

The complaints were principally in regard to food, housing, clothing, drapery, boots, and shoes. Quoting these in three groups, the percentages of gross complaints in the totals for the four tribunals are :—

	Auckland.	Wellington.	Canterbury.	Otago.
Food	26.50	38.48	28.07	35.34
Housing '	20.85	20.19	23.08	18.10
Apparel	18.20	19.24	14.23	20.25

The foregoing figures are the result of an analysis of statistical records submitted by the tribunals.

The Wellington tribunal stressed the benefits to the public of the existence of the tribunals. Their influence should be classed as direct and indirect, the latter probably being the greater. It was admitted by prominent business men and others that the mere fact of section 32 existing in the Board of Trade Act was a tremendous deterrent on traders, who otherwise might have been inclined to take advantage of the rather exceptional circumstances surrounding business during the last two years. Many traders, the report states, were glad of the opportunity of having their *bona fides* proved by an impartial body, and complainants likewise had many wrong impressions removed.

The Dunedin annual report emphasized the need for checking the expenses of distribution. In many instances, owing to the system of distribution in vogue, the public is undoubtedly paying higher prices than are warranted. The goods are sold by manufacturers to distributing agents, then resold to wholesale merchants, then resold to retailers (and oftentimes, during periods of shortage, between retailers themselves); and at each handling a profit is added. The Dunedin tribunal further pointed out that the public did not get the full benefit of trading competition in many cases, as traders were able amongst themselves to fix prices, and such prices would probably leave the traders more than a fair rate of profit. These two matters will receive the close attention of the Department. In regard to the fixing of prices by associations of traders there is a tendency for the price agreed upon to afford a reasonable profit to the least efficient, instead of a reasonable profit to a representative firm.

While the fines imposed under the anti-profiteering sections of the Act amounted to £4,545, the total expenses (for fees, travelling, &c.) of the price-investigation tribunals in the four centres totalled £2,955 14s.

The tribunals were appointed in March, 1920, and were in office until the 31st May, 1921, when they were disbanded. Their work is now being undertaken by the Department's permanent officers, who will conduct any necessary investigations in conjunction with their principal duties of assisting industry and trade.

Summaries of the tribunals' reports for the period ended 31st March, 1921, are as follows :—

AUCKLAND PRICE-INVESTIGATION TRIBUNAL.

The Auckland Price-investigation Tribunal originally consisted of Messrs. M. M. McCallum (chairman), Wesley Spragg, and E. Phelan (members). Later Mr. McCallum resigned on account of ill health, and the work was carried on by the other two members, with Mr. Spragg as chairman.

The total number of complaints dealt with up to the 31st March, 1921, was 566, of which 150, or 26 per cent., comprised foodstuffs, the next highest being drapery and footwear, 103, or 18 per cent. An analysis of how the tribunal disposed of these cases shows that over 48 per cent. of the decisions given were "prices charged not unreasonable." Refunds ordered and adjustments arranged accounted for over 20 per cent. of the decisions arrived at, and this percentage demonstrates the value of the tribunal's work in affording relief to complainants.

The decisions given (48 per cent.) in favour of traders show that the buying public did not always appreciate the changed economic conditions which followed immediately on the war. Realizing this, the tribunal adopted the practice from the beginning of qualifying its decisions with appropriate remarks, and with few exceptions complainants accepted the verdicts in favour of defendants as impartial and just. Thus the tribunal assisted in no small degree in quelling the bitterness shown towards traders by many people who were suffering hardships from the high cost of living.

WELLINGTON PRICE-INVESTIGATION TRIBUNAL.

This tribunal consisted of Mr. C. M. Luke (chairman) and Messrs. A. J. Maxwell and M. J. Reardon (members), and held 158 sittings and conferences in Wellington and twenty-three in country districts. The tribunal prepared over twenty special reports for the Board of Trade, the more important subjects dealt with being the fishing industry, rents and housing, meat, wholemeal bread, laundry businesses, coal (retail prices), explosives. Up to the 31st March the tribunal dealt with 421 cases. An instance shows how the action of this price-investigation tribunal protected the public: it was found that by effecting a prompt reduction of 1½d. per pound on meat for a period of only one week £28,000 was saved to the consumers. It was the policy of this tribunal not to interfere with the legitimate course of trade or harass the business section of the community, but at the same time breaches or attempted breaches of the Act were dealt with promptly.

CANTERBURY PRICE-INVESTIGATION TRIBUNAL.

This tribunal dealt with the Canterbury, Nelson, Marlborough, and Westland Districts. It consisted originally of Mr. C. P. Agar (chairman) and Messrs. W. H. Norton and F. C. Ellis (members).