

and it was guessing calculation—that Mr. Macdonald had made £1,300 out of the transaction.

An Hon. MEMBER.—He has done pretty well.

Mr. FISHER said, Yes; and he had made about half out of the Government and the other half out of the City of Wellington, and as a member of the House, and as a member of the Wellington City Council, he (Mr. Fisher) made his protest against it on both sides. He did not think these transactions ought to be tolerated. In the first place, he could not admit the right of the Government to sell Crown land to any but adjoining owners, and then only by competition. Therefore section 117 of "The Land Act, 1892," had been transgressed. Apart from that point altogether, he said the Cabinet had been deluded into believing that it was doing a good thing for the City of Wellington, whereas it was doing a good thing neither for itself nor for the city, but for the third party only. He did not wish to labour the question unnecessarily. He had not had time to look at the correspondence, or he might have put the whole of it on record. It seemed to him that this was a case that necessitated very close and searching investigation indeed. There was another note here by the Valuer-General in connection with various plots of Crown lands in the City of Wellington, in which he said, "These I recommend should be disposed of at public auction. Regarding the balance, I wish to make the following suggestions: Pt. T.A. 488, Wellington Terrace, U.V. £652, has already been arranged for." Why were some of them to be put up to auction, while this one "was already arranged for"? They should have all gone up to auction. He understood it was sometimes the practice of the Department in certain cases to sell privately. If that was so, then it ought to be stopped. It was a wrong principle, and was against the terms of "The Land Act, 1892." He regretted very much he had not had time to look through the Ministerial file, or he should have had very much more information to lay before the House. He thought, at any rate, he had made out a sufficiently clear case to warrant a searching investigation into the Woodward Street transaction.

Mr. MASSEY (Leader of the Opposition) would just like to say that, although of course he knew absolutely nothing of the circumstances of this case, except what they had heard from the honourable gentleman who had just sat down, from what that honourable gentleman had stated a very extraordinary transaction had taken place. It seemed that a block of freehold land—freehold, remember—in the City of Wellington had been parted with without competition, and at about a quarter of its actual value, apparently without the Government or the Lands Department understanding what was taking place.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—Mr. Fisher said "half its value."

Mr. MASSEY said he understood the honourable gentleman to say it was parted with at £100 a perch, when it was worth £400 a perch. If that was the case, then the very best they could say was that there had been a criminal negligence not only on the part of the Lands Department, but also on the part of the Government. He thoroughly indorsed the opinion expressed by the honourable member for Wellington Central that this was a matter which demanded the most exhaustive inquiry. It must be thoroughly inquired into either by a Commission or by a Committee of the House; and if the transaction was legal, and everything was straightforward, very well, there was nothing more to be said—let it go; but if there had been any shady practices—if there had been anything crooked in connection with this transaction—it was the duty of Parliament to put it right, even if it required an Act of Parliament to do so.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD (Prime Minister) said he would just like to state in reference to this matter, which had been very fully commented upon by the member for Wellington Central, and commented upon by the leader of the Opposition, that he felt that this question ought to be referred to a Committee to deal with. So far as the Government was concerned, it courted the fullest inquiry, and he was perfectly certain it would be found that the Government had done nothing in this matter excepting what it believed to be right and honourable; and he also expressed the opinion that if anything was found to be wrong they should consider whether it could not still be put right. No one connected with this matter—neither the Mayor of Wellington nor the Hon. Mr. Macdonald, nor any one else on their behalf—had ever spoken to him about it, either before or since the transaction. He knew in connection with the matter what the position was regarding the representations to his colleague the Minister of Lands, who would presently make a statement to the House; but, so far as the Government were concerned, neither directly nor indirectly had they been a party to anything other than what they believed to be right in connection with this matter.

Mr. FISHER.—I did not say you did otherwise.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD said he was not going to attempt to prejudge or prejudice any of the parties concerned. As imputations, however, had been made concerning them, it was only fair that they should have the fullest opportunity of giving evidence before a Committee upon the various aspects of the matter, and also of dealing with the subject from the standpoint of the Municipal Corporation of Wellington, which was introduced into the matter, and of which the honourable member who spoke in the first instance was a member. He wanted to have the matter inquired into without delay, and he would therefore suggest that it be referred to the Lands Committee, which had been asked to sit to-morrow, and, upon the completion of taking evidence, then to report to the House.

Mr. BARBER (Newtown) desired to express his pleasure at the remarks that had fallen from the Right Hon. the Prime Minister. He thought the honourable gentleman had taken the right course, and a course that would give a great deal of satisfaction to a large number of citizens of Wellington. He was not going to enter into details with regard to this matter. It was quite sufficient to say that this question had been the subject of considerable outside conversation. There had been a good deal of comment with respect to the transaction, and in regard to the erection of the concrete wall referred to by the member for Wellington Central. He thought that no other course was open to the Government after the statement that had been made that after-