MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

THURSDAY, 21ST JULY, 1904.

DEPUTATION from the Municipal Conference.

The Chairman: The Committee will be glad to hear any statements or evidence the members of the deputation would like to give bearing on the proposed Fire Brigades Bill.

Mr. C. M. Gray (Mayor of Christchurch): I represent Christchurch, and the first objection I have to offer is to the representation on the proposed Fire Boards. I have had a great deal to do with fire-brigade matters in Christchurch for a large number of years, and have been chairman of the committee for twelve or thirteen years. My opinion is that the proposed Board should be divided into thirds as regards liability and representation, which is similar to the representation that obtains in Australia—that is to say, the Government should contribute one-third of the expenditure, the municipalities one-third, and the insurance people one-third. Another objection to the Bill is that it does not appear clear from its provisions how the Government proposes to deal with the existing property and plants of the municipalities. In the case of Christchurch, we have land used in connection with fire brigades to the value of £3,190, which, together with the value of the buildings and plant, totals £14,736, and our expenditure last year was £2,095. Our average expenditure may be stated at £2,000 per annum for working the brigade. As compared with other centres, taken on a population basis our expenditure is much lower than the average. We have not a high-pressure water-supply, but we have chemical engines and steam-engines. The members of the brigade are all paid, some full time, but the great bulk of them only part time. Another point in the Bill we do not like is that all our estimates are to be submitted to Wellington for approval. This we consider to be a retrograde movement, in centralising matters which should be localised as far as possible In Victoria they have Fire Brigade Boards of different kinds. The Metropolitan Board consists of nine members, three representing the Government, three the insurance companies, and three the local bodies. There are also country Boards, two members of which represent the Government, two the local bodies, and two the insurance companies, while two are elected by the fire brigades.

The Chairman: We have information as to how other similar Boards are constituted.

Mr. Gray: In that case I will pass on and state briefly the principal objections we have to the Bill. We think the Government ought to contribute one-third of the funds, and that if they are not going to contribute they should not have the representation provided for, because the sop thrown out providing for the fire-brigade rate over Government buildings is not, in our opinion, sufficient. It is easy to suppose a case where the Government would have undue power by such representation as compared with the local bodies and insurance companies, and we think the Government ought to pay for that power. With regard to the property of the fire brigades, this has been partly provided by subscription and partly by the local bodies for the maintenance of the brigades, and we think some provision ought to be made for allowing the local bodies the value of the plant, land, and buildings, which have been largely provided by the local authorities.

The Chairman: Allowance should be made to the Corporation?

Mr. Gray: Yes, if a separate rating Board is going to be established. I think that is all I have to say.

Mr. Hanan: What form of Board do you think it necessary to create?

Mr. Gray: Personally I am not in favour of establishing separate Boards, but I think Mr. Robbin, one of the deputation, can deal with that point. He has had more to do with the Fire Brigades Association, and they have promoted a Bill which I think more nearly meets the wishes of the municipalities.

Mr. Hanan: Are the views of your Council in the direction of allowing things to remain as they are?

Mr. Gray: As far as my Council are concerned, I am quite satisfied with things as they are. The only sore point we have is that we have had to bear the burden of maintaining the fire brigade alone, with no contribution from the insurance people or any one else.

Mr. Hanan: Supposing things remain as they are, but a contribution is directed to be given by the insurance companies to your brigade-maintenance, do you not think the companies should have some representation on your Council?

Mr. Gray: Under the present Act the Council has power to call in outsiders.

Mr. Hanan: But would you not give them some right of representation on your Fire Brigade Committee?

Mr. Gray: Yes, I think they are entitled to that. Some years ago we occupied a somewhat exceptional position, inasmuch as the fire-insurance companies contributed some £250 or £260 to the brigade. They never asked for representation on the committee, but we always gave consideration to any representations they made to us. Owing, however, to the action of the Australian Underwriters' Association they are debarred from giving anything now, and consequently we ignore them altogether.

Mr. Hanan: Supposing this Board is set up, you say that compensation should be paid to the Council before the property in connection with fire brigades is handed over. This point then crops up: where is this compensation to come from?