

ARTHUR JOHN STALLWORTHY examined. (No. 33.)

1. *The Chairman.*] You reside at Dargaville, and are a journalist?—Yes.

2. You are probably aware of the nature of this inquiry: would you like to make a statement to the Commission?—I know practically the whole of the country from McCarroll's Gap to the junction of the Mangakahia on the western side, and I have a very fair knowledge of a large portion of country on the eastern side over the same area. I believe it would be an accurate description to say that the bulk of the good land in that area lies to the west of the western route. The same remark applies to the country at the lower end on either side of McCarroll's Gap. It is perhaps more true of the country east and west of the Mangakahia. I would like to corroborate the evidence given in this respect by Mr. Edwin Harding, who stated that there would probably be served by the western route an area of about 1,000,000 acres, with a capacity of probably two sheep to the acre. I have seen large areas of maize growing on country that would be served by the western route growing to a uniform height of 12 ft. without one ounce of manure being put on the land; also very heavy yields of potatoes, turnips, oats, and pumpkins. As a Dominion enterprise, I believe that a railway along the western route would be a very sound business proposition, as it would promote settlement and development of a rich and very large area along that route. Much of our land is now held in blocks that it would be better to subdivide. A railway along the western route would assist in the subdivision of these estates. Thousands of head of cattle are now being driven to the rail-head, and more would go by rail if we had the railway. Then, again, if the railway were extended along the western route it would stimulate our farmers by giving them greater facilities for shipping fat lambs and stock to the city markets. I know from my own knowledge that as much as 2s. to 8s. per hundredweight has been paid for cartage over our roads to much of the country that would be affected by the railway along the western route. The railway would minimise all these charges, and greatly assist the settlers in developing the country. Much of the country that would be served by the western route is as badly roaded if not worse than any other part of the Dominion. Our local legislators are of opinion that it is an impossible task, from a finance point of view, for the local bodies to attempt to road much of the country tapped by the western route. At some of the points it would cost £1 per yard to put metal on the roads under present conditions, and frequently they have had to pay from 10s. to 15s. per yard for metal on roads. These remarks would apply to the Mangonui Valley—from McCarroll's Gap to the Tangihuas on the west. The Girls' High School Reserve would be served by this railway, and it has a magnificent future before it when brought within the reach of the line. At present it is very difficult to develop it, on account of the want of roads. The Omano Estate is a magnificent one, of great carrying-capacity, and if the western railway is extended the Government should acquire that land for closer settlement. We urge that the western route should be adopted, because it is a Main Trunk line, and therefore a matter for Dominion enterprise, as it would be constructed and brought into a paying condition sooner than any branch line. Also, the lands would be quicker brought under settlement. As to the possibility suggested by one Commissioner, of a steamer line on the Kaipara waters competing with the railway if it went west, I might say that in thirty years, the Kaipara Steamship Company, or its immediate predecessor, the Northern Union Steamship Company, paid only one dividend, and that suggests the inference of the extreme improbability of any line of vessels on the Kaipara waters competing with the railway, or of any lowering of the fares in order to bring the railway fares down also.

3. How much dividend did they pay?—2½ per cent; nothing last year. Almost immediately the railway was opened to Te Hana, and tapped the Otamatea waters and the traffic of that district, the old-established steamship company left the Otamatea because the trade fell away, which shows to my mind that it is impossible for the steamship service to compete with the railway along the western route. At present the freights on the east coast, at Mangapai and Whangarei, are reported to be from 5s. to 7s. 6d. per ton. There is no competition there, and it is probable that they would be reduced through the railway competition along the coast to the south of Whangarei. In my opinion, a line from McCarroll's Gap direct to Whangarei, and junctioning with the railway system north of Whangarei, would be a very bad business proposition, as it would go through country which would not return enough to pay for the upkeep of its own length of line. It would not be a sound business proposal to go from McCarroll's Gap to Whangarei in a straight line through Mangapai and practically skirting the sea-coast all the way. Further, if the railway went from McCarroll's Gap to Whangarei instead of by the western route it would be to link settlements north of Whangarei with Whangarei, and it would mean something like twenty-seven miles more of travelling for the people in those districts to get to the Auckland port of departure. This would be a serious prejudice to the railway as a trunk line. It would result in the traffic, both passengers and goods, instead of going past Whangarei, and so helping to maintain the line south of Whangarei to Auckland, going into Whangarei Port itself, and from there to Auckland by sea. If the line is extended along the western route it goes more through the centre of the Island; and from a defence point of view the country will be better protected, and an enemy will have less chance of interfering with the line. If it went into Whangarei, where it is close to the seaboard, it could be more readily interfered with. Further, I would say, in the locality of the Mangakahia district for every mile the line might go eastward it would come more or less into competition with the existing parallel line from Whangarei to Kawakawa.

4. What about the competition with the Kaihu line, on the other side?—I am not in a position to indorse the suggestion that the best connection for a Wairua branch line to connect with the Main Trunk would be to Kirikopuni, as a better connection might be found from Ruawai to Paparoa. That would not give Dargaville an immediate connection with the main line, but it would put the latter in this position: We have a splendid harbour, despite what some witnesses say, and we are probably the nearest point to Sydney. We do not know what the future may be, but it is possible that with a branch