

JOHN EDWARD WILSON examined. (No. 16.)

1. *The Chairman.*] What are you?—I am Mayor of New Plymouth.

2. You desire to make a statement to the Committee in regard to the Education Bill?—Yes. On behalf of the people of New Plymouth I desire to give evidence why in their opinion the Taranaki Education District, with headquarters at New Plymouth, should be retained, also why its boundaries should be extended. By the Education Act, 1877, Taranaki Education District, comprising the then County of Taranaki, was constituted. The population of the whole provincial district was then only 8,744, and the number of school-children within the same boundaries was only 726. These figures included the southern portion of Taranaki, now included in the Wanganui Education District, and it was so included because of the difficulties of access from New Plymouth—difficulties which no longer exist. The population of the provincial district in 1911 was 52,569, an increase since 1877 of 500 per cent., a rate of growth not approached by any other provincial district in the Dominion. Between 1891 and 1911 the rate of increase was 135 per cent., or considerably greater than that shown by any other provincial district, and there is every reason to suppose that the rate of increase in the immediate future will continue to be very great not only on account of the extension of settlement into new country, but also because of the closer subdivision of land already settled. The school population, which in 1877 was only 726 for the whole provincial district, in 1912 was 6,156 for that portion only which is included in the Taranaki Education District. If to these are added the children attending schools in that portion of the provincial district which is under the jurisdiction of the Wanganui Education Board, a total of about 8,500 children is arrived at, a number which with prospective increase fully warrants, in our opinion, the retention of Taranaki as an education district. The total area of the provincial district is 2,412,600 acres, of which 1,358,271 acres are under occupation. The balance is in process of settlement, and in a few years will add largely to the total population. The tendency in the older-settled portions is towards closer subdivision, so that under normal conditions a steady and rapid increase of population may be looked for. New Plymouth, the chief town, has exceptionally bright prospects of a more than normal growth. The completion of the harbour will make it an important deep-sea port. Electric tramways are about to be installed. An important petroleum industry is in course of development, and may with reasonable certainty be expected to bring a large influx of population, while there is more than a possibility of an iron industry, giving employment to a great number of men, being established in the near future. We have every confidence, therefore, that the population of Taranaki will increase even more rapidly than in the past, and we feel that it would be an unjust and unwise policy to remove the control of educational matters in the district from New Plymouth to Wanganui, especially as the existing authority has done excellent work in the past and is possessed of thoroughly efficient administrative machinery and new and ample offices of its own. It may be pointed out that were control removed to Wanganui there are schools in the northern and eastern portion of the district, now easily accessible within a few hours from New Plymouth, which would be situated up to 130 miles from headquarters at Wanganui and taking more than a day to reach them. With respect to the extension of the existing boundaries, we submit that the old provincial boundaries, which are coincident with those of the Taranaki Land District, would form a reasonably compact area, all parts of which could be easily reached from New Plymouth. The map which I put in will demonstrate this. The lower portion, outlined in yellow, is now in the Wanganui Education District. It will be noticed that it penetrates to the peak of Mount Egmont, and that on the Stratford-Opunake Road there are six schools, five of which are under the jurisdiction of the Taranaki Board, while the sixth, Makaka, is under Wanganui, though the Taranaki Inspectors must pass it on the way from Rowan to Puniho. Eltham, on the railway-line just over the Taranaki Board's border, is thirty-six miles, or less than two hours' journey, from New Plymouth, and seventy-one miles from Wanganui, whence it cannot be visited under two days, while Patea, at the extreme south of the area proposed to be placed under Taranaki's jurisdiction, is as easily reached from New Plymouth as from Wanganui. The upper portion of the map, outlined in pink, though part of Taranaki Provincial District, is under the jurisdiction of the Auckland Board of Education; but we submit that the schools in that area, numbering perhaps a score, with a total of three hundred and fifty to four hundred pupils, may be at least as easily reached from New Plymouth as from Wanganui. Towards the east the Taranaki Board's farthest school is at Tahora, about eighty miles from New Plymouth, but there are several schools within the provincial boundaries beyond Tahora at present controlled from Auckland. We submit that all of these might be controlled just as easily from New Plymouth as from Auckland. Matiere, the furthest east, is about one hundred and twenty miles from New Plymouth, as against nearly one hundred and eighty miles from Auckland, and all these schools might be visited in a convenient round by the Taranaki Inspectors. In the lower portion of the Auckland Province there are a number of schools which might be conveniently attached to Taranaki also. Mokau and Awakino, just over the border, can be reached in half a day from New Plymouth, while they are nearly two days' journey from Auckland. Mahoenui, Piopio, Paemako, Aria, Kaeaea, and others could be as conveniently controlled from New Plymouth as from Auckland, as their inspection would fit in with the inspection of the schools in the Ohura district. When the railway from Stratford to the Main Trunk line is completed the Ohura district will be even more easily controlled from New Plymouth. To sum up, we submit that the Provincial District of Taranaki forms a fairly compact area which can be more easily controlled from New Plymouth than from Wanganui or Auckland; that if it would facilitate any readjustment of boundaries of the Auckland District Taranaki might be given control of the schools in the extreme south-western portion of the Auckland District; that the present population of the district and the certainty of a steady growth fully warrant the retention of the Taranaki Education District with headquarters at New Plymouth, and that both on practical and sentimental grounds it would be an injustice to Taranaki to remove the control of the education of its own children to Wanganui or anywhere else.