THURSDAY, 10TH OCTOBER, 1901.

EDMUND MASON, Registrar of Old-age Pensions, examined. (No. 2.)

The Chairman: Mr. Mason, the order of reference is for this Committee to make inquiries into the working of the Old-age Pensions Act, and we are anxious to get any information from you in order to see whether we can prevent fraud under the Act, and to make the working of the Act as efficient as possible. We shall be pleased to hear any statement you like to make, so that we may get any suggestions from you.

Mr. Mason: I should like to say, sir, that it is rather difficult to be a critic of one's own work. As far as the special reference you have mentioned is concerned, I feel that I have the responsibility; but a great deal of credit is due to Dr. Fitchett, who was Law Draftsman when the Act was drawn up, of drawing the Act and regulations up in a workable form. But, so far as the administration of the details is concerned, this was left to me, and I fail to see that they have wanted so much amending. I think I am borne out in that opinion by the fact that nearly all the Magistrates that I have had an opportunity of seeing—it is true they have not been many, as I do not leave Wellington very much—and to whom I have spoken, have stated to me that their opinion is that they are as good and as reasonable as can be expected for the purpose. I do not think they are perfect—nothing is perfect—but the few suggestions that have come in, in writing, from some of the Magistrates do not seem to me to really lead one to believe that there is much wanting. I saw some of the memoranda from Mr. Hawkins, and he was drafting some of the forms differently; but I do not think that, so far as I could judge, there would be very much improvement in respect to what you particularly wish. We are most anxious, and every one who has been connected with the working of the old-age pension scheme has been most anxious, that there should be no scandal in connection with it; that it should be given to worthy recipients—people entitled to it under the Act—and we have been most careful in watching the conduct of the people who receive it; so that if their conduct had not been very good, and it was known that they were intemperate, the practice has been not to wait even for a police report that they have been convicted of drunkenness, but on a report that they have been frequenting a publichouse I have simply sent out a notice to the Deputy Registrar to say that the pensioner must appoint an agent to collect his pension, and the agent has been requested to see that this instruction has been given effect to in such a form that he (the pensioner) could not easily waste the pension. Of course, we have not the power to say, "You shall not have the pension continued," but we have the power to say it will not be granted to go to the publichouse. With regard to the question of means, that has been, I believe, carefully investigated by the Stipendiary Magistrates at the time of the inquiry and at the time of the renewal. I have sometimes been in Court, and have heard a pensioner cross-examined as to his means, and so on; and there have been a few cases, no doubt, where the facts have been hidden. But we have got, roughly speaking, twelve or thirteen thousand pensioners on the list, and I think there have been as many as one can count on one's fingers who have been convicted of fraud—perhaps not knowingly—and that is a very small percentage. I have had, say, twenty—mostly anonymous—letters saying that such-and-such an old-age pensioner was disentitled to the pension; that he had a farm, and so on, and money in the Savings-Bank. In each case it has been sent back to the Magistrate for further investigation and for police inquiry, and the result has been that there has been hardly one of these cases sustained—perhaps two or three out of the twenty or thirty—but I am speaking now from memory, of course. I have a thorough knowledge of the working of the Act—I mean to say I watch everything. I do a great deal of the detail myself, and everything goes through my hands; I do not trust anything except routine even to my chief clerk. I was very anxious that this scheme should have, at all events, the best chance possible to make it work. I do not think there is much criticism to offer with regard to the regulations. When this scheme was put before me there was not the least experience to go upon, and I rather flatter myself that we have done very well. I do not think there is much to amend. I should be glad to answer any particular point in regard to the matter; and, as I said before, nothing can be perfect.

1. *Mr. Lethbridge.*] With regard to these old pensioners drinking their pension-money as soon as they get it, Mr. Mason, there are not many cases you say that come under your notice?—Well, the police have been asked to specially report; and we do not wait for a conviction. The reports comparatively are few. I have gone down very often myself on the pay-days here in Wellington, and I was once in Auckland on the pay-day. I have watched the people go in and draw their pension and come out, and those I have seen do this did not seem to me the class of people likely to drink the money. I dare say that in some small settlements, where people are easily watched, there are some "old soldiers," perhaps, who would probably drink if they could, and whom a very little drink upsets; and I do not think that any one—at all events, my view is, I should not say that no old-age pensioner shall ever have a glass of beer, but there should be no scandal, of course. He should not go and waste his pension to any great extent in the publichouse, and that we have been carefully trying to watch. I can only trust, of course, to these police reports.

2. I have got one case in my mind. It was pointed out to me that one old man in Feilding as soon as he got his pension went to the publichouse and immediately spent it, and during the rest of the month he was living on charity, and it was very nearly the death of him. People spoke to me about it, and I spoke to the police, and it was some time before we could get his pension paid to somebody as agent for him?—After the police report has come in we have immediately sent out a notice to the Deputy Registrar to communicate with the pensioner, and inform him that he must get an agent appointed. He (the Deputy Registrar) would no doubt take due care to see that a person was appointed agent who would look after the pensioner, and see that he did not spend it. It is difficult for us to go much beyond that. If it was a notorious case the pension would be stopped.