

H. A. COATES examined. (No. 6.)

1. *The Chairman.*] Your name?—Harry Aylmer Coates.

2. You wish to speak in support of the petition?—Yes, and I would also like to give evidence later on with regard to the Amendment Bill which has been brought down with reference to the Shops and Offices Act.

3. Your business?—Pork-butcher.

4. You are not exempt?—Yes, I am exempt. I am speaking now, of course, as representing the shopkeepers generally. Later on, when giving evidence on the Amendment Bill, I will speak as a representative of the pork-butchering trade. Well, I can honestly endorse my friends' remarks as to the general effect of the Saturday half-holiday; but I can go further, and I will show you how it seriously affects businesses such as mine, which are exempt. We have been placed in a very unfortunate position over this matter. There was a firm of pork-butchers in Auckland who were on the verge of bankruptcy. As a matter of fact they were bankrupt really; and in April last we took over their liabilities, amounting to some £1,600, and also two leases, one extending over eight years at £10 a week rental and rates, and the other extending over five years at a rental of £7 a week without rates. We also have our main business in Symonds Street. Thus we have three shops: one at the lower end of Queen Street, one at the upper end of Queen Street, and one in Symonds Street. Now, I find from my returns that this Saturday closing has had a most serious effect, inasmuch as it has taken practically £551 out of our business in two months—that is to say, comparing the business done at the old shop in Symonds Street during the two months of last year with the two months of this year in which this Saturday closing has been in operation, and also comparing the takings of the two shops we have taken over with the two previous months before the Saturday closing came into operation. Take the lower shop in Queen Street. We took that over about the middle of April—the 17th April, to be exact. From the 17th April to the 30th our cash takings were £133 18s. 9d. In May, by careful nursing, we had increased these takings for the month up to £469 15s. 5d. In June the takings fell slightly. During two weeks of June the Saturday half-holiday was in operation, but I can account for these takings keeping up so well as they did during that month. For the first two Saturdays after the Saturday half-holiday came into vogue the people were not accustomed to it, and we being the only shop handling meat or anything like that, we received the benefit no doubt for those two weeks from those people who could not get their supplies from the grocers. In July the same shop made a clear drop down to £315 14s. 5d. Then the Saturday half-holiday was in full swing. Now we will take the other branch shop at the top end of Queen Street. During April and May of this year our takings there were £637 18s. 6d., and during June and July they had fallen down to £522 14s. 10d., a drop of £115 3s. 8d. These are cash takings purely and simply. Now we will take the Symonds Street shop. This is as old an established business as any business in Auckland, and is, I may say, as solid as a rock. That business has fallen considerably. The June and July takings of 1912 were £850 1s., and the June and July takings for 1913 were £635 2s. 3d. During April and May of 1913 the takings were £836 17s. 2d. and for the two months in which the Saturday half-holiday was in vogue, as I have said, the takings were £635 2s. 3d. This shows a loss of business of £214 18s. 9d. between the June and July of 1912 and 1913, or of £201 14s. 11d. as compared with April and May. Now, this is a most serious position for us, and there are a number of other businesses in Auckland affected in the same way—perhaps not to so great an extent, but I contend that this Saturday half-holiday has created a depression in the town as far as the small shopkeepers are concerned. The question has been asked where the trade goes to, and it has been mentioned that the trade is diverted to some extent to the larger shops. It has been asked why. My explanation of that is this: the large stores handle all sorts of lines, and they have a regular delivery; and if persons cannot get out to the shops, when they have an opportunity they must take advantage of a firm who can deliver the goods at their door; and that, in my opinion, is the way it comes about. These large stores are taking up all these side lines, out of which the small shopkeepers are being squeezed, and it is all run with the one set of expenses. No doubt if this sort of thing is allowed to go on it will squeeze out a great deal of labour in Auckland. In our own case we have already paid off three men and a boy, making four hands, and there will be more to follow, of course, if we cannot get things put right in some way. Coming to the suggestion as to the justification for another poll. There was somewhere about sixteen thousand voted at the poll when it was taken, and yet I think that our petition—and we have not got by any means all the signatures of those in favour of it—I can assure you the womenfolk are up in arms about it—is signed by some fifteen thousand. That, I think, is a clear indication that it would be quite justifiable to take another poll. There are fifteen thousand signatures on this petition before the House as against ten thousand that have voted for the Saturday half-holiday. There is another point with respect to the businesses of these shopkeepers. They are thrifty people that have worked hard. We have worked hard ourselves. They have worked hard in connection with their businesses and have a great deal of capital invested in them, and now a thing comes along like this—originated, I believe, by a few "sports" and one or two of the larger firms to enable them to reap a benefit from it—and practically ruins them. It cuts the livelihood right away from all these thrifty people. I contend that it is not right that we should have our living cut away from us in this way. Now, as to those who voted for the Saturday half-holiday: As I say, the chief interest is sport, and, taking them all round, they are anything but thrifty. Now, sir, why should such people as these govern thrifty people, and undo all their life's work? That is what it amounts to. I do not think I have any more to say with regard to the petition. As I have stated, I would also like to give evidence with reference to the Shops and Offices Amendment Bill, as a representative of the pork-butchers of Auckland, if I may. There is a clause I notice in this new Bill which has been brought down which has defined pork-butchers as clearly distinct from the ordinary butchering trade. I