

JOINT RABBIT NUISANCE COMMITTEE.

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

FRIDAY, 28th May, 1886. (Hon. Mr. G. R. JOHNSON, M.L.C., Chairman.)

Mr. JAMES MCKERROW, Surveyor-General, examined.

1. *Hon. the Chairman.*] You are Under-Secretary for Crown Lands, I believe?—I am Secretary for Crown Lands.

2. This Committee is inquiring into the rabbit nuisance. Can you give us any information regarding the Crown lands and reserves which are unoccupied?—Yes.

3. Perhaps I had better refer you to a return given by Mr. Barron, and laid before the Committee in 1881. It gives the approximate area of unoccupied Crown lands in the colony. Probably there has been a good deal of change since then?—Yes.

4. Could you indicate roughly to the Committee where the unoccupied lands lie, and their area?—I could supply the information by to-morrow, but I could not do so at present. I may say generally that it is principally in Otago where the unoccupied Crown lands are. In the re-letting of the runs in 1882 a very considerable area in Otago was reserved for settlement. This has not been all occupied as yet, and very considerable areas are under no tenure whatever; but, in order to minimize the evil of the rabbit pest, the Commissioner of Crown lands, acting in concert with the Rabbit Department, has made temporary arrangements with the adjacent runholders to keep these unoccupied areas of country clear. In that way they have virtually been kept free of the rabbit pest. Then, again, there is a large area of high mountain-country in Otago which has been in a continual state of transition from being taken up and abandoned and re-taken up. The department saw some four or five years ago that this sort of thing was likely to continue unless greater encouragement was given to the lessees. The Land Act was amended so that, instead of the maximum term of lease being confined to ten years, it was extended to twenty-one years. This extension of time, together with the policy of the department in combining what had hitherto been small runs into one large run, and placing it before the public at a very low upset rental, in a considerable degree has prevented the abandonment of the back-country.

5. In speaking of extending the area you mean—?—I will give an example. In the lake-country of Wakatipu, for instance, the runs used to be from five to fifteen thousand acres. Partly on account of some of the persons taking up these runs having little capital and no great knowledge of sheep-farming, when a severe snow-storm or other drawback came in their way they would throw them up. They had no resource to carry over a difficulty; and when the rabbit difficulty came on they were helpless. We had to amalgamate these small runs, and some of them now contain as much as fifty and sixty thousand acres. Since that policy was adopted we have had less trouble with this country.

6. But the Wakatipu country is still the most infested with rabbits?—Well, not so much as it was. I may say generally, not only in the Otago country, but wherever you have high mountains covered with snow, and the difficulty of mustering, it is there where the rabbits breed. That high country, indeed, may be said to be the breeding-ground for rabbits, and there is a good deal of country of that sort in the interior of Otago.

7. It is stated in Mr. Bailey's report that the rabbits are making back on the main range?—If you hunt them they go back there as a safe retreat. It is also the nursery-ground, and it is from there that the runs get replenished when they are clean. And, as far as I can form an opinion on the subject, it is almost hopeless to eradicate the rabbits in the back-country: it will be a continual fight with them, and the effort should be to confine them as much as possible to the high mountains.

8. You believe the only way is to keep them down; you cannot kill the rabbit out?—Yes.

9. It is said that the rabbits are coming down from the Mount Cook Range, so that eventually they would appear in Canterbury. Is that so?—That is so. I have just had information that they are spreading all along behind the McKenzie country; and, judging from what happened in Otago and Southland, possibly a year or two hence they will come down in myriads on the plains of Canterbury, unless efforts are made to check them.

10. You have described the course adopted by Government for the purpose of getting these lands taken and the rabbits checked upon them. Can you suggest any other means which have not yet been tried?—No; but I should say that any means that are tried—and I hold this very strongly—should all be directed from one central authority.

11. You think that the Act now in force is sufficiently stringent?—I cannot say that I am acquainted with the terms of it.

12. You mean, then, that the authority for working this should remain in the hands of the Government?—Decidedly.