

SESSION II.
1912.
NEW ZEALAND.

ELECTORAL CENSUS

(REPORT ON THE) CARRIED OUT IN 1911 IN CONNECTION WITH THE COMPILATION AND
PURGING OF THE ROLLS.

Laid on the Table by Leave of the House.

The Hon. the Minister in Charge of Electoral Department.

I HAVE the honour to report upon the electoral census which was carried out in August and September of last year for the purpose of compiling and purging the rolls.

I desire to preface my report by pointing out that between the general elections of 1908 and 1911 there was evidence of considerable movement in population in various parts of the country, in consequence of which the rolls, by the middle of 1911, were known by Registrars to be in an exceedingly imperfect condition.

In 1910 the Postal Department advised that the number of alterations in addresses recorded at each of the four centres—viz., Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin—was upwards of 1,400 per month, and, as there had been during the triennial period a renaming of many of the streets and a renumbering of the houses in these centres, it became very evident that the rolls required considerable correction, and it was considered that only by a complete and effective method of enumeration could this be satisfactorily done.

An electoral census was therefore carried out in terms of section 6 of the Legislature Amendment Act, 1910, on the lines of the methods adopted in Victoria and Western Australia, for the purpose of—(a) Correcting the existing rolls; (b) obtaining fresh enrolments; (c) disclosing non-residence, to enable the Registrar to take the usual steps to purge from the roll the names of all those who had left the district since the previous compilation.

In twenty-two city and adjoining electorates the census was taken by means of a householder's schedule, which was left at every household in the electorate by an enrolment officer, and afterwards collected. The names on these schedules were carefully compared with the existing roll, and all names on the roll which did not appear on the schedules were objected to by registered letter on the grounds that the electors had apparently left the district. *As a safeguard, however, against possible wrongful removal, a form of appeal, with free addressed envelope for reply, was enclosed with the objection notice to the elector, so that should he still be residing within the electorate, he could notify the Registrar accordingly and have his name retained upon the roll.*

In country electorates the householder's schedule was not used, but a house-to-house canvass by enrolment officers was carried out, and where, in consequence of the reports of these officers, as well as of the Postmasters and police, the Registrar had good reason to believe that certain electors had ceased to reside in the electorate, the retention of their names upon the roll was objected to by registered letter in the manner already referred to in the previous paragraph.

That the rolls were sadly in need of a thorough revision was completely borne out by the electoral census.

Altogether there were upwards of 169,000 fresh enrolments effected, 118,000 corrections in addresses, &c., obtained, and over 75,000 cases of non-residence in the various districts disclosed. In many instances there were over 4,000 fresh enrolments effected and upwards of 3,000 cases of non-residence disclosed, as well as over 4,000 alterations in addresses recorded in a single electorate.

In the city electorates, as already mentioned, notices of objection were posted by registered letter to all those electors who were not found to be included in the householders' schedules, and in all cases, either in city or country electorates, where no appeal was made against the Registrars' proposal to remove, or where the postal officers were unable to trace the elector, it was intended to remove such names from the roll in accordance with the usual statutory procedure for purging the roll. In a few cases, however, it appears that, through some inadvertence on the part of collectors or clerks, notices of objection were posted to electors who were *bona fide* residents of the district. They naturally resented being informed by the Registrar, per notice, that their names were to be removed on the grounds of non-residence; but instead of advising him of their *bona fides* by means of the form of appeal and specially addressed envelope enclosed with their notice, some of them wrote to the Press, or complained to members of Parliament, with the unfortunate result that a short amending Act was passed at the end of the session of 1911 providing that objections to the retention of names upon the roll were not to be made on the grounds of the electoral census, and that all names already removed on these grounds were to be restored to the roll forthwith. The result was that there were restored to, or allowed to remain on, the rolls over 41,000 names, practically all of which, there can be no doubt, had no right to remain thereon, and thus the usefulness of the census, so far as the cleansing of the rolls was concerned, was completely stultified.

Many Registrars protested strongly against having to restore hundreds of names to the roll which they were quite satisfied had no right to be there, and in some instances, to my subsequent knowledge, the new amendment Act was quietly ignored and the purging of the roll carried out in accordance with the original plan.

Shortly after the election I obtained from Registrars a return of the results of the electoral census, and a report as to its general utility in effecting fresh enrolments, correcting addresses, &c., on the roll, and disclosing non-residence in the electorate. The reports received disclose a strong preponderance of opinion that the census was a very effective instrument in obtaining fresh enrolments and amending the existing roll, and the returns accompanying these reports demonstrate that if it had been carried out as originally intended the rolls would have been purged of a considerable number of names which subsequent events strongly indicated had no right to be thereon.

