

TUESDAY, 22ND AUGUST, 1893.

Hon. R. J. SEDDON examined.

670. *The Chairman.*] I suppose you are aware of the charges which have been made against you by Mr. Rolleston? He says you made a "silent, secret, and surreptitious" alteration of the public records?—In answer to the charge made, which has been referred to the Committee, and which appears in *Hansard* No. 11, pages 156 and 157, and which accusation was made by the member for Halswell, the Hon. Mr. Rolleston, I say it is entirely unfounded in fact; that I neither "silently, secretly," nor "surreptitiously," or in any other way, made any alteration or correction in either the Statement which was laid on the table of the House, or the corrected Statement which was issued from the Printing Department, and which appears in the Appendices and Journals of the House, or the tables attached. As to the graver charge made—that of falsification of public records of the House—that is a specific charge, together with the other, and has been shown by the records of the House themselves to be not borne out, the records proving themselves to have never been altered or corrected, but is as laid by me on the table on the evening on which I delivered the Statement. In making the charge the leader of the Opposition did, there can be no doubt whatever that, at the time he made it, he was under the impression—he must have been under the impression—that the Statement which was laid upon the table of the House had been altered.

671. *Sir John Hall:* He must have been?—Yes; when he made that charge he must have been under the impression that the Statement laid on the table of the House had been altered, for on looking at page 156 of *Hansard*, this year, second column, members will find these words: "He"—that is myself—"has altered these figures, and let go broadcast to the public a statement which is entirely incorrect on the face of it." Now, when the charge was interpreted by that passage in his speech, it made it appear as though the public works expenditure had been put less than it actually was; that I had altered the figures to a lesser amount for the purpose of giving colour to what appeared in the Statement, and of supporting what appeared in the Statement, that public works expenditure had been less during the last few years. That, I say, was the charge made against me: that I purposely, and for the purpose of making it appear the public works expenditure had been less during the last few years, had put in a lesser amount. The Hon. Mr. Rolleston says: "He has altered these figures, and let go broadcast to the public a statement which is entirely incorrect on the face of it." That is, the Statement laid on the table of the House.

672. *Hon. Sir J. Hall.*] Do you mean by "Statement," the actual copy laid on the table of the House?—Yes.

673. The identical copy?—The identical copy. I may say the same statement has been made by another member of the House, that I had reduced the amount for the purpose of giving an incorrect statement to the public, by making the expenditure of public works less than what it actually was. Reference to the document itself, as I have said, will show it has never been interfered with, and that it is the Statement as laid on the table of the House. And, in reference to that, I desire to place before the Committee the fact that it is not a record such as is understood in reference to other records, returns, or papers ordered by the House. It is a Statement, which, for convenience' sake, and to save time, a Minister asks the House to take as his Statement instead of delivering it orally. In this way and with this object it is laid on the table. It is a new departure which has come into existence for the purpose of saving time; it is not a return or paper ordered by the House to be laid upon the table. It would take a couple of hours to deliver it, and, as I say, to save time the Minister lays it upon the table.

674. *Hon. Sir J. Hall.*] By leave?—By leave.

675. There is an order?—Of course; nothing can be laid on the table without it. But I wish to bring forward this: Suppose I had taken the course always followed previous to our coming into office, and have read my Public Works Statement, then it would have been in my possession and would have been as other Statements. There is positive proof of that. Then it would have been given to the public in the way this has been done. This Statement has been treated the same as other Statements of a similar nature, but which have been read to the House instead of being laid on the table of the House by leave—that is, that the departmental officers on discovering, as was discovered here, in Statements which had been read by Ministers, that there was an error, have corrected it. To prove this has been the case, I may say I was not aware myself there had been any correction, until the debate upon the Statement about a week after I had laid it on the table of the House.

676. *Hon. Sir J. Hall.*] That is, on the 5th October?—The 5th October. I did not then make any opening remarks, but simply moved that the House go into Committee of Supply. Upon this, the Hon. Mr. Mitchelson, an ex-Minister for Public Works, delivered a speech, in the course of which he alluded to the fact that, as compared with the Financial Statement, the public works expenditure, as stated in the concluding paragraph of the Statement itself, showed a discrepancy. On his making this statement I left my seat, and went to the Under-Secretary, Mr. Blow. I asked him if that was correct. I may say I turned up the Public Works Statement and looked at the first paragraph, where is to be seen the £491,000 odd expenditure, and the foot-note of £100,000, and at once the discrepancy was apparent. The Under-Secretary informed me that the amount placed in the Statement laid on the table of the House was the net, and that the gross amount was that stated by Mr. Mitchelson, £391,000—I give the round figures. I immediately said, "This must be corrected;" to which he replied, "I have already corrected it. Only a few