

1886.

NEW ZEALAND.

GREYMOOUTH RESERVE

(REPORT BY MR. HENRY BUNNY ON).

Laid on the Table by the Hon. Sir Robert Stout, with the Leave of the House.

Mr. HENRY BUNNY to the PUBLIC TRUSTEE.

SIR,—

Wellington, 29th May, 1886.

Acting upon your instructions I proceeded to Nelson, where I had a long interview with Mr. Catley, one of the Royal Commissioners, who gave me much valuable information, enabling me to understand pretty clearly the position of affairs.

Proceeding to Greymouth, I inserted an advertisement in the papers, inviting those who were interested to come and see me and state their cases. About eighty lessees and sub-lessees attended and gave me a large amount of information. Their evidence, which was in substance taken by the Royal Commission, confirms their view of the extremely complicated nature of many of the titles. As the law now stands, it seems hopeless to attempt a settlement of the questions in dispute, there being no power to enforce the decisions arrived at.

That some exceptional remedy is necessary to meet an exceptional state of things is clear. Greymouth is a rapidly-rising place, and, with its magnificent coal-supply, will in time become a very important place; but, with the titles in their present condition, the people do not care to expend their money upon improvements, or even such necessary works as a gas- and water-supply. A vote was recently taken as to the advisability of raising a loan for the two latter objects and negatived, solely because the people are naturally loth to incur such a liability in view of their present insecure tenure. It is almost impossible to borrow money, for the purpose of making necessary improvements, upon the present titles.

Several courses suggest themselves as being desirable, viz. :—

1. To leave the Greymouth Reserve under the control of the Board and the Public Trustee, as provided by "The South Island Native Reserves Act, 1883," and to appoint a Commissioner, with statutory powers, to make conclusive arrangements with the parties interested.

2. To take the control out of the Board and Trustee for a time, and vest it in a Commissioner, who should be authorized to deal with each case upon its own merits, and empowered to grant fresh leases to such persons and upon such terms as may seem to him just. Upon the final adjustment of all existing disputes, and the issue of new leases, the control to revert to the Board.

3. To allow the present holders to buy the freeholds.

4. To appoint a Board instead of the Board mentioned in "The South Island Native Reserves Act, 1883," and to take the matter out of the hands of the Public Trustee. A Commissioner to be appointed, with ample powers, to act with the Board in the management of the reserve.

All other reserves in the South Island might likewise be placed under the control and management of this Board, and such reserves would thus be brought under the control of a Board easily accessible, which would have power to review the decisions and arrangements of the Commissioner. A rough sketch of a Bill to give effect to this last suggestion is appended hereto, marked A.

The main objection to the first course mentioned is that the expense and inconvenience of having to refer all deeds and disputes to Wellington would still be kept up (*vide* Report of Royal Commission), the final decision would still rest with the Board there, and some difficulty would be found in arming a Commissioner with the powers necessary, and suggested by the Royal Commission, if he would still be liable to be controlled by an officer at a distance.

The sole objection to the second course appears to be that the whole matter would be left to the unfettered discretion of one man.

With regard to the suggestion that the holders might be permitted to buy the freehold, two objections are pointed out by the Royal Commissioners, namely: (1) That the Natives are strongly averse to selling; and (2) That some of the lessees object to buy, on the ground that, not having the means to do so, their improvements would fall into the hands of speculators or mortgagees.

It may be, however, that the Government might itself be able to acquire the freehold from the Native owners, and, by placing the reserve under local control, give the persons interested some voice in deciding the future management of the estate. This seems upon the whole the best course, if feasible.

When I visited the Arahura Reserve I saw some of the Native owners, and had a long conversation with them as regards selling their interests in the Greymouth Reserve, but I found the strongest objection on their part to disposing of them. I did not fail to point out that, if they sold, the interest on the purchase-money would far exceed the amount of the rentals now received. They appeared to be entirely indifferent to the amount of rentals or interest, so long as they retained the ownership of the land. They expressed themselves perfectly willing that leases for sixty-three years should be granted, with a right of renewal for another sixty-three years.

The necessity for some local authority having power to deal with all questions affecting not only the Greymouth but all other reserves on the West Coast is evident.

As regards the Arahura Reserve, which I have inspected, questions will in time arise between mining companies and lessees, and also between lessees and the Trust, which can only be dealt with by some competent authority on the spot. The extended lease asked for by the Humphrey's Gully Company should be granted, the land upon which they are running tailings being useless for any other purpose; but it is not improbable that, in view of their extensive sluicing operations, this site may be found inadequate. Care should be taken, in granting future leases adjacent to this and other mining companies' works, that the land, which in parts about there is valueless, is not taken up for the mere sake of extorting an exorbitant price from these companies. Whatever the land is fairly worth should go to the Maoris, and mere speculators for a higher price (and who cannot, from the very nature of the ground, have any real intention of cultivating it) should not be allowed to get leases of it.

In accordance with the instructions contained in your telegram dated the 29th April last, I secured the services of Messrs. Nancarrow, Moss, and Russell, they being, as far as I could ascertain, the "most reliable and competent men," for the purpose of making a valuation of all the holdings upon a block known as the "Middle Ward," the remuneration being 21s. for each valuation.

By a letter received by me signed by those three gentlemen, and dated the 3rd May instant, they state, "this work we purpose completing in three weeks from this date." I therefore expect by the first mail to receive such valuations. In addition to the rough sketch of the proposed Bill above alluded to as being marked A, four other papers are hereto appended, each bearing its own distinctive mark, viz. :—

1. B.—A statement by Mr. Wiltshire, showing the advisability of placing all these reserves under some local authority.

2. C.—A memorandum from A. R. Guinness, Esq., M.H.R. for the district, embodying his views in reference to the Greymouth Reserve.

3. D.—A letter from Messrs. Guinness and Kitchingham, solicitors, bearing on the case of G. McWilliams, alluded to by the Royal Commissioners in their recommendation.

4. E.—Resolutions passed and subscribed at a recently-convened meeting of lessees and sub-lessees in Greymouth.

The Public Trustee, Wellington.

I have, &c.,

HENRY BUNNY.

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