

loss in weight was anything from 10 per cent. to 20 per cent. There were the shipping-charges also to consider. And there was the £1 per ton export duty, the revenue from which they did not see spent on their wharf. Legitimate competition was the finest thing in the world, but illegitimate competition by the Government who ought to support them was not fair. If they complained they were told the Administration was there to protect the Natives—if they did not like it they could get out: the Administration was not there to protect the Europeans, but the Natives pure and simple. The traders had imported 2,000 bundles of shooks for making cases, and then found that the Government had imported 1,500 bundles. Shooks cost 4s. 6d. per bundle. The Natives followed one another like sheep. They had got up a petition to form themselves into a company. Dozens of them on the island now said they did not know what they were signing. And yet this company dared to say they would fine those who did not sell to them. With regard to shipping-space, one of the Natives had asked for space, but on stating that he was shipping through A. B. Donald he was told he would get no space. When one found that the Native company got space surely a Native who grew his own fruit ought to be able to send his oranges through any of the traders and get the space he required. The traders did not mind fair competition, but disliked unfair competition.

The Hon. Sir JAMES ALLEN asked whether space had been allotted to the traders as well as to the Native company.

Mr. Low replied, Yes, the traders had got their fair share of space, 475 cases; but what they complained about was that directly a Native applied for a share as a Native he was declined. He was told that if he was going to ship through A. B. Donald he would not get any space.

The Hon. Sir JAMES ALLEN asked whether Mr. Low has been asked to supply timber for the cases.

Mr. Low said he had never refused a Native, but he had never been asked to supply the Native company. He would have been quite willing had he been asked.

The Hon. Sir JAMES ALLEN asked whether, before the timber to make cases arrived through the Administration, had the traders been asked to supply either timber or cases.

Mr. BROWNE: No.

Mr. SHEPHERD said he had been asked by the Administration and had said he would supply any one.

Mr. HEWETT said the Resident Agent had called the traders together and had asked them to supply cases, and it was understood they would supply them. He was not concerned himself, as he only got cases for his own use as a planter and had none for disposal. No written request had been made by the Administration. He had never been asked by any Native to let him have cases.

Mr. COOPER (Resident Agent) said the trouble had begun in this way: At the opening of the season last year the Natives had come to him and told him that as the orange season was at hand they had approached the traders and asked what price they were prepared to offer. The traders replied, "1s. per case." He had gone to each of the traders and asked them what the prices were likely to be for oranges that year and they had said it had all been fixed up. He had asked Mr. Low whether it was a fact that the price suggested was 1s. per case, and he had denied it emphatically. It was a case of taking the white man's word against the Natives. The next thing was that the Island Council wanted to pass an ordinance law compelling every one on the island who had fruit or produce to sell to sell it at a price not less than that fixed by themselves. He had advised the Council that such a law was not just or equitable, and that every man must have the right to accept whatever price he thought fit. The Island Council went away satisfied. He was next approached by a deputation of Natives, who wanted to know what could be done. He told them to go to the traders first. They went to the traders and asked 5s. a case. This was declined. He then advised the Council that if there was any difficulty over the matter the respective settlements should form a committee whose business it would be to discuss the question with the traders. The committee then came to him and said they wanted 5s. a case for the oranges. They told him they had not yet been to the Europeans. He suggested they should do so. They went away, and returning subsequently said the Europeans would not give the 5s. The Commissioner thereupon suggested they should put the matter in writing and send the letter to the traders. This was done. The traders presented the letter to the Resident Agent and were very much annoyed about it. The committee then asked him for advice. They wanted to make a law fixing the price of oranges at 5s. a case and fixing the price of other produce also. He informed them this could not be done, and said the only thing to do was to form an association. He also asked them to refer the matter to the Commissioner at Rarotonga. But time pressed, as the steamer was about due and the association had to be formed immediately. He suggested that those Natives who were prepared to accept 5s. per case only should sign the agreement, and those not so prepared should stand out: they could provide for a penalty for breach of agreement if they so desired. The agreement was duly circulated and signed. The traders thereupon challenged some of the signatures. Another agreement was accordingly prepared, and signed in the presence of the Resident Agent after being fully explained to each person who signed. The association then wrote to Rarotonga asking the Government to help them in their desire to ship their fruit themselves instead of through the traders. The Government sent the shooks which were consigned to the Resident Agent and supplied to the Natives. The question of space on the steamer had been settled practically on a population basis, and the best possible was done to suit everybody. About 50 per cent. of the adult population on the island had signed the agreement, and this meant that the association were entitled to half the space available. They were ultimately granted 1,440 cases out of 4,000.

Mr. HEWETT complained that Mr. Cooper had told him verbally that if any Native wished to withdraw from the association he could do so on making application. Several had so applied, but had been told they could only withdraw on payment of a penalty of £5.