

municipal authorities supplied the Borough Council of Taumarunui with fish during last autumn, and, as the latter authority sold the fish to the general public immediately on its arrival and without adding any other cost but expenses of transit, the consumers were able to purchase fresh fish at an average of 3d. per pound, and smoked fish at 4d. per pound. Unfortunately, owing to bad weather conditions at Auckland, the supply was not maintainable for a very long period, but it is expected that with good weather conditions the scheme will be gone on with, and the Board hopes to effect similar arrangements in towns adjacent to the railway-line in the Auckland Province.

The inquiries of the Board regarding the industry generally are not yet completed. The Auckland enterprises are undoubtedly run on proper business lines, but it must be remembered that Auckland is favoured by apparently inexhaustible supplies of fish procurable within weather-protected waters and within easy steaming distance. The provision of cheap fish to the consumers of New Zealand generally is dependent upon a large expenditure of capital on purchase of suitable equipment—trawlers, cool storage, insulated transport—and during the war period it is hopeless to expect that the necessary capital to provide this equipment can be secured.

PETROL AND KEROSENE.

Since the Board's report dated 11th July, 1916, was laid on the table of the House there have been slight reductions in the prices of benzine and kerosene. The prices as at July, 1916, and 31st March, 1917, at Wellington were as follows:—

				July, 1916.	March, 1917.
				s. d.	s. d.
Benzine—Wholesale	...	...	...	19 4	18 10
Retail	...	...	...	19 8	19 2
To consumer	...	...	...	20 8	21 2
Kerosene—Wholesale	...	...	...	11 7	11 3
Retail	...	...	...	12 4	12 0
To consumer	...	...	...	12 10	12 6

Variations in these prices (generally from 6d. to 1s. per case higher) in other parts of the Dominion are due to transportation charges.

In accordance with an undertaking given by the trading companies concerned, the Board has been kept fully cognizant of all conditions affecting the price and supply of those commodities. Changes in price since the war started have been fully accounted for by the many increases in the cost of supplies—viz., casing, tinplate, refining charges, marine insurance, freight, &c. We repeat the conclusion made in the main report that after careful inquiry the Board cannot find that any ring or combination is in existence in New Zealand to control the prices of petrol and kerosene; that prices are decided in open competition, and do not appear to be unreasonable.

SYNOPSIS OF WORK OF BOARD.

We have dealt with the foregoing commodities at length on account of their importance (with the exception of fish and petrol) in the household expenditure. The Board's inquiries into fish and petrol were undertaken under a commission from His Excellency the Governor-General. A large proportion of the time of the Board was taken up in investigating complaints that prices of other main commodities were unreasonably high. During these investigations the Board has held 124 sittings and examined 432 witnesses. Thirty-seven complaints were received from each of the main centres, and 101 from the secondary and smaller towns. These complaints were often general in their terms as to the increased cost of living, but the majority were specific and related to prices of bread (thirty-seven complaints), butter (twenty-two), milk, coal (nineteen each), meat (eighteen). A less number of complaints was received respecting rents and prices of fish, flour, clothing, boots, bacon, and general grocery supplies.

Valuable evidence was freely tendered by all the witnesses who appeared before the Board, and in no case did there appear to be any withholding of information likely to assist the Board.

The Board at the outset discussed the advisability of admitting the public and Press to its proceedings, and after careful consideration decided that its inquiries should be conducted in *camera*, the reason being that when the Board had to adjudicate on the reasonableness of profits and prices the question necessarily involved consideration of the private business affairs of individuals. The results have justified the decision arrived at, as the Board has obtained evidence of a highly confidential nature from the business community which would not have been given had the inquiries been held in public.

As separate reports have not been prepared dealing with each complaint, we append herewith for your information a complete summary of the work during the period under review.

I. INVESTIGATION OF COMPLAINTS ALLEGING INFRINGEMENT OF THE COMMERCIAL TRUSTS ACT, 1910.

(1.) *Re Coal*.—Complaint by Neil Cook against Nightcaps Coal Company, Invercargill. Complaint was fully investigated in public. *Result*: The facts were determined and a legal point was submitted to the Solicitor-General for advice.

(2.) *Re Coal*.—Complaint by Neil Cook against the Wairio Coal Company, Invercargill. Complaint was fully investigated in public, and facts showed that no breach had been committed. Report already in your hands.

(3.) *Re Kerosene*.—Complaint of Messrs. Fairbairn, Wright, and Co. that the agency agreement established by the Vacuum Oil Company Proprietary (Limited) to alter its method of distribution of kerosene and distribute this article through a limited number of agents was in contravention of the above Act. *Result*: The agency agreement and complainant's letter were submitted to the Solicitor-General, who advised that the papers disclosed no evidence of any breach of the Act.