

JAMES BEGG, Farmer, examined on oath. (No. 32.)

1. *The Chairman.*] You are a farmer, and reside at Clinton, Mr. Begg?—Yes, I am a sheep-farmer.

2. Could you make a statement to the Commission as to what, in your opinion, has caused the increase in the cost of living, if there has been any rise?—Yes. I would like to emphasize the fact that to the principal section of workers in the country—that is, the agricultural workers—the cost of living has not increased. It cannot have risen, for the reason that their living is found for them in addition to their wages.

3. *Mr. Fairbairn.*] We are referring to the public generally. Our investigation covers the whole community—not a section only?—Yes; I just wanted to mention that point. In regard to country labour, I may say that I do not think that the obvious scarcity of country labour arises primarily from insufficient wages, for the reason that during the last twenty years the workers' wages have increased from 50 to 100 per cent. So that the position of that class of labour has improved immensely during the past twenty years. Their wages have increased by the amount I have stated, and in addition to that the cost of living to them has not increased. In spite of that fact, labour has drifted from the country to the cities to a considerable extent, though it is stated to-day that the position of the worker in the city is not so good as it was a number of years ago. From these facts I deduce that the depletion of the country districts of labour is not because of wages—that that is not the prime cause of it.

4. *The Chairman.*] Perhaps the attractiveness of the cities?—Yes. With regard to the increased cost of living, in so far as it has increased, I think these facts bear on the subject. So many have ceased to be producers—the primary producers of food in the first instance. That, it seems to me, would naturally tend to increase prices.

5. The prices of food?—Yes.

6. *Mr. Veitch.*] Is not the increased number of people in the towns to be accounted for by the farmers becoming wealthy and coming to live in the towns?—No doubt, to some extent that has taken place. However, I am inclined to think that the number of farmers who have retired from their farms is infinitesimal compared with the number of farm labourers who have retired from the farms.

7. *The Chairman.*] Still, when you speak about the primary producers being the most necessary—they are the most necessary, but they could not do as useful work if they had to leave their farms and do other work—for instance, to make chairs, say: so that the chairmaker is as useful in his place as the man at the plough?—I am not going to work the point to death and say that we should all live in the country and that nobody should live in the towns; but I would say that the balance is a little upset at present, and I do not think that wages has been the cause of the upsetting of the balance.

8. Have you any knowledge as to the sending of fruit or produce into town—as to how the farmers are treated?—No. I may say, however, that wool has not increased in value in twenty years.

9. *Mr. Fairbairn.*] Taking the average?—There was a fall steadily for eleven years, and for the last eleven years it has risen. The actual price to-day is not higher compared with twenty years ago.

10. From 1890 to 1900 was probably the lean decade all over the world, and it has picked up since then?—Yes, with fluctuations.

11. Can you give us some information about the price of sheep and beef? Can you tell us what the farmer has been getting?—I cannot tell you that at first hand. I could deal with store-conditioned stock.

12. *Mr. Hall.*] Are the farmers having to pay more for their stores than they did a few years ago?—Yes, undoubtedly more than they did twenty years ago.

13. So that if they are selling fat stock a little higher they are paying more for their stores?—Yes.

14. *The Chairman.*] Have you noticed that the goods you receive from the town are more expensive than they were fifteen years ago?—Our bills certainly amount to more.

15. The farmer is getting luxurious as well as the working-man?—Yes, I am afraid that is so. We do not get the same goods as we did twenty years ago. I believe that is a very important factor of the question. Twenty years ago, or even less, we got raisins by the case. Now we find they are wanted in one pound packets, seeded, and ready for use. My own experience is that the great bulk of the groceries to-day was not stocked twenty years ago—not in the same form—and the difference in price is very largely the difference in the price of the get-up.

16. *Mr. Hall.*] What wages per hour is paid for harvesting?—About 1s. an hour.

17. Can you get labour as low as 1s. an hour?—I have no personal knowledge of that. I am not a cropping farmer.

18. *Mr. Macdonald.*] When you spoke of wool, what class of wool did you refer to?—Halfbred crossbred wool.

19. I have here the figures prepared by Dr. McIlwraith, and it seems that during the last eleven years wool has risen to a higher standard than it did in previous years?—The highest point for wool was touched in 1906. The price was 11½d. in 1890 for that class of wool.

20. And it is 11d. now?—My own experience was that I did not get as high prices in 1890–91 as I did last year and this year. I refer to wool from the very same class of sheep and from precisely the same class of country.

21. This table of prices would be approximately correct?—Yes.