

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

WEDNESDAY, 28TH SEPTEMBER, 1904.

JAMES G. WILSON examined. (No. 1.)

1. *Mr. J. Allen* (Acting-Chairman).] What are you, Mr. Wilson?—I want to give evidence on behalf of the Farmers' Union.

2. Are you president of the union?—Yes.

3. Perhaps you will make a statement?—Yes, I will do so. I want to bring before you the importance of rural education for country children. I was unexpectedly called for to-day. I just had time to very hurriedly collect a few notes, but no doubt you will excuse that. I suppose I need not go so far as to talk about the necessity and importance of education for the future of the nation. We are all agreed upon this, and I suppose we are all agreed upon the necessity of stopping the influx of people from the country into the towns. I also expect that you are quite prepared to listen to any suggestion as to improvement that can be made with regard to education, or else there would be no necessity for the Committee. I would like to point out that there has been very little change since 1877—more than twenty-five years ago—and yet New Zealand has made enormous strides. I think it speaks very highly for the way in which the Hon. Mr. Bowen thought out the Education Act and the care he must have given to it that there should have been so little change. We have certainly improved education in relation to the universities. We have established a University in Auckland and another in Wellington since then, and I think every one must admit they are well managed—at any rate, the system of management is a good one. The Universities have a Senate and managing committee composed of men of high standing. We have high schools in the large centres; we have district high schools, and we have technical schools in some centres. This technical education is generally governed, however, not by any special body set up for the purpose, but by the District Education Boards, and the Education Boards having so much to do, it is obvious they have very little opportunity to attend to technical education. The members are very much scattered; but most of you gentlemen are members of Education Boards and know the position. It is, however, obvious that the Inspector really is the only man who has the opportunity of observing the work. There is a Director in connection with the schools. As far as technical education is concerned, in the primary schools the whole thing depends upon the teacher. Some teachers take up certain branches of technical education, while others leave the matter entirely alone. I believe that in some of the districts which are well served by a railway the teachers are able to get to a centre of population and are able to obtain some information on educational subjects and some assistance; but the teachers in the country schools, especially those in the back blocks, have absolutely no opportunity whatever of getting any additional education for themselves. There are some of them, however, who do enlarge their education; purely from the love of their calling they make an effort, take up certain subjects, and confer on their pupils considerable advantage thereby. But I should like to put it to you, and I do so with diffidence, that after all these years is it not possible that our system of management of education is behind the times? Is it not possible that the Boards of Education should have their time taken up in detail-work, and leave some other body altogether to have the work of looking after the educational subjects? Is it not possible that we should now adopt the system which has been adopted in nearly every country that is advanced in education—I mean the appointment of a Council of Education? I see a number of gentlemen here who are members of Education Boards, and they consequently know the difficulties the Boards have to contend with—the amount of time they have to spend upon the mere details of carrying out improvements to school buildings and mere routine. As a rule the Boards meet only once a month, and they have very little time to deal with educational subjects at all. If the Minister is an enthusiast, he may do something, but his time also is very fully occupied with other things. Especially is this so in the case of the Premier, who has a great deal to attend to. I believe that unless the Minister is pressed from below—that is to say, from the people themselves—he will prefer to leave things to run along as they are going without taking any active steps towards making any alteration. If such a Council as I suggest were set up—and, of course, it has been suggested many times before this—the Minister would be at the head, and would represent the Education Department, and he might have the advantage of having representatives from the Agricultural Department and from the Mines Department—because there is special necessity in the mining districts to educate children in mining subjects. Then, he ought to have some person representing the Health Department and the Veterinary Department. All these Departments ought to be represented on such a Council, because in modern education all these subjects should be dealt with in certain districts where they would more especially apply to the future of the children growing up in those districts. Then, as to the balance of the men on the Council, there would be such men as Sir Robert Stout: He is a man of great attainments himself; he has been a schoolmaster and a Minister of Education; he has great knowledge on the subject, and has done a very great deal for education in New Zealand. (I am just looking at the matter from a Wellington point of view for the moment; you gentlemen, no doubt, know of people who would occupy positions on the Council with advantage to the country.) Take Bishop Wallis, for instance. He was connected with education at Cambridge for a number of years, and has also a wide experience on the subject. Such men as these, and the Hon. Mr. Bowen, and others of that character would be of enormous assistance to New Zealand, if able on a Council to attend to the education side of our system. I think that