

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

WEDNESDAY, 8TH DECEMBER, 1909.

(No. 1.)

Hon. Mr. T. Mackenzie: Mr. Duncan and members of the Committee,—The gentlemen who are before you to-day, as you can gather from the petition which has just been read, are here to lay before you their views on the drainage scheme which was passed into law some time ago in connection with the Taieri. It is a matter in which there is keen interest in the district, and both sides will now have an opportunity of stating their case before the Committee in order that you may be able to arrive at some conclusion in connection with the matter, which has caused a very great deal of unrest and a great deal of litigation up to the present time. I will not delay you further, because they are here to give evidence, and it is upon that evidence and the reports that are to be submitted to you that you will base your decision, and not upon any remarks of mine. I therefore desire to introduce to you the various members of the Taieri Drainage Board, settlers from East and West Taieri, and the officers in connection with the Department from the South as well.

WILLIAM ALLEN examined. (No. 2.)

The Chairman: What are you?

Witness: A solicitor; but I am not appearing here in a professional capacity. I signed the petition on behalf of the Deacons' Court of the East Taieri Presbyterian Church. I am clerk to that body, and in that way I become a ratepayer, so that, although I appeared in a legal capacity for some of the petitioners in other proceedings, I am a petitioner. I was born in the district, and I have lived in it ever since, so I claim to have a personal knowledge of the matters about which I propose to speak. It may perhaps shorten the proceedings if the Committee would look at a sketch-plan of the district, and get an idea of the lie of the plain. Generally speaking, the Taieri Plain falls from the north-east to the south-west—it has a natural fall in that direction. We might speak of it as from east to west, because the lands on the eastern side of the river will be referred to as East Taieri, and those on the west or lower part of the plain as West Taieri. The Taieri River, which rises in Central Otago and is fed by a number of mountains, enters the plain at Outram, and flows across the plain, so that East Taieri, which we represent to-day, and which we ask to have cut out of the Taieri Drainage District, is on one side of the Taieri River—the upper side—and West Taieri is on the lower side. At one time there were on the West Taieri side of the river four Drainage Boards and two River Boards, and there was always trouble amongst those bodies. On the East Taieri side there was no drainage district; the people there did not seem to want one, and they got along all right without one. With regard to East Taieri there is only a small area of land, comparatively speaking, subject to flood—a small area of swamp land. By far the larger area in East Taieri is high and dry, some of the land included in the drainage district being 100 ft. above the level of the river. Therefore by far the greater portion of this land needs no drainage. Again, it is not subject to flood, so that anything the Drainage Board may do will not make its position any better than it is to-day. A Commission was appointed some time ago—Mr. Cruickshank's Commission—to inquire into matters, and they called evidence; but the evidence which they took was mainly the evidence of persons who wanted drainage, and who were interested in getting a Board of some sort. The people who occupied land higher up the plain in East Taieri did not suppose for one moment that they would be included in the drainage district, because they did not want any drainage, and they did not think it necessary to give any evidence. Notwithstanding the fact that only some fifty-odd witnesses gave evidence, most of whom probably were asking for drainage or expected to get it, the Commissioners in their report say, "From among the fifty-five witnesses whom we examined there was hardly one who did not favour the proposal to unite all the four drainage districts on the west side of the Taieri River into one district, although they were divided in opinion as to the necessity for including the two River Boards in such district. Similarly, there was little or no dissension to a proposal to create one drainage district for the east side of the river; but the great bulk of the witnesses (though not all) opposed making one United Board for both sides of the river." Later on they say, "As already mentioned, we found considerable hostility on the part of the settlers to the suggestion of combining the eastern and western districts in one Board." In spite of the fact that the evidence on which they founded their report was against the proposal, they deliberately recommended that one Board should be set up to include both sides of the river. The evidence was entirely against that. When that report went in, the settlers on the high and dry lands at once took the matter in hand, with the result that they got up a petition, which was signed by over two hundred people on the eastern side of the river, objecting to being included in the drainage district. That petition was sent to Parliament, and the then Minister of Lands, who was in the Taieri, promised the objectors that they would have an opportunity of being heard. Unfortunately, owing to the pressure of business at the end of the session the Taieri Land Drainage Act was passed, and no opportunity was given the objectors of being heard. We do not blame the Minister for that, because it is quite possible it was difficult to give us an opportunity, but I only mention the fact to prove that we did not have an opportunity of protesting against the Bill. Then, as I have said, the Taieri Land Drainage Act was passed on the lines of the report of the Commissioners, creating the Taieri Drainage