

## MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

INVERCARGILL, TUESDAY, 21ST FEBRUARY, 1905.

WILLIAM BENJAMIN SCANDRETT examined.

1. *The Chairman.*] What is your official position?—I am Mayor of Invercargill.

2. How long have you been in the colony?—About forty-seven years.

3. Have you ever engaged in farming pursuits?—No.

4. But I have no doubt, from your long residence and observations, you are in a position to give us some valuable evidence on the questions we have to inquire into. We shall be very glad if you will give us a statement of your views on the land question, or any particular part of it?—The first item referred to is the constitution of Land Boards. So far as Southland is concerned, I think we are perfectly satisfied with the mode of constitution of these Boards. It had occurred occasionally in the past that a good man had been put off and another man had been put on, but that is inevitable under a political system. In my opinion, the Land Boards have done excellent work in Southland. They have acted fairly towards the Crown tenants and towards the State, and I do not think that the advantage to be gained by the election of the Land Boards would be commensurate with the expense attending it. Moreover, a very large proportion of the people would take no interest in the election, and would not vote, with the result that the Land Boards would be elected by the leaseholders, and that would not be in the interest of the colony. Then, so far as the land-tenures of the colony are concerned, I am entirely in favour of the present system, with one exception—viz., I think the leaseholders should be given the option of purchasing the freehold. I regard the lease in perpetuity practically as a freehold so far as the next ten or fifteen generations are concerned, subject to an annual charge which is a reasonable charge on the present value. But there is something in a man which makes him desire the freehold. Fully one-half of the early settlers came to New Zealand with the intention of getting the freehold of their property because it was impossible for them to acquire the freehold at Home. Of course, that may be sentiment, but I think it is a desirable sentiment. I would only give the option of the freehold. I would not insist on people buying. I think they should have the option of purchasing the freehold in connection with either the perpetual-lease system or lease in perpetuity; and I think the purchase-money might be put into a separate account so that it might still provide revenue for the Government. Of course, that is a matter which the State would have to consider, but I see no reason myself why the freehold should not be purchased. I am a land agent, and have been in that business for the last ten years. Previously I was Town Clerk for twenty-two years. The Municipal Corporations have a good many leaseholds, but, as a land agent, I find that the great bulk of the people will not buy leases if they can possibly avoid it. In a great many cases the wives own the home, or they want to own it, and they make a strong effort to get the freehold. If I offer them a good leasehold they say, "Oh, but I will never own it." That shows the desire of mankind for the freehold. I have not much to say in regard to the question of compulsory residence by tenants. I think that is necessary. The Land Board here, at any rate, has always dealt fairly with the tenants in allowing them an extension where the circumstances warranted it before insisting on compulsory residence. I have no knowledge of the effects of climate and land-configuration, nor am I familiar with the homestead system. I am entirely in favour of the ballot system. The ballot system was first started in Otago, and was afterwards changed to the auction system, with the result that people often got excited at auctions, and paid two and three times the value of the land. The result was that the Government had to pass an Act to allow reductions to be made. The ballot system is fair. What we want is successful settlement on the land, and we get that by the ballot system, because the people only pay a reasonable amount, and generally they are able to pay their way. Under the auction system, when the price of the land is run up to more than its value you do not get successful settlement. On the contrary, you get a struggling settlement, which is not good for the country. I have nothing much to say in reference to the loading of lands for roads, except that it seems reasonable. The next point in the Commission is the value of leaseholds now and at the date of lease. I think that as a rule in this district there has been no increase in the value, except in connection with bush land. Where the land is open tussock land there has been no increase in value of the leasehold outside of the improvements. There may be an increase in some parts of the colony, such as Canterbury, perhaps, where the land is rich; but, taking Southland as a whole, the only improvement in value is due to a man's own work on the land. I think the advances-to-settlers system is a splendid one, and that the Government of the country deserve very great credit for it. It has had the effect of fixing the standard for interest, because private lenders base their rate of interest on the rate fixed by the Government. That has been of immense value to the country. I think that it has been one of the best Acts the Parliament of the country ever passed. I think the aggregation of large estates is against the best interests of the country, and anything that can be done to prevent it will be for the benefit of the State. However, I do not think a man should be stopped from increasing the size of his holding. If he is permitted to do so, it may be good for the district, because a man would probably buy his neighbour out at a higher price than a stranger would give. It may suit him very well to acquire a property adjoining his own. I think that power should not be taken away from anybody, although I think it is against the interests of the country to allow the aggregation of large estates without, at any rate, such provision as now exists in the law for a graduated land-tax. That is all I need say.