

2096. Has the Crown any fixed area as a standard upon which to gauge what the Maori should remain possessed of?—No; there has been no particular area fixed as a standard, but I should certainly say that if a Maori was reduced to 50 or 100 or even more acres, and it was known that that was all the land he had, assuming that it was land of fair quality, he should not be allowed to dispose of any of it.

2097. That would be all good land?—That would be fairly good land.

2098. Average land?—Yes. For instance, I remember, some years ago Sir George Grey stopped all dealing with Native lands for a time in the Tauranga district, because the returns of land in the possession of the Maoris there showed that there were only about 50 acres left, as an average, for each man, woman, and child there.

2099. When the Natives refuse to sell to the Government, what is the course followed then? Is there any dealing, or just an abandonment of all transactions?—Just an abandonment. You cannot compel the Natives to sell. When, in respect of any block for the purchase of which Government is treating, all the interests of those willing to sell are acquired, the course adopted is to apply to the Native Land Court to cut off the Crown's interest, and the rest is left as it was.

2100. And where the Natives are willing to sell to the Government, yet they cannot agree in respect of the price offered by the Government, is there any means employed by the agents of the Government by which the question of the price can be settled by a system of arbitration?—No; that has not been found necessary up to the present time. Of course, the Government buy large areas, and, speaking generally, in most cases all the land is not alike; the area includes land of varying qualities. The reserves that are made for the Maoris are usually amongst the best of the land. So that I think it will be found in all the purchases made by the Crown that the Government gives a fair commercial wholesale price for the land.

2101. Because the Crown has the risk. It may happen that the Natives are willing to sell to the Government, but want a bigger price for their land than that offered them by the Government. Now, is there any mode nearer at hand by which such a question could be settled?—No. I may say that, generally speaking, the Maoris are averse to selling their land. In point of fact, the great problem the solution of which the Maori wishes to arrive at is how he can keep his land and live on it without work and without trouble. I believe the Maoris, as a rule, only think of selling land in order to supply their wants, and following the example of other Natives. I have pointed out to them, as a strong reason why they should sell, that when a Maori holds land in common with others he practically cannot go upon any portion and say it belongs to himself. So with all lands that are dealt with communistically, there is the smallest possible benefit for the individuals; and that accounts for the very large areas of Maori land that are absolutely profitless to them.

2102. Supposing that they had their waste lands cut into sections large enough to admit of profitable occupation, and then that these lands were let to European settlers on long leases, the Maoris themselves taking up each alternate section, do you think that would be a good scheme—of course, giving them every encouragement by having the terms made as liberal as possible, and having small rents?—The difficulty that confronts you in connection with all these Native-land leases is that of the distribution of the rent amongst those entitled to participate in it.

2103. Yes; but supposing a Committee of the owners were formed to act as a kind of executive for the whole tribe, and to parcel out the land in conjunction with some Government officer, and that they would cut up the land in the manner I have described, and that the annual proceeds arising therefrom—they would not be much in the first part of the term of lease—would be distributed among all the owners by the Committee, acting along with the Government officer, how would that suit? Would it be calculated to promote settlement?—It might promote settlement, and theoretically the leasing of land in that way sounds very satisfactory; but I think I have had sufficient practical experience to justify me in saying that it does not work out at all satisfactorily. I might remind you of the case of some of the best land in New Zealand—viz., the Waimate Plains, on the west coast of this Island, which was owned by not a very large number of Natives as compared with the number owning land in other localities. That land, when it was first leased, realised large rentals—so much so, indeed, that under the Fair Rent Act these rents have since been reduced. In the distribution of that rent-money, of course, there was this difficulty: A number of these Native owners were Te Whiti-ites, and would not take the money accruing to them from the leases. Without the matter being in my department, I have had the opportunity, more regularly some time ago, of seeing the returns in the Public Trust Office of the amounts due to the Natives in respect of the rents of these lands; and the individual proportions were really not worth the trouble of distributing. You looked down a long list of owners' names—I think the rents were distributed quarterly—and you found that 2s., 2s. 6d., 2s. 3d., and in some instances as little as 10d., were the individual amounts to be distributed. Instances in which the shares approached £1 were the exception to the rule. I think it will be found that the unimproved land in New Zealand at present in the hands of the Natives is of so little commercial value that any sort of fair rent under lease would yield but such a small sum-total for distribution among a large number of owners that, unless it were distributed, we will say, once in five years, or at some long interval like that, the amount would not be worth the trouble of distribution. In order to illustrate what I mean, we will take a few of the divisions that have been made in the Rohe Potae. I shall read out simply the particulars of the first four divisions upon the list: "Te Awaroa—number of owners 472, area of the block 8,690 acres; Te Taharoa—369 owners, area of the block 24,139 acres; South Ohura—225 owners, area of the block 116,152 acres; Wharepungua—991 owners, area of the block 135,000 acres."

2104. That shows that in many of these blocks the area is small in proportion to the number of owners?—I should say that the number of the owners in proportion to the area of the blocks is so large that probably, in the case of the Wharepungua Block, for instance, only 2s. an acre would represent the purchasing-value of it. In such cases the rental would be a very small amount indeed, and to distribute that rental, even if it were the highest conceivable rental in respect of a block