

A combination of four or five traders has for a long time past been strong enough every season to fix the price the Natives must accept for their fruit." This statement, we claim, is not true. On the other hand, we claim that the Resident Commissioner influenced the Natives to ship their copra to Papeete, with the result that they suffered a very considerable loss. When His Excellency the Governor-General was here in June last year the Commissioner stated that the Natives had received back the same price for their copra that had been offered by the traders here, notwithstanding a falling market and certain troubles that had happened to the shipment in question.

HON. SIR JAMES ALLEN: There is some explanation of that, is there not?

MR. FISHER: The Commissioner's explanation was, "I am not a trader and do not understand such matters."

MR. PLATTS (Resident Commissioner): I never dreamed of making such an explanation.

MR. FISHER: The Commissioner was closely questioned as to whether the Natives received back here the same price for their copra, and he had to admit that he had not taken into account certain charges, which amounted to somewhere in the vicinity of £10 a ton. That shipment certainly met with very unfortunate happenings. My only reason for pointing this out is to show that the Commissioner told the Natives they were not getting a fair price for their produce, and assisted them and influenced them to ship their produce to Papeete, and they suffered a severe loss.

HON. SIR JAMES ALLEN: That has been denied by the Natives themselves who have been here—that the Commissioner influenced them.

MR. FISHER: That is just our trouble, that statements are made. We are told by the Natives that statements are made and we are never allowed the opportunity of refuting those statements. Satisfactory explanations could be given. We have done nothing but urge on the Government of New Zealand to grant an inquiry, with the fullest powers. Since then the Commissioner has acted for a firm in New Zealand to purchase copra. The only difference in his offer was about 6 per cent. We were offering £25, and he was able to beat us by offering £26. But the fact that the firm in New Zealand would not be called upon to pay any salaries or cost of wireless messages, or probably cartage, storage, wharfage, and other charges that we would have to meet, or commission, more than offsets the difference in price. Anyhow, the Commissioner is not able to satisfy the Natives even that there was a difference in price. Even white people not well versed in business matters are only too ready to believe any charge of profiteering; and when the Natives down here are told by a person in authority that the traders have combined to cheat them—

MR. PLATTS: I think I ought to take exception to that.

HON. SIR JAMES ALLEN: I cannot allow that statement to go without your being more specific.

MR. FISHER: The Resident Commissioner, at a Council meeting held on the 8th November, 1918, stated that the traders were making enormous profits out of copra, that there was a copra "ring" on the island, and that this "ring" was paying the Natives a very low price for their produce. The Commissioner further stated that if the Natives could send their copra to Tahiti, where there was an open market, they would get the best price for it. This statement was made by the Commissioner in answer to a protest made by members of the Island Council against the export duty of £1 per ton on copra and £4 per ton on shell, which has been brought into force by an Order in Council in New Zealand. That statement was made at the Council meeting. We are prepared to bring witnesses before a Commission to testify on oath to that statement.

HON. SIR JAMES ALLEN: Supposing it were made, are you justified in saying what you did?

MR. FISHER: The inference is that they are not getting a fair price—that they are being cheated. The Resident Commissioner has not thought fit to make public the price realized here to the Natives for this copra. He has taken no steps at all to correct the impression in the Native mind that they were not receiving a fair price. If the Commissioner is able to make a statement that they are not receiving a fair price, we certainly should be given an opportunity of proving that the price is a fair one. The Commissioner was up against certain misfortunes that happened to that particular shipment; we are up against misfortunes that happen all the time. For instance, the direct mail-steamer from here to Frisco has not lifted any copra since September. We cannot always get our copra away. It is often on hand twelve months. This is only one of the matters concerning which we feel we have a right to be heard in self-defence to justify ourselves or to refute charges made against us. Supposing the Natives did go to the Commissioner and make these statements: how does the Commissioner know they are true without making proper inquiries? If any of the members present have any desire to inspect our books or balance-sheets I am authorized by the managing director to submit them for inspection. Any information that you wish for we shall be only too pleased to give. You are quite at liberty to avail yourselves of the opportunity of finding out whether enormous profits are being made or not. Another matter which affects us vitally is that orders for Government supplies have, since the present Resident Commissioner's advent to the island, been diverted to family connections of his. Our statements have been submitted to the Chamber of Commerce at Auckland and the Hardware Merchants' Association, and that association sent a very strongly worded telegram to Mr. Massey on the subject. Mr. Massey handed the question on to the Minister in Charge of the islands, Dr. Pomare, who replied regretting that he was unable to supply any information. The reply of the secretary of the association is as follows: "Referring my letter 13th *re* hardware for Rarotonga, Dr. Pomare's reply unsatisfactory. Commissioner's statement referred to was made publicly, and should either be substantiated or withdrawn. Members have no objection to placing small orders without calling tenders, but strong exception taken to report that tenders called when no such action was taken." The Resident Commissioner has stated publicly that with respect to any supplies over £25 tenders have been called. The association claim that they have never seen tenders or been asked to tender, and their only conclusion is, in the words of one of their leading men, that "the purchases of the Cook Islands Administration must be very limited."