Knowing that the taking of the census entailed considerable work on the part of Registrars, I was prepared to find a lukewarm attitude towards it from some Registrars whose ordinary duties leave them but little time to attend to electoral work; but with few exceptions the reports confirm the soundness and practicability of the whole scheme as originally outlined by the Department.

The following are some extracts from reports of Registrars—both for city and country electorates—in different parts of the Dominion:—

Waitemata.—"Am quite satisfied that my clean and up-to-date roll could not have been obtained without the electoral census. . . . I restored to the roll, in terms of section 2 of the Legislature Amendment Act of 1911, 253 names which I would have been quite justified in keeping off, as not one of the number attempted to vote."

Auckland West.—"I do not consider there was any approach to a 'census muddle' in Auckland; but I must say I think it was a dangerous step to stop the purging under the census. I hope you will not be discouraged, but will again adopt the census, and carry it out to the bitter conclusion. Registrars have now gained valuable experience and knowledge, and I have no fear but that the next census will see your ideal realized."

Parnell.—"The electoral census disclosed the fact that a great number of names were on the roll which should be removed, and the purging which would have followed in accordance with the original intention would have resulted in a much cleaner roll."

Bay of Plenty.—"The electoral census was certainly of distinct service in disclosing non-residence and enabling me to purge the roll. If the object is to ensure as complete a roll as possible, and particularly as clean a roll as possible, the electoral census, if carefully carried out, is the most effective procedure that we have yet had."

Gisborne.—"Generally speaking, I am of opinion that the electoral census was very successful, and am confident that, from what I can see, it is the only true way of keeping the roll near perfection in altering addresses, enrolling, and removing names. I think it only right that I should place on record the position as to why 2,238 persons appear to have not voted at the election. Had I been allowed to remove those electors to whom I sent notices of objection in accordance with the Act and your instructions, 1,480 names would have come off before the printing of the roll. I actually hold in my office 1,480 notices returned through the Dead Letter Office, and which I was prevented from dealing with on account of a new law passed that they were to remain on the roll."

Pahiatua.—"I found the electoral census a great means of effecting fresh enrolments and disclosing non-residence. As a means of enabling me to assure myself of the right of those enrolled to have their names retained upon the roll, as required by section 50 of the Act, the census was all that could be desired. Had the provisions of the Act been allowed to be carried out in their entirety, the roll would have been cleaner than it had been for years."

Masterton.—"I have no hesitation whatever in saying that the census worked well for effecting new enrolments and disclosing non-residence in the district. By means of it I was enabled to add 2,056 names to the roll, and to remove nearly 200 who had left the district. Many said that the roll for the last election was the best that the district had ever had. I do not attribute that state of things to anything that I did, but to the taking of the electoral census."

Wairarapa.—"My roll was never so clean and perfect as for the 1911 election. . . . There is no way of finding out names which should be removed from the roll unless an electoral census is taken."

Stratford.—"The census was very effective in disclosing non-residence in the district, and it enabled me to correct the addresses of nearly 3,000 electors whose names were on the roll. In carrying out the requirements of section 50 of the Act (Registrar to assure himself of the right of those enrolled to have their names retained upon the roll), the census was a very great assistance; without it, Registrars would have had an almost impossible task."

Wellington East.—"In my opinion it [the electoral census] is the only way an absolutely clean roll can be obtained."

Wellington South.—"The electoral census disclosed the necessity for making 2,570 alterations in address in this electorate. Its effectiveness in disclosing non-residence was most certain. . . . I am strongly of the opinion that it would have been quite safe to have removed all those names that were restored by section 2 of the Amendment Act of 1911."

Motueka.—"Its effectiveness in disclosing non-residence in the district was, I consider, very satisfactory, as prior to the census being taken it was extremely difficult for a Registrar of Electors to get the necessary documentary evidence to remove names which he was sure should be erased from the roll."

Riccarton.—"Let me say that I consider the taking of the census is an excellent proposal. I am sure that in no other way could such splendid results have been achieved. As showing the good work done in this electorate, I will quote the following facts: 1,157 names were struck off the roll as a result of the census; of these, 653 were confirmed afterwards by transfers, deaths, &c., leaving 504. I made searching inquiries in respect to these names, and confirmed 307 of them as being non-resident, the balance, 197, being allowed to remain on the roll. Of this number only 6 voted at the election."

Christchurch South.—"My conclusion of the whole matter is that the electoral census enabled me to make a clean roll."

Lyttelton.—"No other system than the census would enable Registrars to comply with section 50 of the Act, requiring them to assure themselves of the right of those enrolled to have their names retained upon the roll. The system has worked satisfactorily, and without some such system I could not undertake to prepare a roll that would be either complete or clean."

Temuka.—"The electoral census was the means of enrolling 1,500 new electors and of disclosing that 647 former electors had left the district. Had the purging of the roll as a result of the census been allowed to go on, I am of opinion that it would have been satisfactory, and the roll as clean as it could possibly have been made."

