

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

WEDNESDAY, 22ND JULY, 1914.

WILLIAM LAMBIE, Farmer, Orawai, made a statement. (No. 1.)

Witness: Speaking as a farmer, I desire to say that the proposed extension would be of very great benefit to settlers in Orawai, Feldwick, and Birchwood. The roads in this particular district are completely wiped out with the excessive carting of the coal, and this railway going in would put a stop to the heavy carting. At the present time our produce is limited to stock that can walk away off our farms, and if this extension is made from Wairio our farms will be able to produce twice as much. There are thousands and thousands of acres there awaiting development just for want of railway facilities. I sincerely hope that this extension will be authorized. I am not interested in the coal—I have none on my property: I am speaking as an outsider.

ALEXANDER WYLLIE RODGER, Sheep-farmer, Birchwood, made a statement and was examined. (No. 2.)

Witness: The other members of the deputation have asked me to lay the whole case before you as far as I can, and it is not their intention to take up your time by adding to what I have to say. I wish to say that in getting our petitions here we have been more anxious to get representative petitions than to get numbers: the signatories are spread over the whole of the country from Nightcaps to Balclutha. In our western district—that immediately affected by the extension of this railway if it is carried through—there are 620 signatories. From Invercargill itself, where we might have had thousands if we had set out to get numbers, there are 222; between Invercargill and Gore there are 189; and beyond Gore up to Balclutha 262. These are all coal-consumers, and are not in the slightest degree interested in this scheme from a monetary point of view. With regard to the smaller petition, which bears forty-seven signatures, I thought it wise to send two petitions, because of clause 17, which was read to you, and these forty-seven signatures are those of men who are in the district—either farmers or interested in the coal leases—and are willing that their lands should be rated in order to make good any loss that may be incurred in the working of this extension. But the very fact that they have been so ready in coming forward—every one who is interested in the land within a certain distance of this terminus has signed the petition—shows that they are confident of the result if the prayer of the petition is granted. If you look at the map you will see that there are one railway-line and one tramway-line in existence, and the thin line shown on the map is the proposed extension. You at once jump to the conclusion that there must be something wrong if we are going to have three lines running practically parallel for a certain distance; but that requires explanation. The two miles of railway from Wairio to Nightcaps is privately owned by the Nightcaps Coal Company (Limited), and they have a terminal charge at Nightcaps of 2s. 6d. a ton on every ton of coal that goes over the two miles. I may say here right at the beginning that we have no objection whatever to extending either the railway or the tram-line to Ohai so long as it is done under Government control. The country here [indicated] is very hilly, and the engineering difficulties are great; but the most objectionable feature from my point of view is that that country is all undermined by the workings of the Nightcaps Coal Company. I think, therefore, that it would be a dangerous thing for the railway to be extended there. So far as the tram-line is concerned, in August of last year practically the same gentlemen who are here to-day appeared in support of a petition to Parliament to acquire and extend this railway or tram-line to Ohai. We failed in that petition, and we were forced to bring forward the scheme that is now before you in order to get the facilities that are called for. When the finding of the Railways Committee—that they had no recommendation to make—came before the House there was considerable discussion, and it brought forth a statement from the Minister of Public Works that it was his intention to visit the district during the recess and go into the whole matter. Unfortunately Mr. Fraser has not been able to carry out that intention, but he was good enough to send one of the Inspecting Engineers of his Department, Mr. Furkert, to report upon the whole matter, and I hope that that report is at the disposal of the Committee. Seeing that Mr. Fraser had intended to visit the district I interviewed him and suggested that it would be a good plan if I were to have a scheme drawn up and placed before him so that he would have the whole data before him when he came to visit the district, and he agreed that it would be desirable. I set to work at once and formed a syndicate, of which all the members except one are here to-day, with the idea of first acquiring an option over the lands through which this extension would have to go, to have the route surveyed by a competent engineer, and to place the plan and all particulars before the Minister. We have done that. With the exception of one property, which is held by Mr. Handyside, the managing director of the Nightcaps Coal Company (Limited), and who is at present in the Old Country, and also the Government lands which we will have to go through at the farther end of the extension, we have got the right to purchase all the land required for the railway at any time within the next twelve months. We have submitted the plans to the Minister of Public Works, and I hope that they also will be at the disposal of the Committee; but