

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

TUESDAY, 4th OCTOBER, 1898.—(Mr. SLIGO, Chairman.)

The Right Hon. R. J. SEDDON in attendance.

1. *The Chairman.*] I understand you wish that a certain course should be defined?—I desire the Committee should follow the same course as was adopted in respect to an inquiry of a similar character in 1890, and when the then Premier (Sir Harry Atkinson), Mr. Mitchelson, and Sir Frederick Whitaker had been attacked by Mr. Hutchison. That course, which I think was fair to all parties, was that the *Hansard* containing Mr. Hutchison's speech was taken into consideration, and the paragraphs which reflected upon the then Premier and his colleagues were agreed upon as between the parties. That having been done in this case, then I should ask that I might be permitted to call witnesses in rebuttal of the charges made. At present I am placed at a disadvantage in one respect. I look upon it as a disadvantage, inasmuch as the member—Mr. Hutchison—who made the allegations is not in attendance, and in the House has signified his intention of not being present to cross-examine witnesses or prosecute the charges he made. I prefer he should be present to cross-examine the witnesses or myself; or if he has anything in support of his charges that it should be produced here. However, it is my intention, with the approval of the Committee, of course, to proceed to take the *Hansard* containing the charges, and then to bring evidence to refute them. Luckily for me, the then Town Clerk is still alive, one of the local auditors is at Palmerston North, and the gentleman who was then Mayor is at Christchurch. Of the two Government Auditors I think one is dead and the other is in London; but we have the report they made, which of course will speak for itself. I think from the evidence now procurable the Committee will have no difficulty whatever in coming to a unanimous decision. I would suggest that to-day the Committee should ask me what paragraphs in Mr. Hutchison's speech I take exception to as reflecting upon myself and my relatives, and, if the Committee infer there is any reflection, that I should be allowed to call evidence to refute it.

2. Where is the Town Clerk?—He is at Kumara still.

3. *Hon. J. McKenzie.*] Where is the Mayor?—He is in business as a chemist at Christchurch, and Mr. Nicholson is at Palmerston. There is also Mr. G. Harper, who was brought over to Hokitika specially to assist the Crown Prosecutor as leading counsel. In a matter of this kind he would know as much as any one else you can get.

4. *Mr. Duthie.*] Who was the Judge on that occasion?—It was the Chief Justice who sat on the bench when the Town Clerk was tried.

5. *The Chairman.*] When was the case tried?—The committal took place in the Resident Magistrate's Court, Kumara, before Dr. Giles. I should ask that he be brought here, because if there was any suspicion of wrong-doing on the part of my relative or myself it must have come before him. He ought to be able to produce his notes. The depositions are obtainable from the Resident Magistrate's Court, and the Judge's notes are obtainable as to what took place in the Supreme Court, Hokitika. The newspaper reports of the time are also obtainable; and I have asked that a file of the *Kumara Times* and the *West Coast Times* be placed before the Committee.

6. The case was tried before the Chief Justice?—Yes, before the Chief Justice.

7. You said you intended to submit to the Committee the portions of the *Hansard* which you specially desired should be inquired into?—I produce *Hansard* No. 17, page 63. I take exception to the following, which appears therein: "If one were to consider the public antecedents of the Premier as leading to this debasement of parliamentary and public life, we may trace in the course of an indifferent repute in an obscure part of the colony the explanation of much that otherwise may appear surprising." I say there is an imputation there in the reference to "indifferent repute." Then, further down, he says, "There was one deficit in the Kumara financial statement in connection with the Town Clerk's own salary, and there was another in connection with the wages of an employé, whose name was Nathaniel Seddon. A special examination by two of the staff of the Audit Office had been made of the borough accounts. One paragraph of their report reads thus: 'Nathaniel Seddon . . . we find, after most careful consideration, that he was paid in full up to 25th December, 1879, after which confusion begins. He received wages at the rate of £3 per week up to 5th November, 1881, when his weekly engagement was terminated by order of the Council.'" On the same page, further down, he quoted an extract from the report of the Auditors, which I have just read, but he keeps from the House a portion which explained that part. The Auditors said they took this from the cash-book and the ledger, but they had not been able to give the dates from which they started. Assuming that the date was 1879, Mr. Seddon had been paid in full, but taking it forward from the date he left the service of the Council he had been overpaid by no less than £219 10s. Mr. Hutchison went on to say, "The trial of the Town Clerk followed, and the right honourable gentleman, who gave his evidence as an expert so early as that on finance, attempted to prove that the two Auditors were all wrong, and that there was no such thing as overpayment. In the course of his examination, however, a document was put into his hands. It was an authority in his own favour from his uncle Nathaniel Seddon, under which the right honourable gentleman had to admit that he himself had been the person who had drawn the money so paid and overpaid. That was only one incident in his West Coast career." The