

which the Government had 4,471. That drop continued steadily till 1913, when there was a revival. Out of 9,225 tons imported, 913 tons went to the Government, so that in that year the private consumption went up to about 8,200 tons. The following year there was a big drop, because only 6,580 tons were imported, of which 1,878 went to the Government; and in the next year 5,258 tons, out of which 579 went to the Government. Looking to the big drop in consumption of coal privately, and the arrivals of vessels in 1914-15, and considering the entries in Mr. Kellow's diaries of what happened to the vessels, it is quite clear that in the last two years there has been some deterioration in the harbour. That, to a great extent, accounts for the fact that there are only four vessels trading to that port now, because coal and cement, sugar, flour, and grain cargoes from the South are not carried in a regular trader like the "Queen of the South"—they are brought in by what are called coastal boats; and you will notice now the practically total absence of coastal boats calling at that port. We have the evidence of Mr. Deck, representing the Anchor Shipping Line, that they find it no longer practicable or profitable to deal with this port; and I think any one who knows anything about the coal trade will admit that to get freights into Foxton is one of the most difficult things possible. In regard to the strandings of the vessels, it is one of the duties of Mr. Kellow to keep an account of that in his diary. I have been through the 1915 and 1916 diaries, but the figures I am about to give will not impress the members of the Commission so much as reading the diaries. I find from the 1st January, 1915, to the 15th May, 1915—I am taking that period because I want to compare it with the same period in 1916—in that period there were four strandings inside, and there were no strandings on the bar. For a similar period in 1916 the "Queen of the South" was four times stuck in the river and twice on the bar. The "Wakatu" came in once only, and that time she stuck inside. The "Awahou" stuck five times inside and twice on the bar. So that we have fourteen strandings in the period of 1916, and there were only four strandings in the same period of 1915. Therefore the deterioration seems to have started some time in 1915. Then, for the period 15th May, 1915, to 31st December, 1915, there were fourteen strandings inside and two strandings on the bar—that is to say, during the latter part of 1916 there were sixteen strandings, as against four previously. I would submit, therefore, that there has been deterioration in the river, and the time has come when it has to be dealt with, considering the big interests that are involved. You have only to look at the tremendous growth of hemp and tow exported from Foxton to see how important is the harbour there. Looking also at the actual geographical position, it is the centre of a plain bounded roughly on the north by Marton and on the south by Shannon. Right over that plain a railway could be run on a grade of only 1 in 70, but if you work it from Wanganui and Wellington you will meet with insuperable grades. Of course, with regard to the natural deterioration of the harbour, that is what one would expect on account of the gradual disturbance of the rainfall by the stripping of the bush, and you have sudden rushes of water followed by periods when the water is lower than when the bush was there. You also have a considerable amount more detritus brought down, and I submit that the depth at the wharf which is affected by the detritus which is brought down the river will have to be met by dredging. We have had evidence from people living in Palmerston, all of whom, with the exception of Mr. Goldingham, who has a branch in Foxton, have indirect interest in Foxton itself, that in the interests of the district they should be entitled to get especially the heavier goods through Foxton. That is not the case at present, because of the Railway Department, who can say to a particular district, "You are not going to develop yourselves; you are not going to take full advantage of your natural facilities simply because it is going to take a small amount of profit from the Railway Department." The improvement of that harbour is more essential in regard to the import of sugar, coal, cement, grain, and flour. You will not be able to get those goods in unless there is a greater depth than we have now, because if you bring small loads in you have to pay prohibitive freights. The bigger the boat the cheaper she can run, and therefore the cheaper the freights. What I also desire to point out is that we do not desire to be ambitious—the Board has not got a very ambitious programme. They do not set out to get an ocean port—all they want is to get 12 ft. of water on the bar; and in these days of sand-suction dredges we have the evidence of the Engineer of the Wanganui Harbour Board, who thinks the deterioration of the river can be got rid of by this method of dredging. If we had thousands of pounds to throw away we might set up training-walls, but we think it could be remedied by a suction dredge. With regard to the fears of the Railway Department we have heard a great deal. One of the bogeys of the Railway Department is this fear of what they are going to lose. The profit is about £1,500 a year; and Foxton is part of a railway section which, as was shown by the figures yesterday, is paying by far the greatest percentage, outside of the small West Coast Section, on cost of construction of any section. Foxton is not the case of a branch line made after the construction of the main line.

*The Chairman:* I suppose you say the branch line goes to Palmerston?

*Mr. Weston:* Of course, no doubt we are to a certain extent. There is the case where a deviation is demanded by a locality by means of political pressure and those other means that the Railway Department has told us so much about, and where they get their branch connection. If they have got to pay for it, well, I have not much sympathy with them, because I consider they have brought it on themselves. But Foxton is not in that position. The connection there was made to suit the railway, not made to suit ourselves, and therefore we are fully entitled to say with regard to ourselves, "We are part of a connection which already pays 4·7 per cent. on the cost of construction when other parts pay a great deal less. So that by taking £1,500 a year from the net earnings of that section, amounting to £621,000 odd, I do not think the Railway Department has much to squeal about, and it is not much of a bogey to be afraid of. It speaks little of their confidence in that great district and of their powers of management to think they are not going to make up that £1,500 in much less than three years from now. Moreover, they seem to think that the whole thing they have to consider is the growth of the contribution from