

if deemed better, three or four) persons specially appointed by or for the Maori owners of the lands, to protect the interests of these Maori owners consistently with the progress of settlement generally. Perhaps these persons need not be paid at all, or at any rate they would require to be paid very little. They would meet only when it was found necessary, and certainly in this way there need not be any fear of their constituting a new department. It would be a very small affair indeed, and would, I believe, entail little if any additional expense.

NEW PLYMOUTH, TUESDAY, 21ST APRIL.

MR. WILFRED RENNELL examined.

1303. *Mr. Rees.*] Now, Mr. Rennell, you were good enough to say that you had one or two matters to bring under our notice?—Yes; one of them is that succession duties are charged the Natives and no rebate is allowed them, as would be the case with Europeans, the reason being that no proper accounts are filed. There are a great many small estates of the Natives in this district where the value of the whole estate does not come to £100, and duty has to be paid. There is a way, of course, of avoiding this, and that is by filing proper accounts, when a solicitor would appear and be paid a guinea. An interpreter would have to be employed also, so that it would be far easier and cheaper after all to pay the succession duties.

1304. Then they have to pay the charges necessary for making up proper accounts?—Yes. It has led to a lot of correspondence on my part with the Public Trustee. One case may be taken as a sample of the whole. This is a letter that I wrote to the Public Trustee, Wellington: "Replying to your memorandum (250, of 3rd instant) *re* succession duties on orders of Native Land Court, I have to state that I am not aware that Apikaera died before the Court order was granted, nor is that alleged by the Natives. The sore point is that the property is worth only £36, being the only property Pahata, the grantee, died possessed of; and that being worth less than £100, no succession duty would be chargeable if proper accounts had been filed with the Stamp Department. Now, to file accounts would mean employing a solicitor at, say £1 1s., *i.e.*, more than the succession duty. This is not the only case. The Hon. the Premier is aware that there is a number of small interests of this class, and Native mortality being heavy, these small interests often change hands, and either succession duty or a solicitor's fee has to be paid every time a new order is granted. When succession duty is assessed on these small interests (and on the Native holdings in my district), the Stamp Office accepts my valuation of the property; and I do not think it will lose anything it is entitled to if it were to extend the concession and accept my statement as to total value of property any Native may die possessed of, and dispense with filing of accounts or payment of duty where the estate is under £100. The only legislation I would venture to suggest is that the Stamp Department be authorised to accept such evidence as it may consider sufficient in lieu of filing accounts, where the estate is under £100. I am unable to say, however, whether this will require legislation." The last sentence of the letter was in answer to my being asked to suggest legislation, but I hesitated to do so.

1305. In relation to succession orders passing for the amendment of the succession deeds, do you think it would be at all difficult, without going to the Native Land Court at all, for a Committee of Maori owners who know the friends and relatives of the deceased owner, and the claims they have to succeed, to determine who the successor is?—I think it would very much simplify the matter both in time and cost.

1306. Under the present state of things attendance at the Native Land Court is requisite; there is a *Gazette* notice to be paid for, and all sorts of things besides?—It might be done by the Native Commissioner in his round.

1307. With the aid of the Native Committee?—Yes.

1308. Now, in relation to fixing the proportionate interests in a block of land among the owners, do you think the Maori Committee, acting in concert with the Commissioner, could do that?—I can only say that I have defined interests in nearly every case on this coast. I have done so with the assistance of the Assessor. Wherever the Natives assisted there was no trouble whatever; in fact, they fixed it among themselves, and we confirmed the arrangement they arrived at. I gave them notice that I would attend along with the Assessor, and I never interfered unless in case of dispute. Then I always found that they accepted my decision.

1309. Can you state the number of cases in which that has happened?—I may state that only ten days ago Te Kahui, the Native Assessor—who is now present—and I defined the interests in a block of two thousand and odd acres among twenty-one people.

1310. Did they agree?—Yes. It was a very good representative meeting. We had the opinion of the Natives; and those of them who were away at Parihaka neither disputed nor assented to the arrangement. They were passive. Of course, each one of the latter had notice in writing, in Maori, of the intention, and date, and so forth, but they did not trouble about the matter. I propose to do the same thing in respect of another block about a fortnight hence, at Waitotara, if the Native owners agree, but with a different Assessor. My reason for taking a different Assessor is that I can get one from Wanganui much more cheaply for this particular spot.

1311. Can you say how many cases, comprising how many Natives, you have partitioned during the last four or five years? Or can you give us an approximate idea of the number of blocks of land you have partitioned, and how many owners in each block?—Thirty blocks of land, ranging in area from 300 to about 15,000 acres.

1312. And including how many Natives, on an average, for each block?—It would be difficult to get the exact number of Natives.

1313. An approximate idea of the number will suffice?—I see on further reference to the data before me that the number I have given you (thirty) does not represent half of the blocks. This return only comprises cases as far as Hawera, whilst I went down as far as Waitotara. Out of these thirty blocks the Native owners in each ranged from twenty to one hundred and forty-seven in number.