

WELLINGTON.

Report from JOHN STRAUCHON, Esq., Commissioner of Crown Lands, Wellington.

Department of Lands and Survey,

District Office, Wellington, 24th July, 1903.

I HAVE the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your memorandum of the 9th instant, covering a memorandum from the Right Hon. the Premier of the 6th idem, with reference to suggestions required for improving the system of application and ballot for Crown lands. I regret that my absence from town when your circular arrived and pressure of other work since prevented my replying sooner.

Before definitely dealing with the questions leading up to the ballot, I preface my remarks with a short review of the following systems of selecting Crown lands, and my opinion of their suitability, or otherwise, to the requirements of our classes of settlement :—

Methods of selecting and disposing of Crown Lands.

1. Applicants taking personal possession of the land at a specified time.
2. Priority of application in the sale-room.
3. Allotment to special-settlement associations.
4. By auction between applicants.
5. By tender.
6. Duplicate applications lodged during the same day.

1. *Applicants taking Personal Possession of Sections, &c.*—This system, which I understand is adopted in the United States in some instances, would, I presume, be worked roughly as follows: A certain block of land would be laid out for settlement in this manner. At a given time applicants for land in the block so laid out would be permitted to go on to the ground and take possession of the particular sections they wished to select somewhat in the same manner as miners peg out their mining claims. I do not think this system would be suitable for settlement of the limited area of Crown lands remaining in New Zealand, especially of the bush lands; but in any case, if adopted, consideration should be given as to whether the land should be open to every one, or if some measures should not be taken to insure that applicants were suitable persons, and were possessed of sufficient capital and experience to select and occupy the lands in a satisfactory manner. This could be done by providing that all applicants should present themselves before a board at a given place and date, before the day of selection, for examination. It would be necessary for the board to sit as close to the blocks as possible, to avoid expense to the applicants.

By the introduction of these suggestions speculation by unsuitable persons would be checked, and selectors would practically be compelled to inspect beforehand the sections they wished to select, also the allotment of the sections would be practically automatic, and the successful applicant would necessarily be one who had satisfied the board that he is capable, and able, by physical health, &c., to take up the land and work it in a satisfactory manner. In any case, however, as already stated, I do not think the system a suitable one for this colony.

2. *Priority of Application in the Sale-room.*—This system would mean that the applicant who first got his application lodged and recorded in the Land Board sale-room between given hours would get the section he applied for. This would result in some cases in the approaches to the sale-room being blocked for some time previous to the hour of opening, and an unseemly scramble would result, in which the biggest and strongest person would probably have the advantage. The remarks as to applying certain restrictions as to suitability, &c., mentioned above in No. 1, would apply equally well to this heading; and, if this were done, the number of applicants would be reduced to a considerable extent.

3. *Allotment to Special-settlement Associations.*—Under this heading blocks of land have in the past been allotted to associations formed in terms of special regulations made under Part IV. of "The Land Act, 1892," and previously under Part V. of "The Land Act, 1885." These regulations prescribed, *inter alia*, that a certain number of persons should form themselves into an association, and obtain the Minister's consent to their selecting without competition a block of land sufficient to allow each member to have a section of an average area of 200 acres allotted to him. When this consent was obtained, the block was surveyed into sections, and a ballot was then held amongst the members for the various sections, or for order of choice. From experience of this system gained in this and the Taranaki Land District, I do not consider it a satisfactory manner of settling Crown lands. It is very doubtful whether it is advisable to allow any number of persons to band together and obtain the privilege of picking out the best blocks of land without the general public knowing or having an opportunity of participating.

4. *By Auction between Applicants.*—This method would be in favour of the man with most means, who would be able to outbid any other applicant. This could, of course, be governed to a certain extent by applying the restrictive measures outlined in No. 1 (*re* prior examination by board); but this would only remedy the evil to a certain extent, and the invariable result would be that the richest man would get the section—probably, also, at a higher price than it was worth—except in some few cases where the man without capital would be led on to purchase a section at a price far above his means. In both these instances dissatisfaction with the prices would be found in the future, and attempts would be made to obtain revision of capital values.

5. *By Tender.*—The remarks outlined in No. 4 apply almost with equal force to this system, except that each applicant would be in ignorance as to whether the section was being applied for by others, and what prices were likely to be offered for it. The result, however, would invariably be that the wealthiest man would obtain the section, as the person with small means would only