

*Hon. the Premier*: Do you think, if you had the right of making this arrangement with the Natives at the end of the term, the Natives themselves would consider that verbal promise made to you?

*Mr. Riddiford*: No; only the old ones. The old Natives would. The drawback is that the lessors and the grantees are two different tribes of people.

*Hon. the Premier*: In a verbal promise of that kind, as you know, there cannot be any great weight, coming from any one, in the matter of a lease extending for twenty-one years.

*Mr. Riddiford*: I grant you that.

*Hon. the Premier*: I am not saying that equitably you are not entitled to some consideration—possibly you are; it appears to me, however, that if the settlers were allowed to make their own arrangement with the Natives—if you arrived at a fair rent yourselves—then legislation would follow in the way of validating what had been done. I am inclined to think that would be the solution of the difficulty. Mr. Symes has given some indication of what might take place. The settlers might make some fair arrangement with the Natives as to the rent they were to pay. In a great many cases that might be done, if not all, if time were given. Mr. Symes has said this is the mind of the settlers on the point, I think: that a lease for twenty-one years, at 5 per cent. on the land-tax valuation, *minus* improvements, would be satisfactory. But my own opinion is, that would not be accepted by the Natives. I think the Natives are not prepared, as far as I know their minds on the matter—Mr. Symes can confirm it, I dare say—they are not prepared to accept rent on the unimproved value of the land, because what they contend is that the land would fall to them at the end of the term, and they would have the right of making new leases, and the new leases would be upon a rent calculated on the improved value of the land. I would like you to keep in mind this, gentlemen: that any proposal brought before the Legislature must be based upon equity between the parties. After the discussion that has taken place on this question there is no probability of legislation going through Parliament unless it is fair and equitable to both parties. I may tell you also that there is an almost unanimous consensus of opinion that the Act of 1887 was not fair to the Natives. That is the impression on the minds, I will venture to say, of three-fourths of the members of the House—especially on that one point, the rent being on the unimproved value of the land; because up to that time it had never been contemplated by any leader of public opinion in Parliament or the colony that the rent should be on the unimproved value of the land. The Bill which I brought in myself in 1887 calculated the rent should be on the improved value of the lands, except houses, which should be allowed. Mr. Lysaght was there that session, and he agreed, I think, with the fairness of my Bill; but he went a little further, and got that hurried legislation through in 1887. The result was that the Natives took action, backed up by opinions from various parts of the colony, of lawyers and others, that the terms were not equitable, and the regulations under that Act were upset. You have to arrive at something that will be acceptable to Parliament. If you do not do that, you will have no chance of getting a Bill through at all. My own impression is, you should face the position, and have the rent calculated on the improved value of the land, less, possibly, the buildings and houses. If you do that, then I think the assistance of a large number of those in the House would be obtained to back you up; and I think the gentlemen advising the Natives in the matter would recommend something of that character. I have held, and hold still—and I have told the Natives to-day—the settlers have rights, and as far as I am concerned I will not consent to have the settlers turned off their lands, either where the leases have expired or in cases where the leases have to expire; but at the same time I firmly believe the settlers should consider what is fair and equitable, and come to some understanding on the point. I do not know whether the settlers have deliberated and carefully considered that one point, as to the improvements, mentioned by Mr. Symes to-day. That is, I think, the point on which a fatal difference of opinion may arise; and I ask you to reconsider it. The Government occupy a position of absolute neutrality in this matter, but they do desire, from the responsibility which belongs to them, to have this matter settled once and for all. We would like to see the settlers get their rights, get advances upon their land, and perform the work generally of good settlers. That is the position we take up in the matter, and I express my opinion quite independently and quite fearlessly upon this point. I told the Natives exactly what I think upon the subject of turning the settlers off the land, and I tell you now what I think on the question of the improvements. We do not want to have any answer to-day—before next session will be time enough. You will have to consider it carefully, and I would recommend you to send down a deputation to Parliament or to the Government before the session begins. I should be sorry to see next session pass without some arrangement being come to. That is the position we take up in the matter. I have expressed the opinion that these proceedings should be perfectly open and perfectly unreserved to-day, believing that the more publicity which is given to both sides the more sure we shall be to come to some satisfactory conclusion. I have nothing more to say now, gentlemen; I would like to hear the opinions of some of the settlers upon the points raised to-day. There is nothing to conceal in the matter, and the more open it is I believe the better in the way of arriving at some result.

*Mr. P. Wilson*: As to the valuation, you will recognise that a considerable number of the leaseholders have leases which have not yet expired. Some of these gentlemen have leases with ten years to run, and some of them six years, and we should suffer, because the rent we occupy under now is considerably less than we should subsequently occupy under if the rental was based on the improved value of the land-tax valuation. It would be a hardship on the part of those who have to give up their holdings and take fresh leases for twenty-one years—that is to say, part of that time will absorb part of the unabsorbed term of their present leases.

*Hon. the Premier*: That may be made an element in the valuation. That is to say, where there are six years for the leases to run, and a new lease has to be taken up, clearly the value ought to be less.

*Mr. P. Wilson*: Successive Governments have recognised the advisability of issuing fresh leases