

of bush land in Southland. Take, for instance, the Seaward Bush area, which has been "cut through" by sawmills. Sections there are thrown open by the State, but to expect a working-man to tackle sections of that kind is an absurdity. The system which has been adopted in connection with the opening of those lands is, in my opinion, a wrong one. If we had all the bush and swamp land in Southland through which the sawmill has worked settled under proper conditions it could be made productive. If the sections could be let on a sound tenure—without allowing the speculator to operate—I consider that the cost of living would be reduced to a great extent.

37. *Mr. Veitch.*] Is there much sawmilling in your district?—Yes, a great deal.

38. Do you know anything as to the royalties for timber there?—Mr. O'Byrne, secretary of the Sawmillers' Union of Workers, will be able to give you the exact figures.

39. You mentioned some other method of dealing with the high price of land: what did you mean when you said that?—I believe in the unearned increment going to the State—stopping the land-speculators.

FRIDAY, 7TH JUNE, 1912.

CHARLES THOMAS MUNRO, Fruiterer, examined on oath. (No. 20.)

1. *The Chairman.*] What is your occupation?—A retail fruiterer.

2. Have you resided in this district long?—About five years.

3. Do you know the fruit trade well?—Yes, I think so.

4. Can you give us any information as to the difference between the price of produce paid to the farmer and the retail price at which it is sold to the public? Is there, in your opinion, a fair margin between the two?—Yes. Sometimes there is not enough from the retailers' point of view.

5. Is there anything in the shape of a combination or understanding to secure a larger profit?—I do not think there is anything in the nature of a combine. Of course, when a producer sends his stuff in he often puts a price on it at which it is to be sold. Sometimes the price goes higher than that, and sometimes it falls below—that is, with regard to fruit.

6. You have no knowledge of any understanding between the buyers as to not bidding against one another, or anything of that sort?—No. It might happen occasionally, but there is no standing ring. They are vying with one another.

7. You mean that two or three may temporarily have an understanding not to bid against each other?—Yes. There might be one particular line for which no one was particularly anxious.

8. Is it within your knowledge that farmers or producers often grumble at the difference between the price paid at auction and the price at which the produce is exposed for sale in the shops?—I have heard the complaint many a time.

9. Do you think there is any justification for the complaint?—I do not think so.

10. Could you describe the process. Does the farmer send in his goods intrusting them entirely to the auctioneer?—Generally speaking, that is so. There are professional fruitgrowers and amateurs.

11. Do the professional fruitgrowers use the auctioneer as an agent?—That is so. They place their trust in the man selling the stuff. For instance, they may send down a line of apples and possibly have given no instructions, and this month they may send down another line. In doing so they may say, "We were dissatisfied with the price returned for the previous lot. We expected to get 2½d. or 3d., and we hope you will do better this time." They describe them as "good keepers," and say how long they can be comfortably held for. That man, generally speaking, is satisfied with his price. He understands that possibly he has run against a bad market, and that there may be many other fruitgrowers doing the same thing. The amateur sends his fruit in, and, no matter what kind of a tree they may have come off, they are, in the grower's opinion, the best fruit in New Zealand; but when it comes against the professional growers' stuff it is very often rubbish. The taste may be all right, but the appearance and get-up are not to compare. He sees another man's produce, and knows he is getting a great price, and expects to get the same. When such a man sees his neighbour's stuff being sold he naturally thinks he should get the same price.

12. Is it often that fruit gets kept too long waiting for a good market?—Very often. Not so much in the market here, but the producer holds it too long. He is sitting at home watching the prices in the papers, and all the time the fruit is deteriorating.

13. You have absolutely no knowledge of any controlling ring to buy cheap and sell dear?—No.

14. *Mr. Veitch.*] What is about the usual retail selling-price of eating-apples?—Apples are sold up to 8d. a pound. It depends on the season. Just now you will get good eating-fruit up to 4d. a pound, perhaps 6d.

15. What price would the producer get for apples sold at 6d.?—Just now he is getting about 4½d. to 4¾d. In one or two cases lately they were getting 5d. That is what was bid at the auction. The auction business is a funny business as regards fruit. I can give you an instance that occurred a fortnight ago, where a line of fruit was knocked down at a very high price and is being retailed the cheapest in Dunedin at the present moment. I do not know what return the producer got. That was pointed out to me just a few days ago.

16. Is it the general practice in the trade that the producers send direct to the auction-room? Yes. Of course, the auctioneers are fighting one another, and they might guarantee a price, and if they get more money, so much the better for them.

17. In that case the auctioneer is not an auctioneer—he is buying and selling for himself?—He gets the benefit of the increased price, of course, but next day the price may be just the other way.