

*Mr. Myers :* I am given to understand that Mr. Holmes in his evidence estimated the cost at £12,000 per mile.

*Sir James Wilson :* Now, the question has been raised, and it has been published in the newspapers, that the Manawatu County Council desires to sell its tramway. I would like to take this opportunity of denying that statement. Now, in connection with the question of gravel for our purposes, I desire to say that we have the utmost difficulty in getting it when we want it. We recognize, however, that the Railway Department has to run the trains at the least cost. Then again, the Railway Department will not convey our gravel in the summer-time because it does not pay them to do so. The time that suits the local bodies to get their gravel is the summer-time, but the Department apparently considers it more convenient to convey it in the winter-time. We own the tramway and run it to suit ourselves, subject to the restrictions imposed by the Public Works Department. We assist the settlers to a great extent, and they cannot, of course, expect the Government to do it to the same extent. The tramway has been a great benefit and a great saving to the ratepayers, and I say most emphatically that the only reason why we are willing to sell our tramway is because the Manawatu County Council is supporting the suggested deviation of the Levin-Greatford Railway. There are other motives suggested, but in dealing with this matter I think it would be better to leave them alone. Our position is somewhat difficult, and I do not know where we are. If the Railway Department is going to spend its own money upon the deviation of a railway, that is a matter for the Railway Department to consider—that is a railway matter; but if the Government is going to spend borrowed money, then it must be a matter for the Public Works Department.

*The Chairman :* In any case it is a Public Works matter.

*Sir James Wilson :* Whatever the position may be the duty of the Government is quite clear. It is quite true what Mr. Myers said, that these gentlemen—the General Manager and Chief Engineer of Railways—are the advisers of the Government upon railway matters. There is something beyond that, and, as I have previously stated, there is the public interest in this matter, and to my mind that is beyond a local question altogether. I submit, sir, that it is too important a question to be considered by a Commission unless the members thereof have the fullest information before them.

*Mr. Luckie :* You are now referring to the Levin-Greatford deviation?

*Sir James Wilson :* Yes. If your report is to the effect that the station facilities should be improved I may say we do not want to enter into that subject, because we have no evidence to offer upon it; but we do say if you consider the deviation of the line round Palmerston North then you should have more information before supporting it. You must consider the future, and it will not be very long before the line will have to be duplicated; but I submit, if the Levin-Greatford deviation were given effect to, a duplication of a large portion of the line will be saved. It is proposed to spend a very large sum of money, and I think before anything is done you, as a Commission, ought to have much more information than the mere hazard of Mr. MacLean that it is going to cost a million or two. This, of course, is a matter which the Government has to decide, but you gentlemen have a most important duty to the Government and to the public, and you have to consider the matter very fully before reporting. I am not prepared to say anything more at the present time, but we think that the time is not opportune to spend this large sum of money. We are quite prepared to stand aside and say nothing more and wait your decision, but we think the fairest course to be adopted is for the Department to do the best it can at Palmerston North. It seems to me difficult to understand how a gentleman of Mr. Hiley's capacity, who came here with such a reputation, and who has since gone to India also with a very high reputation, should state in the year 1914 that the present accommodation could be improved to meet the needs of the community, and now to be informed that that is impossible. That is a question on which no doubt evidence will be given at a later stage. I would again urge you before anything is done to be in possession of the fullest information and know what is going to take place, and I think you should suggest to the Government that this is not the time to spend the money on the deviation suggested by the Railway Department. In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and gentlemen of the Commission, I would like to thank you for the patient hearing you have extended to me.

*Mr. Miles :* May I say, Sir James, that it would be of interest to the Commission if you will give us an idea of the strength of the body you represent. My point is we have heard of the Railway League, and I understand you are representing the Railway League.

*Sir James Wilson :* The local bodies concerned begin with the Levin Borough Council. The next local body is the Foxton Borough Council. As a matter of fact, all the representatives of the various local bodies were not able to be present, and therefore I am appearing before this Commission on their behalf.

*The Chairman :* I understand that Mr. Luckie is really representing the whole of the local bodies Sir James Wilson is speaking for.

*Mr. Miles :* If Mr. Luckie is appearing for all the local bodies concerned, that is sufficient for my purpose.

*Mr. Luckie :* In appearing on behalf of those persons in and about Palmerston North who are opposed to the proposals of the Government in this connection, I desire before calling evidence—as you gentlemen have decided I will have to do—to state the main line of objection taken by those people whom I represent. In the first place I desire to point out what is well known to everybody—that a particularly large factor in the prosperity and the size and growth of Palmerston North is that it is now, and has become during some years past, the main central distributing and collecting station for the whole North Island system of railway, and it is a fact that the whole North Island railway system centres in Palmerston North. This has had most to do with its prosperity and its growth in previous years. Indeed, I remember well how much smaller it was twenty-five years ago, and though Palmerston North has risen by reason of the railway we have the most extraordinary proposal put