

## C. TODD, Otago Expansion League, examined.

We feel in Otago that our land is not producing anything like what it should produce. The rabbits came in forty years ago. The country was open country, and was taken up in large blocks. When the rabbits came in it was found that the few settlers could not cope with it, and the settlers have been unsuccessful in coping with it ever since. The Expansion League met the local bodies around Dunedin and asked that a Royal Commission should be set up fifteen months ago; the Lands Committee of the House recommended that a Commission should be set up, but Cabinet did not fall in with the view expressed by that Committee. We saw Mr. Massey in Dunedin a little later, and he promised, if the matter were brought up in the past session, that it would be favourably considered by Cabinet. It was again brought up, and the Committee again brought up a favourable recommendation, but so far we have not heard anything further in regard to the question. We met Mr. Guthrie the other evening—a large deputation brought the matter up, and he thought it might be impossible to have a Commission set up before the general election. That means having to go all over the work again. If the Committee can assist us to get the Commission set up to go into the whole question of land-tenures, the depletion and deterioration of the land in Central Otago, and the best steps to take in regard to rabbits, and if the Commission is given a wide scope to take all those matters up, it will meet with approval here. I took out a return of the year just before the war—the year in which exports were not interfered with by lack of shipping. I found that nine million rabbit-skins and frozen rabbits were exported from this country in that year. It is well known that from six to nine rabbits eat as much grass as one sheep, so that nine million rabbits eat as much grass as a million sheep. Otago is losing because of the rabbits half a million a year. That is one of the subjects we must look into. If you could get this Commission going before next election it would be a good thing, because we do not know where we will be by then. 69½ per cent. of this land is under lease, and the capital value of the land is only 4s. 4d. per acre. I think that is a ridiculous amount. I think if that land were properly held and attended to it would run two million more sheep, and the land would be doubled and trebled in value. 69½ per cent. of the land is held under lease, and 30½ per cent. is freehold or leasehold with right of purchase. In the North Island there is only 8½ per cent. of what we call short, bad leaseholds, and 90 per cent. freeholds, 1½ per cent. being held on longer-lease terms. Whether that fact has any bearing on the subject I leave to the Committee to decide. One of the remedies to get rid of the rabbits is the use of rabbit-netting, each owner dealing with the rabbits on his own land. I think rabbit-netting should be given to the settlers at cost price. Boundary-fences should be compulsorily rabbit-proof. A factory might perhaps be set up to provide the netting as cheaply as possible, and each farmer should be compelled to get rid of the rabbits on his own holding. If this were done it would mean increased settlement and prosperity to the country.

*To Mr. Hornsby:* The importance of afforestation has been impressed upon the Government. We will be only too glad to supply the Committee with all the information possible in regard to this matter. I will see that the information is supplied to you.

*To Mr. Forbes:* The supply of wire netting by the Government at a low cost is what we recommend; I think it would be an indirect gain to the country. A very large number of men are engaged in trapping in Central Otago. The suggestion has been made that trapping should be stopped. In some places the owners trap and poison as well. It is not in the interest of the trapper to kill the last rabbit.

## J. B. WATERS, Chairman, Dunedin Chamber of Commerce, examined.

I have been asked to attend and support the requests which have been made by Mr. Todd, president of the Otago Expansion League, in regard to the necessity—the absolute necessity, I would like to say—of an improvement being made in the tenure of the land in Central Otago. The Dunedin Chamber of Commerce has had this question before it time and again, and although we are a mercantile body and have more to do with the commerce side, still we very heartily support the Otago Expansion League in their representations. It is a well-known fact that the productivity of our land is steadily decreasing, and one of the great causes of that is the unsatisfactory nature of the leases. The short-dated leases do not encourage tenants, the larger tenants of the Crown, to go in for improvements in the way of regrassing their land, netting rabbits, clearing scrub, and making other improvements of a permanent nature. We have emphasized the necessity for an inquiry being held and for the establishment of some better form of tenure. The Dunedin Chamber of Commerce has examined this question again and again, and we very heartily support the representations which have been made in this respect.

*To Mr. Luke:* Of course, my Chamber is a mercantile body; and as to the question of tenure, an inquiry might be set up to take evidence on the spot. The renewable lease is already on the statute-book—a term of sixty-six years, and then the rental is revalued. In that case a man would have as good as a freehold; he would have the full benefit of all his improvements, visible and invisible. I would insist on any man holding land improving it to its possible capacity. I think if such a provision were brought in we would have our ends served. I think such conditions could be embodied in the lease.

*Mr. Waters:* As president of the Chamber of Commerce, there are two other matters to which I would like to allude briefly. First there is the question of scientific research. The Dunedin Chamber of Commerce heartily supports scientific research, and has already moved in that direction. In regard to the growing of agricultural seeds in Central Otago, we support that as a matter which is of really great importance. There is no part of New Zealand which is more adapted to that purpose than Central Otago. It is work which would have to be carried out under the direction of experts.