

Rarotonga, 17th February, 1920.

To the Hon. Minister Sir James Allen and to the Members of Parliament.

GREETINGS to you all! We desire to extend to you a most cordial welcome on this your visit to our island Rarotonga. Salutations to you all!

We, the committee of the Rarotonga Fruitgrowers' Association, ask you if our wishes have reached you that we expressed in 1919. Our requests were—

1. That we wanted Platts to remain here as our Resident Commissioner for some years to come, because we have experienced his goodness, and forbearance, and help in trying to put our fruit trade on a good footing, so as we get good prices.

2. We asked for good steamers to take our fruit to New Zealand for disposal there.

3. To try and induce the Union Steamship Company to advise us fully when their steamers will arrive at Rarotonga for loading our fruit to New Zealand.

4. Not to have what is called "Hospital" fruit—let us know exactly what space is available.

5. An Island Bank for the Maoris: we want your assistance, if possible, in this direction.

6. That we may have a fair share of space on Union Steamship Company's boats allotted to us.

7. We earnestly oppose any European member being put into our Rarotonga Island Council.

8. To try and grant us assistance in the draining of our lands that are liable to floods—to have the water carried off, so that those areas of land may now be put to use.

(Signed) TINOMANA (and 17 others).

A member of the deputation explained that they had heard something had been said against Mr. Platts having bought fruit-cases for them. That was a mistake. It was their own work: they merely went to him and asked him to get the cases for them. It was only afterwards they had heard of the complaint that the Commissioner had bought cases for them. This was not true: the committee were responsible for them. It had also been stated that they had been prompted in all they had done by the Commissioner. The idea was entirely their own. They simply went to him and told him what was in their mind. All the things that had been said about the Commissioner in this matter were untrue. With regard to the fruit trade, the committee were going to retain the right themselves of fixing a price for the fruit. During past years there had been great losses. The main things were set out in the petition.

The Hon. Sir JAMES ALLEN said it had been stated that the fruitgrowers had been offered 1s. 6d. a case for bananas and 1s. 6d. for oranges by the traders in Rarotonga.

MEMBER OF DEPUTATION: That was for the last year: that was the net price without the case.

HON. SIR JAMES ALLEN: You were prepared to sell for 2s., 3s., and 5s.

MEMBER OF DEPUTATION: Those were the prices we asked for when we formed the association. The prices quoted as having been obtained in New Zealand for their fruit were the net prices; they represented the price after paying all expenses of packing, transport, insurance, selling, &c.—the net profit.

To Hon. Mr. Michel: The busy months for the fruit industry were April, May, June, and July.

To Mr. Harris: The cases obtained through the Administration had cost 2s. 6d. each. The price charged by the traders was 2s. 6d., which was also the present price.

Mr. HARRIS inquired whether the fruitgrowers were fully cognisant of the fact that they had to bear the risk of fruit going bad on the voyage.

A member of the deputation said that since the association had been formed there had been no losses. Previously there had always been losses.

To Mr. Holland: There had been very small shipments last year, and a great quantity of fruit had accordingly gone to waste. About three-fifths of the amount available had gone to waste.

Mr. ISITT: Do the traders advance you money against the crops? If you interfere with them how are you going to get over the difficulty?

MEMBER OF DEPUTATION: If the traders give us fair prices we will sell to them and ship ourselves also.

Mr. LUKE: Would you be prepared to pool the season's output for the general good, such a pooling to be assisted by way of Government advances, thus ensuring a levelling-up of prices and a fair deal for the whole industry?

DEPUTATION: That would be all right.

To Mr. Powlrell: Generally speaking, it was considered it would be possible, with a regular service, to maintain an output of about four thousand cases of fruit per month.

Mr. WITTY asked whether, if they had cool stores, it would be possible to send out a regular supply of fruit, thus controlling the market, instead of causing an occasional glut and consequent deflation of prices, also preventing the spoiling of fruit in transport.

The deputation agreed that that would be a very fine scheme.

The Hon. Sir JAMES ALLEN, in reply, said he was very pleased to meet the deputation, and was very grateful to them for the kind words they had spoken with respect to Mr. Platts. He could not answer for all the members of Parliament with regard to the action of the Resident Commissioner, but as Minister of External Affairs he endorsed the stand Mr. Platts had taken in assisting the Natives to find a market for their fruit.

With regard to the shipping question, the Government of New Zealand had approached the Union Company both before and during the war, and had been in constant communication with them on the subject, with a view to seeing how far they could go in improving the steamer service to the islands to meet the fruit trade. So far as they could gather the Union Steamship Company were fully alive to the value of this trade, and were doing their best to meet its requirements. Special boats had been built for fruit-carrying, and he understood that one of the last boats built by the company had been especially designed for the carriage of bananas. All that the deputation had said with regard to shipping, storage, and transport of fruit would be represented to the Government, and the Government would do all it could to approach the Union Company to ensure the proper carriage of the produce of the islands.