Waitaki.—"As a means of enrolling electors and disclosing non-residence and alterations in addresses on the roll, the census was entirely satisfactory. I am of opinion that the roll would have been better had the Amendment Act of last session not been passed; then the names of all persons objected to who had not replied to the notices would have been removed, and any mistakes could have been rectified on the supplementary roll. I was complimented on the correctness of the last roll, and this result was only achieved by means of the census."

Dunedin North.—"The effectiveness of the electoral census in disclosing non-residence was invaluable, and gave me the opportunity of exercising the provisions of section 50 of the Legislature Act, 1908. Hitherto, we have not been able to carry out this provision with safety. . . . Had we not been stopped in our work of purging, the result would have been practically a clean roll."

Dunedin West.—"The electoral census was distinctly effective in disclosing non-residence, and gave me definite information as to the whereabouts of three-fourths of the electors on the roll. I actually made 3,400 alterations in address by means of the census."

Dunedin Central.—"The census method is an efficient and effectual way of purging the roll. I have nothing but unqualified approval to express of the system."

Bruce.—"Its effectiveness in disclosing non-residence appears to me to be the most useful part of the census. I am unaware of any other satisfactory means of purging the roll before an election and making the numerous minor alterations necessary to identify electors."

Invercargill.—"The census is certainly the best method yet provided of advising the Registrar of absentees from the district."

The electoral census undoubtedly gave Registrars an opportunity such as they never had before for compiling complete and clean rolls, and I have no hesitation in stating that, had their work not been interfered with, we would have had as nearly perfect rolls as it is humanly possible to get.

However, with a total enrolment for the Dominion of 590,042 electors, there were 97,130 non-voters, and it is highly probable that a substantial number of these were "restored" names due to the Amendment Act of 1911. In Wellington North and Wellington Central, for instance, there were 2,754 and 2,753 non-voters respectively, which is a strong indication of the overloaded condition of these rolls, especially when we consider that in Wellington Central, where there was a second ballot, the non-voters referred to did not show up at either ballot. As the contests in these electorates occasioned considerable interest on the part of the electors, it can only be concluded that the large percentage of non-voters was almost entirely due to overloaded rolls.

In Auckland Central there were only twenty short of 3,000 non-voters; and even in Parnell, where the contest was exceedingly keen, and a second ballot was held, the number of non-voters was 1,415.

Although the average percentage of voting for the Dominion was 83·54 per cent. of those on the roll (many electorates obtained over 90 per cent.), the percentage of voting in Auckland Central, Wellington North, and Wellington Central was only 72·18, 74·15, and 74·46 respectively.

Nevertheless, the percentage of voters to those on the roll for the Dominion was higher than at any previous election, and considerably higher than was attained in any of the Australian States; but I am strongly of opinion that but for the indiscriminate restoration of over 41,000 names to the roll the average percentage of voting would have been 4 or 5 per cent. higher.

The reports of Registrars bear unmistakable testimony to the general utility and success of the electoral census as a means of compiling and amending the rolls.

Section 50 of the Legislature Act, 1908, provides that "*it shall be the duty of the Registrar . . . to assure himself of the right of every person enrolled to have his name retained on the roll*"; and I submit that a Registrar of Electors is not carrying out this provision of the statute unless he takes definite and active steps to thus assure himself that all those on his roll are entitled to remain thereon, and that this can only be done by some systematic method of inquiry or enumeration. In the city electorates especially, where there is a continual movement of population, the rolls become imperfect to the extent, probably, of 40 or 50 per cent. of the names thereon during the triennial interval; and, although the statute provides facilities for electors to object to the retention of names upon the roll on the grounds of non-residence, experience has shown that the parties interested in the condition of the rolls confine their attentions more to the placing of names on the roll than to inquiries as to the right of those already appearing on the roll to remain thereon.

The Department has always been faced with the difficulty of keeping the rolls in a reasonably clean condition, as overloaded rolls are a standing invitation to irregularities in connection with elections, and a menace to clean and proper polling. It was in the interests, therefore, of a good election conducted with clean rolls that the electoral census of 1911 was carried out, and, although its general results were most satisfactory, and, to my mind, fully justified the expenditure, much greater benefit might have been obtained had the fullest advantage been taken of the information obtained for the purposes of roll-purging, as originally proposed by the Department.

The cost of the electoral census was £7,296. At a later date I intend to submit proposals for the compilation and purging of the rolls by means of an enumeration carried out largely with the assistance and co-operation of the Police and Postal Departments at a comparatively small cost to the country. In Australia, Registrars avail themselves largely of the assistance of the police in connection with the compilation and purging of the rolls.

F. W. MANSFIELD,
Chief Electoral Officer.

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