

54. *Mr. Scobie Mackenzie.*] I think, Mr. McKenzie, that in your speech in Palmerston, in answer to what you call the charges made against you, you said that Mr. John Ritchie had nothing whatever to do with the purchase and sale of Pomahaka?—Yes, I said so; so far as I know, of course.

55. It has been given in evidence before this Committee that the department in Dunedin was set in motion to inspect this land by Mr. Barron, at the suggestion of Mr. Ritchie. Was that with your knowledge?—No.

56. It has also been given in evidence that Mr. Barron did this without the authority of Mr. Percy Smith, his superior officer. Mr. Percy Smith is his superior officer, is he not?—Yes.

57. Mr. Percy Smith is a member of the Land for Settlements Purchase Commission. Was that the regular course of action for an officer of the department to take without your knowledge?—It is occasionally done in cases of this sort to get the preliminary information and bring it before me. If he was aware that such an offer was to be made he would, by a preliminary letter or action of some sort, cause inquiry to be made, in order to see whether it was worth while investigating the other conditions of the land or not. In land-purchasing you will find in many cases that we get preliminary inquiry made, to save going into the matter fully at considerable expense.

58. In your evidence you have stated that numberless applications to sell land are sent to you, but that you invariably hand them to Mr. Percy Smith?—Or to Mr. Barron; both of them are officers that have access to me, and by whom all documents would be brought to me—sometimes by one and sometimes by the other. It is quite possible, in some cases, I would hand to either of them a letter instructing him to make the necessary preliminary inquiry. The inquiry would be made by the department.

59. You did not do so in this case?—I do not know anything about it.

60. Is it usual for Mr. Barron to do that at the suggestion of an outsider in a matter of this importance?—I do not suppose it is a usual thing, but it is sometimes done.

61. Can you give me another instance?—I would require to have the papers here before me. It is quite possible that both of them would come in and say, "We have an offer from so-and-so; we have made inquiry, and find that the land is not suitable to purchase." The matter would then drop, and the owner would be informed that the land he offered was not suitable. That would end the matter. You will find there are a number of cases of that sort where that answer has been sent.

62. Now, this was on the 21st of August. The petition was presented on the 30th. Do you not think it was somewhat irregular or improper for the department to forestall you in this matter, seeing that you had to declare publicly that the petition was the first you heard of it?—I cannot see that there was anything irregular or improper in a responsible officer of the department making a preliminary inquiry.

63. Would you be able to tell the reason which induced Mr. Barron to set the department in motion in the way he did without the knowledge of his superior officers?—I suppose he felt it to be necessary to do so.

64. Was it Mr. Ritchie that induced him?—I would like to have Mr. Barron's explanation before answering that question. Mr. Barron is high up in the service, and he is continually advising the Minister—every day. I would not condemn his actions without knowing his reasons.

65. He has given it in evidence that he set the department in motion because Mr. Ritchie asked him.

*The Chairman:* That is hardly the true position, and the question is scarcely put in a fair way. The department was sending down a person to inspect the Conical Hills Estate. In a conversation between Messrs. Barron and Ritchie, the Conical Hills cropped up: as there was a person on his way to inspect the Conical Hills, Mr. Ritchie said that it might be as well if he would inspect the other also—to inspect both to save expense.

*Witness:* In that case, a preliminary inquiry as regards Pomahaka would do no harm, and as it would save expense he was justified in doing it.

66. *Mr. Scobie Mackenzie.*] Justified in doing it. How so?—Mr. Barron is a responsible officer of the department, and has a great deal to do with these things.

67. Is not Mr. Percy Smith a more responsible officer?—In one branch of the department he is.

68. Is not Mr. Percy Smith President of the Land Purchase Commission, and therefore more connected with these things than Mr. Barron?—Mr. Barron is Under-Secretary of the department. Mr. Percy Smith is Surveyor-General: he is a member of the Purchase Board by virtue of his office. Frequent communication goes through the hands of Mr. Barron to the Surveyor-General.

69. Then you say it is entirely regular that Mr. Barron should set the department in motion at the suggestion of Mr. Ritchie?—Yes.

70. Without consulting you or Mr. Percy Smith?—Not at Mr. Ritchie's suggestion, unless he had some other grounds for his action authorising him to go on. If he knew that this property was to be offered, he would be justified in instructing Mr. Adams, who was going to Conical Hills, to go to Pomahaka to look at the land and report.

71. Do you think that Mr. Ritchie was actuated by motives of public economy in making the suggestion?—I could not say. I could not tell you what his motive might be.

72. Mr. Adams was going to inspect this land. Does he travel free by railway?—That I cannot tell you.

73. Is he not an officer of your department?—I could not tell you whether he has a pass or whether he charges his railway fare to the department. Mr. Adams being an officer of the department in Dunedin we pay his expenses when he travels.

74. In your speech in Palmerston you said that you took action in this matter as the result of a petition sent in by the settlers. Do you remember that?—When I read your speech I had no recollection of the circumstances; but when I came to my own house at Shag Point I telegraphed