

it—the prejudice against the pumice area. Say “pumice,” and a man falls down in a faint. Give a dog a bad name and hang him. “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” That is the mental attitude of most people towards the pumice area; but I think the evidence brought before this Committee will very largely dispel that idea. This is the cheapest railway by far which is suggested in the Dominion to-day. The estimate of the Public Works Department before the Commission of 1922 was that the railway would cost £11,000 per mile—that is to say, £600,000 altogether. That Commission added another £100,000, making it £700,000. Now, it is said, the Public Works Department’s estimate is £800,000. Why, I do not know. The work that has already been done over eight miles of the heavy construction work has, on the evidence of the Prime Minister, cost £35,000, including the erection of huts, which is less than £4,000 per mile, for the heavy work; and on the evidence of Mr. Butcher we know that it was done with hand-shovels—with not even a horse-scoop put to work on it. The evidence of the Railway Department given before this Committee raised the rate of interest to be earned by the railway from 4 to 5 per cent., and increased the operating-costs from £52,500 to £61,600. I cannot say why. By this means the profit previously estimated, amounting to £9,000, is turned into a loss of £1,674. If we compare this with the road the loss in interest would be the same; but the maintenance of a first-class road in New Zealand, being at the rate of £120 per mile per annum, the loss would be £6,000 a year, as against a loss of £1,600 on the railway. How else, I ask, are we to provide access to this large area of country, constituting about one-fourth of the North Island of New Zealand? At the present time there is no adequate means of access either by land or by water. Now, gentlemen, you have the support of previous Committees and Commissions in a favourable finding for the construction of this railway. Two parliamentary Committees and two Royal Commissions have previously unanimously recommended the Government to proceed with the work as far as Reporoa. This much-quoted minority report by Mr. Munro in itself shows that the other members of that Commission were in favour of the railway being constructed to Taupo, and that Mr. Munro himself was in favour of it being taken to Reporoa. Otherwise he would have said, “I object to the railway altogether.” You have the report of this 1922 Commission: “Should it be decided to assist settlement in the district under the provisions of section 11 of the Land Laws Amendment Act, 1919, a railway would be necessary.” You have the considered favourable recommendations of three Engineers-in-Chief—Messrs. Holmes, Blow, and Furkert—and of the present General Manager of Railways, Mr. Sterling. The only things that this railway lacks are money, votes, and influence. The slowness to recognize the advantages of this country is very irritating to me.

9. *The Chairman.*] Did you say that Mr. Sterling favoured this railway?—Yes, certainly. I know the possibilities of the country. It is not theory with me. “I speak that I do know and testify that I have seen.” It may be said that I have too much enthusiasm in this matter. Well, it is far better to have too much enthusiasm than to have a miserable pessimism: pessimism and cold-water treatment never get you anywhere. Enthusiasm carries the country on its back, and I am not ashamed to say that I am an enthusiast for the pumice country. But, on the other hand, I submit that I have discretion in this matter. I am not carried away by my enthusiasm for this country. A challenge was made to me, “Will failure be impossible?” I do not say failure is impossible. All great and worthy objects need great effort and courage, and possess the possibility of failure. The ascent to the heights is always difficult: it is only the descent to Avernus which is easy. But I ask: At this juncture in this country have we abandoned enterprise? Let us compare the suggestion of the Rotorua-Taupo Railway with the building of the railway in to Rotorua in 1894. At that time the tourist traffic was undeveloped; timber was worth nothing; the lands of Rotorua were considered worthless for farming purposes. But we built that railway, developed that area, and we have there now a great colonial asset. The same thing will happen again if you continue the railway to Taupo. I say that railways, if they are to open up the country, must be into the interior away from the sea. A railway along a sea-coast is like a man with one arm—it is getting traffic from only one side. It has been said—and I think correctly—that this is not a political question; but actions will speak louder than words. The weight of evidence is entirely in our favour. If the Committee finds with the weight of evidence, I respectfully submit it can come to only one decision, and that is to recommend the immediate construction of this railway. A solemn test was put to me the other day in regard to this matter. It was said to me, “If you are advocating the expenditure of £700,000 of public money, and you feel that it will be a failure, do you not think you should be given twenty-five years in gaol?” I have accepted that challenge, and I put the same challenge to you: “If any one of you, believing in his heart that this railway would be a benefit to this Dominion, votes against it, then, sir, he should have the same term that was suggested to me.”

10. You are pronouncing sentence?—No, not sentence at all, because I believe you will vote for the railway. I want most solemnly and sincerely, and with all the force of which I am capable, to put before you that a great responsibility rests upon your shoulders to do the Dominion a great service by recommending the Government to construct this line, thereby giving not only me, but every well-wisher of the Dominion cause to sing—

At last, at last, O steadfast soul,
Luck takes the tiller, and foul tides turn;
Serene throughout the pumice plain
The roofs of happy homes arise.

The Chairman: On behalf of the Committee, I think I am justified in expressing to you, Mr. Vaile, their very sincere thanks for your expression of appreciation of the way in which the Committee has placed every possible facility at your disposal in connection with this inquiry, and at the disposal of your witnesses, so as to enable you to place your case as fully and as effectively as possible before the Committee. This is an expression which I am sure the Committee will be very pleased to have from your lips to-day. I think I can say also for the Committee that, whichever way the Committee decides the matter, the Committee will regard as very valuable the large amount of evidence that has been placed before it, touching both upon the question of the railway and upon land-settlement in the district. I thank you very much for the evidence your witnesses have given to the Committee.