

JOHN KERSHAW examined. (No. 3.)

1. *The Chairman.*] What are you?—I am secretary of the New Zealand Branch of the Manchester Unity of Odd Fellows, and parliamentary agent for that society.

2. Do you wish to make a statement to the Committee?—Yes. I wish to say that I have very little to add in regard to the matter before the Committee. I gave very lengthy evidence before a parliamentary Committee some two years ago, which is now in print in the Journals of the House, and I should only have to traverse the ground which Mr. Darlow and Mr. McLeod have so ably gone over; but I do wish to emphasize the particular part referred to as to the very keen competition with which we are faced in regard to the operations of the National Provident Fund. It has been shown that our membership has not increased in the same ratio as it did previous to the Fund being established, and, as has already been pointed out here to-day, we are in a great measure dependent for our success on the young members that we hope to get into our ranks. It will probably be patent to those who are intimate with the workings of friendly societies that many years ago the tables of contributions that were fixed were not fixed so carefully as they are to-day. Consequently a large number of members entered the societies at a rate of contribution which they would not be permitted to do to-day. The societies have still got those members in their ranks, and we know very well that the contributions they have paid and the contributions they are now paying are not at all adequate in comparison with the rate of benefits which they are entitled to. Consequently we have had to depend in recent years on admitting young lives, young members, at what is considered to be an adequate rate of contribution, and so we have been able to maintain a fairly high standard in regard to the finances of these societies: that is, with careful administration, as has already been set out by the officers of the friendly societies—carefully watching over the working and the investment of funds as they come to hand has enabled us to keep in a fair position. Consequently we view with alarm the inroad that has been made in the field of operations in which we have hitherto worked—that is, amongst the younger population of this Dominion. At the early outset of the National Provident Fund it has been shown to you to-day the progress was very slight, but it has also been set out how the operations of the Fund were extended by lecturers and canvassers, and then how the Fund increased. It was specially remarked that this year—the year referred to—the Fund had made remarkable progress by reason of the large number of young lives that had entered—young members that had joined the Fund. Now, that was the very point that was striking at us, and we realized that we were face to face with a very difficult problem. I would like to say to-day, and to emphasize it, that personally speaking—and I may speak for a large number of members seeing that we have been engaged in advocating thrift and self-dependence for so many years—it is not at all likely that we are of so selfish a nature as to say that the State shall not operate in this field, or shall not advocate a thrift movement, such as the National Provident Fund evidently is. In a certain direction it has been set out that we have an organization which is far more capable of furthering the practice of thrift and giving greater and more satisfactory benefits than can be done through the State. It has been mentioned that the national scheme in England has ultimately come into the hands of the friendly societies. It was there realized that the work could be done better through the societies than through the State, and the Manchester Unity along with other societies took over those who were paying through the Post Office and in other ways. Now, they have a large number of members—the exact number I cannot give you: these are all paying through the friendly societies. Mr. Poole to-day made a suggestion of a movement which, if it is brought into operation, would be far and away ahead of the national scheme in England. I believe that it could be worked in such a way that we could greatly benefit in this Dominion. A great factor in connection with that scheme would be that our fraternal movement and spirit would permeate right through the whole organization. Mr. Darlow said only a little while ago that there are a great many men who devote their leisure and a great deal of their life to the advocacy of friendly societies, and do what they can for the inculcation of thrift, and these men by reason of the positions which they have held in friendly societies have graduated through our districts and lodges, and have risen into different positions, municipal and otherwise, and have become a power for good in the Dominion both in municipal life and in parliamentary life. And I think, looking at it from that point of view, we ought to be very careful not to do anything that would be likely to hinder the work of friendly societies. And I am satisfied that there can be some scheme devised whereby the friendly societies can still proceed with their beneficent work, in order that those who have hitherto made no provision in the way of thrift, or for old age, should be brought within our ranks. I think it has been patent to you to-day by the figures Mr. McLeod has given you that in our operations we can work more successfully and more economically, and we can give better benefits than the National Provident Fund, which only provides the principal benefit when a person is sixty years of age; but we admit members, and they get the benefits almost immediately after their initiation. In the Manchester Unity the funeral benefit is available if the member dies the day after his initiation, so that it is most important that nothing should be done to hinder the progress of these societies. As I have already pointed out, we are faced with the responsibility of these older members who have been with us for so many years, and if there could be brought about some scheme of combination of the National Provident Fund with the friendly societies it would relieve us in another direction, which I will explain. Those who are familiar with friendly societies know that we have to pay benefits which were not intended when the member was initiated. Before receiving benefits they are supposed to suffer from some specific sickness, but it is well known that the sick-benefit is paid by reason of old age in many cases. The doctor gives a certificate that they are not able to do any work, but they are not really sick; still the lodges pay these benefits. Now, if there was some scheme whereby we could work in conjunction with the State we should be relieved in some measure of that liability, because these members would be at once drafted from the