

Ritchie to Mr. Barron, about which Mr. Scobie Mackenzie makes mountains of fraud because it was not on the file, the same considerations apply. How does the existence of that telegram become known to the Committee? Through Mr. Ritchie himself. He volunteered it.

*Mr. Scobie Mackenzie*: No. I found it out first, and drew it from him. It would never have been known at all if I had not had an inkling of it.

*Dr. Fitchett*: That is not correct. He stated it quite voluntarily.

*Mr. Scobie Mackenzie*: Yes; after I discovered it.

*Dr. Fitchett*: There is nothing to show that you discovered it; indeed, how could you? Mr. Barron had himself forgotten it, and it was not on the file. It is manifest that if there had been anything to conceal about it Mr. Ritchie need not have disclosed it. Why should not Mr. Douglas wire to his nephew asking him to try and hurry up the money? And why should not Mr. Ritchie send the message on to Mr. Barron? What more natural, and what more innocent? And that the telegram was merely that, and nothing more, is shown by the fact that Mr. Barron does wire to Mr. Douglas in reply. That reply is on the file. The fact is that whenever, in the course of this inquiry, Mr. Scobie Mackenzie discovers that a document does not exist, or is mislaid, it straightway becomes of gigantic importance to him—not that there would be anything in it if produced, but simply because he knows it cannot be produced. I will now summarise the position of the Minister and the department. The evidence shows that the Minister had singularly little to do with this transaction. He first comes into connection with it when the petition is presented, and he sends the petition to the department in the ordinary way. Next he sends the Governor's warrant to inspect. The next thing is when Mr. Percy Smith waits on him with the recommendation of the Board at Dunedin. The Minister sends this to Cabinet, and from Cabinet to the Governor. Then comes the authority to make an offer to Mr. Douglas, and Mr. Douglas's reply asking that the difference be split. This request the Minister declines. Not much conspiracy about that, I suppose. That is absolutely all the Minister has had to do with this matter. As for the department, the evidence clearly shows that it has done nothing save what is usual and proper. Mr. Barron was acting within his authority in instructing the preliminary inspection, and, with the exception of the telegram to Mr. Douglas about the purchase-money, he did nothing else in the matter—absolutely nothing. I have no concern with Mr. Douglas, but it is equally clear that he did nothing save what he was justified in doing. He was anxious to sell—accepted a lower price by reason of the bank pressure than he otherwise would have done, and worried about the delay in payment, as well he might: that is all. My purpose has been to lay before the Committee every fact and every paper connected with the matter. That I have done; and I submit that not a breath rests on the integrity of either the Minister or the department, and that Mr. Scobie Mackenzie's hints and innuendoes have been proved absolutely reckless and baseless. One word more and I have done. It is to show his utter recklessness. He declared in Palmerston, and he repeated it here, that the Minister's power in the matter of these purchases is unlimited—he can override the Board and do anything. Sir, if he knows the Act, this is dishonest; if he does not, it is disgraceful. The Minister has less to do with a purchase than any single member of the Board. The Minister himself can do nothing. The Governor in Council—that is, the Cabinet—purchases “on the recommendation of the Board.” That means that the Board determines both the land to be bought and the price to be paid, and the Cabinet cannot vary it. The most it can do is to decline to buy at all. As for the Minister, he is merely a member of the Cabinet, having an equal voice with every other member. In suggesting, therefore, to the people of Palmerston the facilities for corruption that existed by reason of the unlimited power of the Minister to buy what he liked and at what price he liked, Mr. Scobie Mackenzie either shamefully distorted the law or was shamefully ignorant of it.