

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

(R. McNAB, Esq., M.H.R., CHAIRMAN.)

WEDNESDAY, 31ST JULY, 1901.

HENRY BETTS examined (No. 1.)

Mr. Henry Betts (Chairman of the Inangahua County Council) was in attendance, and, being sworn by the Chairman (Mr. R. McNab, M.H.R.), gave evidence as follows, viz. :—

The Chairman : Your name is Henry Betts, and you are Chairman of the Inangahua County Council. You desire to give evidence before the Committee on the Counties Bill, now before the House. We will be pleased to hear anything you have to say, and members will have an opportunity of asking you questions afterwards.

Mr. Betts : The reason that I desire to give evidence before the Committee is that if the franchise clause in this Bill, as circulated—clause 15, subsection (c)—if given effect to it will be the means of depriving a large number of miners in the Inangahua County of the privileges of the franchise, inasmuch as in a large number of cases the companies carrying on mining operations in that district erect huts for miners on their lands, and in no case do they charge more than from 1s. to 1s. 6d. per week rental for these huts; consequently, you will see that a £10 rental qualification would deprive these men of the privileges of the franchise. The Inangahua County Council recommends, and desires that this clause should be so amended to bring the men I refer to within the scope of the Act, that all the words after the word “relates,” in the 7th line of subsection (c), section 15, be struck out; and that, in lieu of a rental qualification, a residential qualification (say, of six months) within the county should qualify the person to have a vote at the election of Councillors. Of course, I might point out that, so far as we understand, a miner cannot get the privilege to occupy a residence area on a mining lease unless he holds the ground as a principal under the Mining Act of last session; but, so far as we are aware, a miner cannot get a title of a residence area on a mining privilege held by another person. On the other hand, of course, it might be urged that a miner can take out a miner's right and qualify himself for a vote by a miner's right, but we consider that unjust, because he would be compelled to pay rent for his hut, and also be compelled to be the holder of a miner's right as well. Another thing, the men who are working in the mines there do not receive a very large wage, and the cost of living is very dear in that part of the country, and consequently it is just simply an existence; and in other cases of the kind miners working in some of the quartz-mines live in other ridings of the county where their homes are situated, and they pay rent for the huts on the mining property on which they are working. I know of instances where miners have erected huts on mining leases, and the company have claimed these huts, and charged the men rent for huts which the men have erected themselves on the company's property. I can name the company if the Committee desires me to do so.

The Chairman : It would not affect this question of the franchise.

Mr. Betts : I know that such has been done, and we hold that it would simplify everything if the residential qualification (say, six months) was given effect to. There is another matter I would like to point out. In our district we have a very large county town consisting of seventeen hundred inhabitants, and according to the recommendation of the Counties Conference, although there are a large number of renters (miners and others paying rent for cottages in the Town of Reefton)—according to the recommendation of the Counties Conference these men would be deprived of the franchise; at any rate, they would not be in the same position as a lot of small boroughs in different parts of the colony, inasmuch as they would not have the same privileges as boroughs have got under the Municipal Franchise Extension Act, although the population of Reefton outnumbers several boroughs even on the West Coast, and although the population of the Town of Reefton outnumbers, for instance, the Boroughs of Ross and Kumara.

1. *The Chairman*.] How do you propose it should be amended, then?—Our Council recommends that the residential qualification should entitle them to a vote.

Mr. Allen : They can get a miner's right.

Mr. Betts : I would like to point out in connection with this that a man might have his family residing in one riding, and he might have his miner's right taken out for that riding where his family is residing, and he might be working in another riding of the county altogether, and consequently he would not be continually residing in the riding where his miner's right was issued, and he would therefore be deprived of a vote. I might say that the whole of the recommendations of the Counties Conference, except the allowance of a Chairman, were practically agreed to by our Council, except their recommendation in connection with the franchise clause and payment of members attending meetings, and my chief reason for coming before the Committee is to try and prevent an injustice being done to a large number of men in our county.

2. *Mr. Houston*.] Would not subsection (d) of clause 15 meet the case (the mining qualification)?—It would if he were a miner working with a party for himself, but not if he were a workman employed by a company or employer.

3. *Mr. Bennet*.] Would you expect any person that had neither miner's right nor property to have an equal vote with those who are paying rates?—The miner is paying rent for the use of the hut to the company.