

## MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

THURSDAY, 14TH AUGUST, 1913.

JOHN STRAUCHON examined. (No. 1.)

1. *Mr. Guthrie* (Acting-Chairman).] What are you?—Under-Secretary for Crown Lands.

2. The question before the Committee is the matter relating to the sale of a small area of land in the Cheviot District?—Yes.

3. The Committee would like to have any information you can give on the matter?—I have not seen the file for a very long time. [File produced to witness.] It is a small area of about  $7\frac{1}{4}$  acres, and was originally  $8\frac{1}{2}$  acres. There is a road through it.

4. *Hon. Mr. Massey*.] We want you to give us as much information as you possibly can, and particularly as to what led up to the present position?—Well, it was sent up, so far as I recollect, by the Land Board to be disposed of on the renewable-lease system.

5. It would be just as well to be perfectly candid and know where we are. The suggestion is that influence was brought to bear on the Minister of Lands in favour of somebody who desired to obtain the section, and that he influenced the Department in favour of offering the land by auction?—I can answer that straight out that to my knowledge I do not think the Minister knew anything about it. The Minister did not bring it under my notice—it was simply done in the course of my departmental duty. The Minister never spoke to me about it till long after this trouble arose, nor did I speak to him about it. That is the position so far as I remember.

6. Do you remember some months ago, Mr. Strauchon, a recommendation coming to the Department from the Commissioner of Crown Lands at Christchurch or the Land Board suggesting that it should be disposed of by way of renewable lease?—I do.

7. And do you remember the correspondence on the point in answer to your suggestion to the effect that it would be very much better, considering the size of the land and the number of applicants therefore, to dispose of it by public auction?—That was my suggestion. I am perfectly clear about that and about the general features, but as to the details I have not seen the papers for a long time.

8. Is it usual to dispose of these small pieces of land by public auction?—Yes, we have frequently done it in regard to these little bits.

9. Can you remember that parts of Cheviot have already been disposed of in the same way years ago?—I do not know that, but I know that the small sections adjoining that are freehold. I have a plan here showing the tenure. [Plan produced and explained.] The adjoining small section is lease in perpetuity and the rest is freehold.

10. Have you any recollection of this letter, written over the signature of F. T. O'Neill, Assistant Under-Secretary, addressed to the Commissioner of Crown Lands at Christchurch, dated 29th January, 1913: "Referring to your memo. of the 17th instant, No. 3713, I have to state that it is not considered advisable to offer such a small section as the above on renewable lease. If it is to be disposed of it should be sold for cash. The better plan would be to treat it as a reserve and offer it for lease for a term of seven or ten years"?—Yes, I recollect that.

11. That was forwarded from your Department?—Yes, to the Commissioner in Christchurch.

12. Then, do you remember this letter being forwarded to me, dated 26th February, 1913: "Memo. for the Hon. Minister of Lands.—Section 20, Block IX, Cheviot Survey District, 8 acres 2 roods 12 poles: The Canterbury Land Board has recommended that the above section be offered for selection on renewable lease." In making the recommendation the Board has apparently been influenced by the fact that three local people applied for the land on that tenure. The section is not large enough to maintain a settler, who under renewable lease would be required to reside on the holding. Recommended therefore that you approve of the land being offered for sale by public auction for cash, and not of its being opened for selection on renewable lease"?—Yes, that is correct.

13. Prior to your writing that letter to me did I at any time approach you with regard to this section or express any opinion thereon?—None whatever. As I have said, I had no communication with you at all prior to this being recommended to you.

14. Did we have any conversation on the subject?—No, we had no conversation at all on the subject until after this question arose. I am perfectly satisfied on that point.

15. Then, again, do you recollect this letter written by yourself to me on the 2nd June, 1913: "Referring to the attached letter from Mr. G. W. Forbes, M.P., I have to inform you that the above area has been withheld from sale hitherto on account of its containing limestone deposits. It has not, however, been formerly reserved, and may therefore be disposed of under Part IX of the Land Act, 1908, which deals with the Cheviot Estate. There is a permanent reserve of 3 acres of limestone land adjoining Section 20, which is considered by the Crown Lands Ranger to be ample for any requirements for lime in that part of the district. The section consists of land of special value and will be keenly competed for. I have therefore to recommend that it be sold for cash by public auction instead of on renewable lease as suggested by the Canterbury Land Board, and that Mr. Forbes be informed accordingly"?—Yes, that is my letter.

16. Did I send along Mr. Forbes's letter to you for your remarks thereon [letter handed to witness]?—Yes, that letter came to my office; there is a minute on it