

HONEY INDUSTRY IMPORTATION FROM AUSTRALIA

PRODUCERS' PROTEST

"That this meeting of honey producers protests against the action of the Honey Control Board in handling Australian honey, and demands an inquiry into the whole question in order to prevent a repetition of the occurrence."

Such was the text of a resolution carried at a meeting of honey producers held in Timaru yesterday. The meeting was convened by Mr W. B. Bray, of Leeston, there being ten present. The motion was carried by five votes to two, three present refraining from voting.

Mr L. F. Robins was voted to the chair, and he suggested that as Mr Bray had called the meeting, he should state his case.

Mr Bray said that for some weeks he had known what had been going on. Over two months ago a member of the Honey Control Board went to Australia to buy honey. The speaker thought that that was suspicious, so he asked some friends in Auckland to keep a look-out to see if any Australian honey came in to New Zealand. Later he was advised that two large shipments had arrived on the Aorangi, 600 cases being to the order of the Board and 600 to the order of Messrs Johnson, Kerr and Johnson. "We don't know anything about them," said Mr Bray, "but we want to know if Mr J. R. Butland, the chairman of the Board, has any association with the firm." He went on to say that it was more than a coincidence that 600 cases should go to a firm and 600 to the Board. The Crown Law Office had come into the matter, and had ruled that the Board had exceeded its powers. The Act stated that the Board was set up to deal with honey intended for export from New Zealand, and any Australian honey which came in would have to be re-exported. It was stated that the Board had got a private firm to take the honey off its hands, and the speaker had a letter from the chairman of the firm, in which he stated that the 300 cases were only 30 tons. but he also said that there was more to follow. Mr Bray said that he had written to Mr W. Watson, of Geraldine, who was a member of the Board, and he had said that it was a fact that honey had been brought in from Australia, but the fact was so well known that he suggested that the chairman of the Board should be written to for further information. This the speaker had done, and Mr Butland said that the Board had imported 100 tons of honey, the reason being that producers in New Zealand had not sent in sufficient.

HONEY INDUSTRY

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Chairman's Statement

Mr Bray said that he had written to newspapers in the four chief centres, and three of them had published his letter in full and had referred it to Mr Butland for his comment, which they had also published. In his comment Mr Butland said:—

"The letter amounts to a collection of inaccurate statements typical of the type of criticism which has been levelled at the Board by Mr Bray in the past. The Board has not, and is not likely, to bring any Australian honey into the local market. It has neither jurisdiction in, nor control of, the New Zealand market.

"The Board did take steps to adjust the grading regulations, but instead of this proving unprofitable it has proved to be immensely profitable to the whole industry, as disclosed by the Board's pay-out.

"A member of the Board (an expert on honey grading) certainly did go to Australia, and there has never been any secret about this. It must be perfectly obvious that his mission was not for the purpose of purchasing 'rank flavoured' Australian honey. The Board did not purchase several hundred tons of honey. There is no secrecy surrounding the Board's business, and Mr Bray well knows this, and in due time, at the conference of the National Beekeepers' Association in Wellington in June, the reason for the Board's representative's visit to Australia will be disclosed to the industry.

Purchase of Honey

"The letter further states that, as a result of protests made by some producers, the Board has disposed of some (presumably he means Australian honey) to a local packing organisation. The Board has neither imported into, nor has it sold a pound of honey to anyone in New Zealand.

"The suggestion that the Board may have brought honey through New Zealand for the purpose of avoiding a disclosure of its sources of origin shows a lamentable lack of knowledge. Honey exported from either New Zealand or Australia cannot enter the British market without a proper declaration of the country of origin."

Mr Bray said that he had not charged the Board with selling honey. What he had charged it with was bringing honey in from Australia, and it was being mixed with New Zealand honey, exported to England and sold as a blend of New Zealand and British honey. He also desired to know why the honey was brought in through Auckland. If it was intended for shipment to London why was it not sent direct from Sydney, which would have been less costly. New Zealand honey enjoyed a splendid position on the London market, and as a result of supervision and control, commanded 2d more than any other honey. If it became known that New Zealand had had to buy from Australia, the Australian producers would see to that, then the advantage New Zealand now enjoyed would be lost. It would have

been far better to have said straight-out that there was a crop shortage this season, and they would reap the benefit next season. If the people in England found out that Australian and New Zealand honey was being blended, they would refuse to buy the New Zealand product.

