

103. *Mr. Hurst.*] How many people took up land during those two years?—About 400. Now I come to the fifteenth clause, which says, “That some of your petitioners have selected land which had remained open for a considerable time at £1 10s. per acre prior to the passing of the said Act, and for which no application had been received, and yet are liable to pay £3 per acre, although the price in these very blocks has again been lowered to £1 10s. per acre, and some of the land is still unapplied for even at the reduced price.” Regarding the first portion of this I am not able to state the number of petitioners who took up land at £3 that had previously been opened at £1 10s. per acre, but there could not be many, for in the whole of Otago and Southland there were only thirty-one selectors who took up 5,239 acres of land at £3 that had been previously offered at £1 10s. All the other lands, taken up during the two years the Act was in force, were selected from blocks opened for the first time, and consequently the selectors had the first choice of the best sections. The sixteenth clause says, “That your petitioners find that, owing to the uncertainties affecting agricultural pursuits, the occurrence of bad harvests, and occasionally exceptionally low prices of produce, the provisions of the present law, requiring fixed payments annually on pain of confiscation and forfeiture, work exceedingly to their disadvantage.” I believe that is quite true. Since the settlers have taken up their land the prices for agricultural produce have been notoriously low, that is to say, for two or three years past. It was I think impossible, during the continuance of these low prices, and the expenses of settling, for the selectors to pay their rents out of the produce of their farms.

104. Are these low prices still the rule?—No; they are better at present, and I believe will continue to improve. The seventeenth clause says, “Your petitioners beg humbly to say that they are anxious and willing to pay for their land according to the true and fair price or value thereof; but, owing to the exceptional circumstances already referred to under which their licenses were acquired, they are at present bound to pay far beyond that value.” My reply to that is, that the selectors really fixed the price of their land themselves. The Government did not do so. There was an upset price fixed, and no means were adopted to induce the selector, against his will, to take up the land. The Government had the land surveyed and maps prepared and published, and every man bought with his eyes open as to what he was buying. Of course, when land is put up at auction it is sold to the highest bidder; and it is he, therefore, who buys who puts the price on the land. The department has been always very careful not to employ professional auctioneers, but to conduct auction-sales by its own officers; and no artifice that would mislead the public, and so induce them to give a higher price than their deliberate judgment prompted them to give, would be countenanced for a moment. It has sometimes been stated, as a reproach against the Government, that their auctioneers were stupid and did not get the highest prices obtainable.

105. *Mr. J. Buchanan.*] Have you had any complaints to the effect that you have not sufficiently advertised the sales?—Yes; but I remember that on one or two such occasions it was notorious that we over-advertised. The eighteenth clause is to this effect:—“Your petitioners humbly submit that a revaluation of their lands by competent and impartial persons, and such a rearrangement of the terms of payment as will enable them to pay off the principal price at such times as they may be able so to do, would be equitable in itself and for the best interests of the agricultural settlement of the colony.”

106. *Mr. Hurst.*] Do you think there were many cases in which too high a price was given for the land?—Yes; out of the thirty-three persons I have referred to there may be five or six who have given more than the real value of the land. In one or two cases considerably more than the value was given. I am, of course, merely giving that as an opinion. As an instance, I may state that one of the persons whose names appear on the petition—I refer to Mr. Wm. Rendle—offered to give £4 17s. 6d. for 182 acres in Budle District. That I deem an excessive price. However, he has paid for two and a half years, and is only one year in arrear. At the same time the land may have been in such a position as to be of special value to him. With regard to the eighteenth clause, I should like to ask where a revaluation, if such is to be made, is to end. Any person who has bought land in the colony may come forward and ask for a revaluation, and if you give that to one you can hardly refuse it to another. If that principle is once introduced, I do not think it will be possible to carry on the Lands Department. With regard to the rearrangement of the terms of payment referred to in the eighteenth clause, I think that is a very reasonable proposal, and I consider that such a rearrangement may be made without violating the original contract, and in a way that neither the Department nor the selector will have any cause to regret or be ashamed of.

107. *The Chairman.*] What do you mean by rearrangement—do you mean postponement?—Yes; it might take the shape of altering the status of selectors. At present they are incipient freeholders. They might become leaseholders in perpetuity, as proposed in the land bill, or, if it were considered desirable to rearrange, on the basis of their becoming freeholders, the best plan would be to capitalise the instalments remaining unpaid, and allow selectors to pay interest on the amount every half year, and to pay off as much as they could, year by year, the payments being spread over as much time as you like.

108. *Hon. Mr. Rolleston.*] You are opposed to revaluation? Yes; very strongly.

109. *Mr. Hurst.*] By capitalising the amount and allowing the selector to pay interest, he would be placed in a more favorable position? Yes. Of course it would not do to fix the interest at a high rate, because if it were too high the selector would go to the money lender at once and pay the Government the capitalised value, and that would lead to very awkward complications with those who had already paid up without getting any rebate. They would consider that, while they themselves had paid in full, others had been let off. I think 5 per cent. would be a fair rate of interest, and it would be lower than the money lender would charge.

110. *Mr. J. B. Whyte.*] Do you not think it is bad in principle to make the Government the mortgagee?—Yes; but I can think of no other way of meeting the case. Under the system of capitalisation, the selector would actually pay more in principal and interest than he would if he made his payments regularly under the existing system. But the capitalisation would give him easier payments for a few years, while he was establishing himself, with heavier payments towards the end of the term, when he ought to be able to pay them.