

JAMES BURNETT sworn and examined.

*Mr. Myers.*] You are a civil engineer?—Yes, and a member of the Institute of Civil Engineers.

You were for many years in the Engineers' Branch of the Railway Department?—Yes, for thirty-seven years.

I think you retired, when?—I was Chief Engineer from 1908 to 1915, when I retired on pension. I succeeded Mr. Coom, and I had been Chief Assistant to him for seven years.

You apparently had to consider in your time this bugbear of the Palmerston North station?—Yes, I had to make proposals, but I explained to the General Manager that they were only tentative and temporary proposals.

For instance, in 1912 there were some proposals made?—Yes.

Does your observation apply to those proposals?—Yes.

At that time I think there were all kinds of railways proposed as part of a comprehensive scheme and all included in what has been referred to as Mr. Hiley's report?—Yes, but Mr. Hiley's report was after that.

But I think in 1912 there were proposals made for railways in various parts of New Zealand?—There have been for years and years large improvements proposed.

In 1912, for instance, were the difficulties in Palmerston North so acute as to necessitate a complete revision or change of site?—They were sufficient for economical working to make it necessary to increase the accommodation.

I think you have had the opportunity of seeing the records from 1914 up to the present day?—Yes.

And of seeing how tremendously the work has increased in volume at Palmerston North?—Yes.

Have you considered the question as to the best method to be adopted to overcome the difficulties at Palmerston North?—In the last report I remember making the difficulties connected with the closing of Cook Street especially appeared to be so acute that I said unless it could be satisfactorily arranged it would be inevitable that a new site must be considered.

That was before you left the service?—Yes, that was in 1912.

Knowing what you do now of the increase in the volume of traffic, do you think if even Cook Street were closed the present site is or could be made sufficient?—I do not think that any developments that could be made on the present site would give anything like the advantages which would be given by the deviation proposed by the Department now.

You heard the scheme propounded yesterday by Mr. Fulton and referred to by Mr. Maxwell?—Yes.

Have you considered that and compared it with the deviation proposed by the Railway Department?—Yes, I went into it yesterday afternoon with Mr. MacLean.

Which do you think is the better scheme?—I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that in my opinion the deviation scheme is a prudent, well-considered, and in the long-run an economical scheme. The cost of working such a station as Palmerston North, with the lack of facilities they have had for many years, is impossible to estimate. The whole of that would be obviated by the deviation. Moreover, there is one point I have not heard referred to, namely, the haulage. The total length of line would be reduced by half a mile, which in the course of years becomes quite an important matter. I have no hesitation in saying that in my opinion the deviation is the right thing to follow.

And you say that in the light of the modern experience you have had yourself in connection with the working of the New Zealand railways?—Yes.

Have you been in a position to consider, and if so have you considered, the question of the comparative cost between Mr. Fulton's suggested scheme and Mr. MacLean's?—Not in great detail, but in conversation with Mr. MacLean yesterday afternoon we went through the estimates and noted many things of which he has given evidence this morning.

You have heard what he has said in evidence this morning by way of comparison: do you agree generally with what he has said?—Yes, generally.

For instance, do you agree with him that in all probability very large savings could be made on his estimates in connection with the deviation scheme?—I would say that the estimates for the deviation scheme appear to be on the liberal side. Mr. MacLean has been very prudent in putting down what may be considered exceedingly high prices, but the difficulties of estimating them at present are so great that I think it is most commendable.

On the other hand, what do you say as to the estimate which Mr. Fulton made of carrying out his proposal?—I think it was insufficient, and he did not take into consideration many points that should be taken into consideration. There cannot be a doubt about it that if that suggestion were adopted overbridges at the three streets would be insisted upon.

The three cross-streets being Cook Street, West Street, and Kairanga Road?—Yes, it would be absolutely unavoidable.

That means two bridges that Mr. Fulton has not taken into consideration?—Yes, two long and expensive bridges.

Well, if you take those into consideration, and also other items which you think Mr. Fulton has underestimated or omitted to estimate, do you think in the long-run there is going to be very much difference in the cost between the carrying-out of his scheme and the carrying-out of the deviation scheme?—Not a difference that should be considered as against getting the deviation scheme for convenience, whereas by Mr. Fulton's scheme you are perpetuating the disadvantage of the railway running right through the main thoroughfare of the town and its approaches. There cannot be a doubt in my mind that if it continues there for a generation or two the whole railway through the town will have to be elevated. It is better to deviate it now before the town grows larger.