Staff Dismissed

Another point referred to by the speaker was that previously the whole of the packing and blending of the New Zealand honey in England was done by the Board's own staff, but the staff had been dispensed with, and the work was done by Mortons. The Board should have retained at least one man in this depot to act as a check, for there was nothing to stop Mortons from blending honey and selling it as New Zealand. Whichever way the consumers in England reacted to the change, it would be to the detriment of producers. If they did not make themselves heard now, the action of the Board would be ratified by Parliament, and what had been done unconstitutionally would, in future, be done constitutionally. Producers should take the long view, and put their cupidity on one side. There was a principle at stake, and one they could not afford to ignore.

At this stage Mr Bray read his motion, and it was seconded by Mr T. F. Penrose.

Motive Questioned

Mr Watson, who arrived after the commencement of the meeting, said that he was not going to enter into any controversy regarding the importation of honey from Australia, as the matter had not been finalised by the Board. Until it had been finalised, it was not his place to divulge anything about it. The annual conference would be held in Wellington in two weeks' time, and producers would then be given full details. "It is only another two weeks," he said, "and until then you would not be wise to pass a motion like that. I would like to know what is at the back of Mr Bray's mind stirring up producers against the Board. I don't think he is an exporter."

Mr Bray: I voted at the last meeting.

Mr Watson: Yes. You sent in half a cwt. to do it. Why are you stirring up trouble against the Board, which is giving wonderful service to the producer and exporter?

Mr Bray: I have never questioned that.

Mr Watson: You came here to stir up trouble, but you don't give the Board credit for what it has done.

Mr Bray: I have extolled the past.

Mr Watson: You have given a long rambling statement about the defects of the Board.

At the request of Mr Watson, the chairman read extracts from the address given by the chairman of the Board at the last annual conference of the National Beekeepers' Association in Wellington, with particular reference to the pay-out.

Mr Watson said that the Board had worked up the business to where it was

a real good thing for the exporter, and they were not going to let the market drop and so allow other countries in. The chairman of the Board was a man of more than average business ability, and he was not going to let producers down. Mr Watson said that this season the Board would pay out 6½d or 7d for quality honey, pro rata.

Mr Bray: Do you think 6½d is a good price straight out ?

Mr Watson: Yes. I want to point out to those who have a bone to pick that it costs us ½d per lb for administrative expenses. Is there any other Board in New Zealand running its business as cheaply as that? I can't see why there should be any trouble over the Board.

Mr Bray: Will you help us stop this if, as you say, it is not finalised yet?

Mr Watson: If it can be proved to me that it is in the interests of producers.

Mr Bray: Do you think I have stated the case properly?

Mr Watson: You have done nothing but ramble.

Mr Bray: If this meeting supports me, will you stand by it?

Mr Watson: I will use my discretion.

Mr Bray: That is what we want to know.

Mr Watson: While I am a member of the Board I will use my discretion as to how I vote. If members are wise they will refrain from voting on this motion in the meantime.

The chairman: We have got to the point where we are anticipating the Board. Have you definite information from the Board?

Mr Watson: No, he hasn't.

Mr Bray: Here is a letter from the manager of the Board. Will you accept that?

Mr Watson: Have you tasted the Australian honey? You don't know what it is like. You would have been wiser to wait until after the conference.

Mr Bray: It will be too late then.

The matter was further debated at some length, and the motion eventually was carried.

Assurance Sought

Mr Bray moved and Mr Syme seconded: "That this meeting of producers asks the Government for an assurance that legislation will not be brought down to legalise any past unconstitutional acts of the Honey Control Board."

The motion was carried, but again some present refrained from voting.

The question of marketing control was also introduced by Mr Bray, who moved: "That this meeting of producers is opposed to any form of marketing control which does not protect the interests of consumers as well as producers by a price discount subsidy which does not come out of taxation."

The motion was seconded by Mr Penrose, and after Mr Bray had expressed his views, the motion was carried.