

16. You assert that the increased cost of living is really the cost of high living?—Probably, to some extent; and I think it applies more to the case of butchers' meat. I know instances where a butcher calls at a house for a small order of meat costing perhaps 1s., and he calls back during the day to deliver it; and that goes on year in and year out.

17. The cost of distribution is decidedly more?—Yes. Then there is the question of firing, which is a big item in the South, where the condition of living is not so pleasant as it is in the North. A large quantity of coal is now used where firewood was previously used. Both those articles have increased in cost, more particularly coal, to the consumer.

18. Do you think that is caused through the handling—passing from man to man too much? Does not the Westport Company or the State Coal Department keep the cost down?—As far as Invercargill is concerned, we are not affected by State coal, because there is no depot in Invercargill. The retailers have an association which has kept the price of coal up. I refer to the coal-merchants—the men who distribute the coal.

19. They have put up the price compared with five years ago?—Yes; it has gone up recently, I believe. On the 1st May, I believe, it was increased by 1s. a quarter-ton or 1s. a half-ton.

20. Is there any rumour or talk amongst the inhabitants of Invercargill that their cost of living has been increased by rings or combinations?—The Coal-merchants' Association is practically the only combination I have heard spoken of—that is, outside the dairymen, who have a combination—that is, the men who supply the milk; and they regulate the price from time to time. As an instance of what one might term an iniquitous proceeding on the part of the coal-merchants, I may say that it had been the custom prior to the formation of the association for three or four householders to join and get a ton of coal delivered to them at the ton rate. They lived perhaps adjacent to one another. Since the formation of this association they have been unable to do that: they must pay at quarter-ton rates, instead of at ton rates, as previously. I may say that I reside outside the town boundary and across the Waihopai Bridge, and there is an extra charge of 1s. per load or part of a load for delivering coal across this bridge—it matters not what the quantity is. Two or more people could not combine to get coal out there—they would each have to pay the extra shilling even in addition to quarter-ton rates.

21. Do you mean to say that if you did not pay that shilling the coal-dealers would refuse to deliver the coal?—I was told by one of the coal-merchants that they would be liable to forfeit the sum of £50 under their bond if they delivered coal to me or to any one else under the old scale.

22. *Mr. Macdonald.*] Can you tell us what the price of coal was before the 1st May?—There was no increase, so far as I know, for several years prior to that.

23. What were you paying?—I think it was 12s. a half-ton. The price has now been increased by 1s. per half-ton. I usually get a half-ton of Kaitangata nuts and a half-ton of Nightcaps.

24. *Mr. Hall.*] Could you supply us with the prices when you get back?—Yes, I will be able to furnish you with the actual figures.

25. *Mr. Macdonald.*] Is there anything to prevent me, if I felt inclined, becoming a coal-merchant in Invercargill?—No, I do not think there is; but what I do notice is this: that any one who starts in that line soon becomes absorbed in the association. I know that relations exist between the coal-owner and the distributor, but whether he gets a concession or not I really could not say.

26. Do you know of any coal-merchants who have made large profits out of coal—who have amassed wealth?—No, I am not aware of that.

27. So that the coal-merchants are hardly bleeding the public?—You can put it that way if you like. There are a large number of coal-merchants, and there is not much likelihood of any of them amassing wealth.

28. Now, as to those who supply milk?—There are a large number around Invercargill, but none of them in a large way.

29. None of the collieries have distributing-depots in Invercargill?—Only the Westport Company I do not know if they are in the combination or not.

30. The general manager stated that since they had taken charge of the distributing themselves they had reduced the price to the consumers by 20 per cent.?—I am not aware of it.

31. *Mr. Veitch.*] What is the principal class of coal used in Invercargill?—Principally Nightcaps, with a fair proportion of Kaitangata.

32. There would not be much Westport coal used for household purposes?—No.

33. Has the coal used for household purposes gone up in price?—There was an increase recently, I understand, from the 1st May.

34. Do you think that is due to the coal-mine owners' association?—I really could not say.

35. Are you able to say that the retailers pay a higher price now than before the price went up? Is the distributor paying a higher price to the mine-owner?—I could not say, but I know that the price has gone up to the consumer.

36. *Mr. Robertson.*] How long has the coal-merchants' association been in existence?—I should think, ten years at least.

37. There has been a rise since it came into existence?—Yes.

38. *Mr. Hall.*] What is the retail price of milk?—I could not say. A general rise took place two months ago.

39. Will you forward us the exact price?—Yes.

40. You spoke of the difference between what the producers were getting and the price it is being retailed at. Do you know if there has been any marked difference in fruit?—No; fruit is frequently spoken of as being very dear in Invercargill—I mean locally grown fruit.

41. Is it sold by auction?—Yes, any one can purchase.

42. Is a case of fruit sold at auction at much less per pound than it is retailed at in the shops?—Yes, there must be a considerable margin between the auction prices and the retailed prices in small quantities.