

Native lands (and all other lands for that matter) under one Act. United action is wanted on the part of the lessees. I look on Mr. McGuire as a good man to take charge of petition or amendment to the Act. When in Wellington I was told by M.H.R.s', that thirds of rent should go to the roads, and that only Taranaki would put up with such a state of things. But it is presumption on my part, to suggest to you, who has the Act at your finger-ends. I am impatient to read the remains of your letter. Believe me to be yours ever grateful.

ALFRED WRAY.

J. J. ELWIN, examined.

60. *The Chairman.*] You are a leaseholder under the West Coast Settlement Act?—Yes.

61. Will you tell the Committee what are the grievances about which the leaseholders complain?—In the first place, I should like to make it plain under what conditions the settlers first took up these leases, for the Committee do not appear to understand that. I would also like to show the original intention of the Government in issuing these leases. When the Native disturbance was taking place the Government considered it would be desirable to have in the disturbed districts settlers to take the place of the Constabulary. With this object in view, large sections were offered for lease in various parts, the idea being that a Native section and a European section would interlap; and these leases were taken up towards the year 1884 by a large number of settlers, and they took them up in good faith, coming from other districts with the idea that the value placed on these lands was a fair one. They had not been very long on these lands before they found that they were not like lands in any other districts. The Natives refused to fence, and, if a settler put up a fence, the Native horses, and cattle, and pigs worked them down again. There was constant trouble with Natives passing over the land, and so on, and there was constant irritation received from the Natives, besides which cattle and sheep disappeared from the lands, and there was great trouble. Under these circumstances the leaseholders found that the rents payable were far too high, and they petitioned Government, with the result that the Government had these lands revalued by Mr. Robinson, the Crown Lands Ranger, and he reduced them in many cases as much as 50 per cent. These reductions lasted for five years, that term ending on the 31st December, 1892. Prior to the end of the year 1891, Mr. Ballance, who was then Minister of Lands, was communicated with, and he thoroughly understood the position, and drafted a Bill on which this Act of 1892 was founded. The object of the Act was to place the interests of the settlers in an equitable position as regarded their leases. A large number of persons had taken up rights from the Natives previous to the year 1891. I may say that in the year 1887 the House passed an Act dealing with Native lands, and that Act intended the excising of the West Coast Settlement Reserves from the action of the Act, but accidentally they were included; only those portions of the land that were not leased were hung up until this Act was passed. They were surveyed, but could not be dealt with. Mr. Ballance was communicated with, and he recognised that it was impossible for the settlers to go back to the original rents, and he recognised that persons who, in the interests of settlement, had settled on the land illegally since 1881 must be put in a proper position. Mr. Ballance made provision in the Act by which these illegal tenures could be recognised. Clause 6 was distinctly put in for that purpose. We have come down now to this Act, and the petitioners state that the Act has not been administered in a manner satisfactory to the tenants. Now, we have the intention of the Act in the first place to give us an equitable rent. Clause 8 gives a large number of subsections under which a tenant who held a lease could come in under this Act, and could obtain a new lease at a fair rental. Clause 8 specially provides that the Public Trustee shall call a meeting of the Natives and Europeans to agree together as to the rent. In certain cases, if the Natives do not come to the meeting, the Trustee then has power to fix the rent. The meeting must take place before the Trustee can interfere in any shape or form. I have here a letter from the Public Trustee in connection with my land. He gives me notice that the meeting is called, and says it will take place at a certain place; then he says, "I have fixed the value of the land to be brought under the lease at £2 16s., and the value of improvements at £1,400 6s." This is all done before the meeting is called—before I have seen the Natives; before I have had an opportunity of discussing the matter the Trustee's foot is down and my valuation is fixed. That is one reason why we say that the administration of this Act is not satisfactory. When we applied for a new lease we had to lodge £12 10s. before the Public Trustee would take any action whatever in giving us a new lease. Mr. Ballance, who knew the circumstances of the case, told the Public Trustee that it was absolutely impossible for small leaseholders to raise £12 10s. The amount was then reduced to £7 10s. Allow me to show you how that money has been expended. Valuation-fee, three guineas. Now, this valuator, who was utterly incompetent for the work, arrived on my land at 5.30.; we walked down through the land, and by 6 o'clock the valuation was finished. During our walk I drew the valuator's attention to two paddocks, one of seven acres and one of ten acres. These paddocks had been covered with rocks—they were not stones, they were rocks—the land was utterly valueless for any purpose whatever except for grazing calves. I had taken a month with two men and three horses, a dray, and a sledge to get these rocks out; the paddocks were then ploughed, and when the valuator saw them were looking green and nice. I drew his attention to these fields particularly—in many other cases I had carted hundreds of stones off the land. I live at Stoney River. I showed him heaps of stones lying in the creek—some of the rocks a yard through. He told me that was not permanent improvement, and it was not mentioned in the valuation whatever. That was a town valuator, and I had to pay three guineas for this. Then, there was the account for advertising in the *Hawera Star*. The Act says the Trustee shall advertise in a paper published in the district; not that the tenant shall have to pay for long advertisements 4in. or 5in. in length. The account I had to pay was £2 17s. for advertising in the *Hawera Star*, and not one single Native connected with my land saw a copy of that paper. When the valuation was sent to me with the Trustee's statement that that was my valuation I immediately wrote to him and, told him that the whole thing was in excess of the real value of the land. The reply I got was that if that