

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

FRIDAY, 31ST JULY, 1903.

Two deputations, representing respectively Wellington and Christchurch retailers, were introduced.

The Chairman : We understand, gentlemen, that you desire to give evidence in connection with the Shops and Offices Bill. We presume that all of you do not wish to speak, and that you have your spokesman. If anything is left unsaid by the person whom you have requested to speak on your behalf, we will be glad if the others will fill up the gap. We have other deputations waiting, and wish to get through as quickly as possible for the convenience of those who are here; and we hope you will help us in that direction. We shall be very pleased to now hear what you have to say in connection with any clauses of this Bill.

WILLIAM ALLAN examined. (No. 1.)

Mr. Allan : Mr. Chairman and gentlemen,—We have come here to give evidence on the Shops and Offices Bill. We do not wish to traverse each clause of the Bill, but there are one or two clauses which very materially affect us, and which we would like to speak about. The chief one is that providing for the Saturday half-holiday. As you are aware, the Saturday half-holiday is an institution in some phases of trade which works admirably; but for the retail trade, which all of us here represent, the Saturday half-holiday is quite unsuitable. Saturday shopping is an institution that dates back, I suppose, as far as shop-keeping. What is asked for now in this Bill is very much of a revolutionary character. Some years ago the Legislature provided for an optional half-holiday—*i.e.*, either on Saturday or any other day of the week which the local authorities might fix. It is apparent to every one that that measure has been faithfully carried out. The shopkeepers have most loyally endeavoured to carry out the law in the matter of the weekly half-holiday. We are now enjoying that half-holiday, and I do not think there is any retailer, employer or otherwise, who would wish to see that half-holiday done away with. There were inconveniences in connection with it to begin with, but we have got over them. Now, we feel very much disturbed over this proposed change to make Saturday the day for the half-holiday. At the present time those who wish to have Saturday can have it; it is optional, so there is no hardship imposed upon those who would like to close on Saturday afternoon. But as the law now stands if the local bodies make it Saturday we have no option to choose another day; and according to this Bill we should be simply bound down to a universal half-holiday on Saturday afternoon. Now, from the point of view of trade that would be disastrous. I am not exaggerating when I say that most traders who do a middle-class and working-class trade will tell you—and they will bear out the statement by evidence from their books—that on a Saturday their takings amount to those of any other two or three days in the week. To change that, it must be apparent to every one, would be very dangerous, to say the least of it, and in some localities it would be disastrous. No doubt members of the House will ask, “Where does the assistant come in?” It is quite easily understood that an assistant would like all the privileges he could get, and no doubt it would be very nice to have Saturday afternoon and Sunday linked together as holiday-time. But there are a great many other privileges which would be very enjoyable but which it would be disastrous to trade to give to the assistants. You have, no doubt, seen by the papers that the Trades and Labour Council appear to support the Saturday half-holiday, but I may tell you that the Trades and Labour Council are not the working-men. They do not represent the wage-earners in a general way. It is quite the common thing—you will find that the working-people will tell you so—for the working-man to go home on Saturday at midday: He cleans up for the week, and goes out with his wife on Saturday afternoon and evening to do the shopping. He will tell you that he does not see how he and his wife could do their shopping at all if the privilege of doing it on Saturday were denied them. You might say to him, “Oh, but we will give you Friday night as the late night in the week.” Suppose you do, how then? The working-man gets home at 6 o'clock in the evening. He has his tea, changes himself, or otherwise, and reads the paper. Why, the evening is then gone. You take away from him the only opportunity he has in the week for doing his shopping. Of course, there is a large section of the community to whom it does not matter on what day in the week they do their shopping; they can do it on any day. But the working-man, whose business to a very large extent we cater for, could not possibly do his shopping on any other afternoon but Saturday. You may say that he *must* do it, and he might; but that would lead to developments that might not be desirable. To show the importance of the matter even to the limited suburban trade, we have returns here from the Manawatu Railway Company and from the Government railways which go to show the very large number of people who come into Wellington ostensibly to do shopping on Saturday. From the Lower Hutt and intermediate stations there came into Wellington on Saturday the 18th of this month 1,098 people, and on Saturday the 25th of this month, 895. So you see there is a large railway traffic on that day. People teem into town to do their shopping. If the Saturday half-holiday were to become law it would simply mean that those people would be denied the privilege of shopping on Saturday afternoon, and consequently a very large amount of business would be lost to us. On the Manawatu Railway an average of two hundred people for the last twenty-five Saturdays travelled from Paikakariki and intermediate stations to Wellington.