

COUNSEL'S ADDRESSES.

WELLINGTON, 2ND JUNE, 1916.

Statement by Mr. SKERRETT. (No. 53.)

Mr. Skerrett : Will your Honour permit me to make a statement as to the position I take up with respect to the suggested construction of the line from Marton to Levin? I do so, sir, only for this reason, that the statements I make may shorten the discussion which will ensue, and may relieve my learned friend Mr. Myers of dealing at great length with that aspect of the question. The members of the Commission will remember that at the outset of this Commission, while I pointed out the advantages which would arise from the construction of the new line, I explicitly admitted that the time for its construction was not now, and I pointed out that we recognized that the time for its construction would not arrive until the volume of traffic on the Main Trunk line so increased as to necessitate the duplication of the line between Marton and Palmerston North or between Marton and Wellington. It is quite true that at the outset I indicated a period of years within which we suggested that duplication might take place; but your Honour will recognize that it is impossible for a responsible counsel to invite this Commission to disregard the volume of evidence given by the experts who represent the Department and who are continuously engaged in the service of the Railway Department. I say it is impossible for a responsible counsel to ask the Commission to disregard the evidence that the time for the duplication is not in the immediate present, but is in the somewhat distant future. Now, your Honour, I make this statement quite frankly and candidly, because I apprehend that it would be an insult to the intelligence of the Commission to ask it to disregard this volume of evidence which the officers of the Department have produced on this point; but would your Honour permit me, as I have made the statement, to mention in the briefest possible form what we suggest with reference to this line. We submit we have established that when the construction of the line becomes necessary it will afford a great saving in mileage and in time to the public.

The Chairman : I have thought that possibly the time may come when they will be able to run two expresses one way and two another. Of course, the traffic may not merit that for twenty years; but should that time arrive and they have to provide for it, it may be that this would be of great advantage.

Mr. Skerrett : Just so.

The Chairman : I am only speaking personally for myself, but that time apparently has not yet arrived, as you say.

Mr. Skerrett : Yes. Your Honour will see that I am asking permission to make these few observations not because I am instructing the mind of the Court, but because, having made the admission which I felt compelled to make, I would like to suggest briefly what we suggest the advantages to be. I point out that to the public in freights and fares it will be a great saving, and in time, which is becoming so valuable upon the main arterial line between Auckland and Wellington, it will be a great saving. I desire to emphasize the fact that if the line is constructed there will be practically a flat run from Marton to Paekakariki, a distance of some seventy-one or seventy-three miles; and if the grade between Paekakariki and Wellington is improved—as Mr. McVilly has indicated the Department have it in their mind when the opportunity arises to do so—this line must expedite a great deal of the traffic between Wellington and Auckland. I only want to make one further observation, and it is this: that if the duplication becomes necessary a very large part of the expense of this line will be gone, because I feel that the duplication of the line from Marton to Palmerston or Palmerston to Wellington will almost certainly involve the construction of two bridges over the Rangitikei and over the Manawatu Rivers, because, as your Honour is aware, the existing bridges are plainly insufficient to carry the duplicated lines, so that the cost of the bridges over the Manawatu and Rangitikei will, in the event of the construction of the line, not be additional. Your Honour will see that we have, I venture to submit, presented our case upon this point with as much candour as could be expected, and I myself have not been free, as your Honour will see, from the difficulty of being without any expert railway advice upon the matters which I presented to the Commission.

Mr. Myers : When you speak of duplication, you mean the new line—you include that?

Mr. Skerrett : Yes.

Mr. Myers : I take it that what my friend says makes it unnecessary for counsel to deal at all with question number 4 referred to in the Commission. Then there is a further question which has been mentioned during the course of the proceedings. It was first mentioned by Mr. Skerrett when we met in Wellington before evidence was taken at Foxton, and I understand from the Railway Department that the scope of the Commission has been extended by a further Order in Council which was signed yesterday, or is to be signed to-day, so as to include that further question.

The Chairman : I have not seen it.

Mr. Myers : It may not have been signed till this morning. It states that the “functions under the said Warrant are hereby extended and shall be deemed to include the power to inquire into the question whether it is necessary or desirable in the public interest that a new line of railway should be constructed by the Government from Levin to Marton.” Your Honour will see that question 4 as set out in the original Commission refers only to a line from Levin or some other suitable point on the Main Trunk line to Foxton, but it was intended that the larger question should be submitted to the Commission. We proceeded upon that assumption, and evidence was taken upon it, and therefore it is desirable that the question should be in a concrete form before the Commission; but what my learned friend has said makes it unnecessary that I should refer to that question and, I apprehend, question 4 also.