for thirty years on condition that they should pay to the Natives the value of all improvements over £5 an acre?—Yes.

*Mr. McGuire:* There is one other point that I would like to mention, and that is about insurance. Now, to show you that the Public Trustee is not acquainted with these matters, a farmer of, say, 500 or 600 acres, he does not look upon the grassing and fencing as sufficient security for the rent which has to be paid in advance, but calls upon the lessees to insure in his name their buildings, thus taking all the security away from them. I admit that the Trustee would be quite justified in such a course were the land only held in one-eighth-acre sections, but on big farms it is absurd.

5. *Mr. Duncan.*] With regard to this question of valuation, do I understand that under the original lease the holders were only entitled to five pounds' worth of improvements, no matter what the value of the improvements they may have put on amount to?—Under the old lease they were only entitled to £5; under the new Bill no amount was mentioned whatever.

6. Was the new Bill passed?—Yes. Mr. Ballance assured me that it was not the policy of the Government to prevent people from improving their holdings. It was to the advantage of the country for the people to make improvements.

7. *Mr. Reeves.*] With reference to the refusal of the Public Trustee to pay rates, is the property virtually private property—Native lands held by the Trustee—or are they Native lands in the ordinary sense: which are they to be regarded as? My own opinion is that they are lands granted to the Natives, and they have a perfect right to them, but have no power to deal with them; but it seems there is something wanted to place that power in their hands. Do you not think that a great deal hangs upon that point, as to whether these lands are Native or private lands?—Of course.

8. *Mr. Hall.*] Do you not think that it is a very proper thing that the Public Trustee to require that these buildings should be insured?—It may be proper if it were in the towns where there are no other improvements, but where the Trustee is satisfied that there are £700 of improvements without buildings at all, and where the rent does not amount to more than £50, and where the rent has to be paid in advance, I do not see why he should compel these parties to insure, and thereby denude themselves of every scrap of securities upon which they might get an advance. The Public Trustee looks upon it as if it were a section here in the middle of Wellington, where insurance is a great thing; but here men need not build at all. He need not make these improvements at all; but, when he does build, then the Public Trustee wants to compel him to insure. I believe none of them will insure, and I do not think that the Public Trustee has got many of them to insure as yet.

9. *Mr. Green.*] Do I understand you to say that it is a great grievance that there is only five pounds' worth of improvements allowed; it is under the Act of 1892?—Yes, I consider it a great blot on the Act. Men should be encouraged to improve their holdings.

10. Who issued these leases?—The Public Trustee.

11. The leases contained that provision?—Yes.

12. Of course it was a contract?—Yes.

13. These leases have expired?—No; that is where the grievance comes in. These parties have taken advantage of the last Amendment Act many years before their existing thirty-year leases expire. They say that if the question of improvements was left over until their original leases expire they would not have to pay at all, and they consider it hard that through coming under the new Act they should have to pay a penalty.