

Well-grounded complaints are made in all parts of the Colony of the very great length of time which generally elapses between the purchase of waste lands and the issue of the Crown grants. The causes of these delays are sufficiently notorious; the only wonder is that the public have for so many years quietly submitted to a failure on the part of the Crown to observe the universally implied condition attending all sales of real estate—namely, that no unnecessary delay shall occur in the execution of the title. Very considerable areas within the Colony, more especially in the Northern Island, sold at periods varying from five to thirty years ago, are still unconveyed. It must be admitted, as before remarked, that much may be urged in excuse for this delay, principally the unsettled condition of the Native population; but it cannot be denied that such a reason can no longer, except to a small extent, be pleaded. So far as can be learned from inquiry in the Provinces, it would appear that one great cause of the delay in the preparation and issue of grants is the extraordinary arrear of reliable survey; and further, that this arrear is ascribed to the alleged inability of the Provincial authorities to provide funds for the necessary extension of their surveying establishments. Very recently, in some parts of the Colony, great anxiety has been professed to remedy this evil; but practically, the alleged want of funds is still the justification of continued delays. In more than one Province it is known that resurveys to a considerable extent will be necessary before preparation of Crown grants. Of all this, the Legislature may inform itself by direct evidence in Committee.

Before my entering upon the administration of the Crown Lands Office, I became impressed with the opinion that in all cases the Crown grant fee should be paid at the time of purchase, and had the honor of writing a brief memorandum on the subject from the Office of Registrar-General of Land and Deeds, which resulted in the insertion of a clause giving effect to the recommendation in a Bill which was dropped last Session. Subsequent experience justifies my persistence in advising that, upon general economic considerations, the fees, whatever they may be, should be paid at the time of purchase. The payment of these fees in advance, would have a tendency to strengthen the healthy popular objection to the very unbusinesslike delays which under the past condition of affairs have existed. But if it could be made to harmonize with the general scheme of Colonial finance—the complete abolition of Crown grant fees would be very desirable. This arrangement, in the event of the Legislature accepting the recommendations contained in this report, would have the effect of placing the European and Native on an exact level in the matter of surveys and Crown grants.

Before concluding my remarks on this subject, I would deferentially submit that the facilities offered to the Natives for the conversion of their estates into English freehold, and the consequent direct expense to the general revenue, would be more than balanced by the incalculable quantity of indirect profit, which must naturally follow the incorporation of the Native estate into the English system, and the consequent habit engendered in the Native mind, of feeling his common interest in and a dependence upon general laws securing the peaceful and fruitful enjoyment of property.

It is unnecessary to urge, that millions of expense may be directly traced to the fear with which the Native has regarded the vague and shapeless security which has hitherto been offered for his protection in the enjoyment of his lands—a fear which it must be confessed has hitherto been a perfectly natural emotion, following an intellectual regard of his past relations to the European, and their logical consequences. I am profoundly impressed with the belief that, in accepting such recommendations as the above, which are simply repetitions of what has been many times said or felt by our ablest men, the Colony will not only realize great and not remote commercial advantages, but will afterwards feel, what is of far greater importance, a well-reasoned and elevating moral consciousness of the presence of abstract justice, as the governing principle of its legislation on subjects commonly affecting the European and Native races.

I have the honor to submit for the information of Government, a detailed statement of business transacted in the Crown Lands Office during the past year.

I have, &c.,

The Hon. the Colonial Secretary, Wellington.

W. S. MOORHOUSE,  
Secretary for Crown Lands.