**WHEAT PRICE STABILIZATION SCHEME BALLOT BILL 1953**

**Legislative Assembly, 2 December 1953, pages 1812-4**

Second reading

His Excellency the Governor’s Deputy, by message, recommended to the House the appropriation of such amounts of the general revenue of the State as were required for the purposes mentioned in the Bill.

The Hon. Sir GEORGE JENKINS moved—

That the Speaker do now leave the Chair and the House resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole for the purpose of considering the following resolution:—

That it is desirable to introduce a Bill for an Act to enable the Minister of Agriculture to hold a ballot on a wheat price stabilization scheme.

Motion carried.1

Resolution agreed to in Committee and adopted by the House. Bill introduced and read a first time.

**The Hon. Sir GEORGE JENKINS (Minister of Agriculture)—**I move—

That this Bill be now read a second time.

It is a short Bill to enable the Minister of Agriculture to conduct a ballot of growers on the establishment of a wheat stabilization scheme. It has always been the intention of the Government that, when agreement had been reached between the various State Governments a ballot of growers should be conducted on this question, particularly in order that the Commonwealth Government should be informed whether the wheatgrowers of Australia were prepared to allow the Commonwealth to market their wheat and retain the £9,000,000 at present in the Stabilization Fund, but, although there has been considerable negotiation between the Commonwealth Minister for Commerce and Agriculture and the State Ministers of Agriculture, we have been unable to reach agreement. Although at the last meeting of the Agricultural Council the terms of the Bill were substantially agreed upon, since then, after discussion, it has been found impossible to reach complete agreement; consequently and because the Federal House will soon rise and there will be an election early in the new year, the Commonwealth Government desires the States to conduct a ballot on this question to ascertain the feeling of wheatgrowers on it. In passing this legislation the House will commit itself only on the question of a ballot, and, if as a result of that ballot, it is decided that further legislation is necessary, another Bill will be introduced next session and its terms and conditions will be open for full discussion then.

As members have been informed, the details of the proposed stabilization scheme, have not yet been completely agreed upon in all respects by all the Governments of Australia but there is already a fair amount of agreement and it is quite possible that complete agreement will be reached in the near future. The Bill does not contemplate that a ballot will be taken until complete agreement is reached, and the power conferred upon the Minister to hold the ballot is conditional on such agreement. This is indicated by, the first provision in clause 2 which states that if proposals for the stabilization of the price of wheat are agreed to by the Governments of the Commonwealth and of all the States the Minister of Agriculture shall direct that a ballot be held.

Among the matters on which agreement has not yet been reached are the question whether the £9,000,000 now held in the Stabilization Fund are to be used for future price stabilization and on what basis the premium for Western Australian wheat is to be allowed. When the ballot is held a direction will be given to the Returning Officer for the State for the purpose and a list of wheatgrowers who delivered wheat to the Australian Wheat Board in the season 1951-1952 or 1952-1953 will be prepared, and this list will be the voting roll for the purpose of the ballot. As in previous cases, the ballot will be conducted by postal voting. The ballot paper will be in a form which will be fixed by the Commonwealth Minister for Commerce and Agriculture and it will have either attached to it or printed on it a short summary of the proposals on which the ballot is to be taken. The object of having the ballot paper in a form fixed by the Commonwealth Minister is to ensure uniformity throughout the whole of Australia. It is proposed that voting will be by marking a cross opposite the word “Yes” or “No” on the ballot paper and the other details of the procedure at the ballot will be determined by the Returning Officer.

Clause 3 provides for a vote of money out of the General Revenue for the purpose of meeting the expenses of the ballot. Clause 4 provides that regulations may be made for carrying the Bill into effect and, in particular, they may provide for compulsory voting. The Government is informed that such compulsory voting may ultimately be agreed upon between all the Governments concerned and if so, it is desirable that South Australia should have the power to carry it into effect. When this matter was discussed at the last meeting of the Agricultural Council, the Commonwealth Minister was keen that the voting should be compulsory in order that there should be a known majority of wheatgrowers either in favour or against the proposals.

Mr. Stott—Will there be only one question on the ballot paper?

The Hon. Sir GEORGE JENKINS—Yes— whether the wheatgrower is in favour of the scheme or not.

Mr. O’HALLORAN (Leader of the Opposition)—I am prepared to continue the debate on this Bill, but perhaps after I have spoken the Minister may consider an adjournment necessary so that members who have not had the opportunity of perusing the Bill may be able to consider it before coming to a final decision on it. I would not have been prepared to continue the debate but that, through the courtesy of the Minister, I had had an opportunity to study a copy of the Bill this afternoon. Personally, I am satisfied with its provisions In fact it happens to be the policy sponsored by the Labor Party for many years that, where primary producers desire, they shall have the right to participate in a stabilization scheme, and the only effective way of ascertaining whether they desire to have such a scheme is by ballot. Consequently I offer no objection to the power being vested in the Minister to conduct a ballot if and when agreement has been reached on the nature of a stabilization scheme, but the position is not so innocent as the Minister told us, for, as I understand it, after the wheatgrowing States have agreed on the basis of the scheme, a skeleton of it will be submitted to the growers on the ballot papers when they are asked to vote “Yes” or “No’’ on it.

The Hon. Sir George Jenkins—That is so.

Mr. O’HALLORAN—The fact that it is a scheme of which the growers have been asked to approve will mean that, if they approve of it, when subsequent legislation is introduced into the House it will be necessary for us to follow substantially the outline of that scheme, for if we depart in the slightest degree from it we shall be committing a breach of faith with the growers.

Further, we have had previous experience of the difficulties created by this kind of inter- Government agreement. Conferences have been held and agreements made between the various State Governments and between the Commonwealth and the State Governments, and then a Minister has come to this House asking us to ratify an agreement and telling us that we are not permitted to alter it substantially because by doing so we would create difficulties with the other signatories to it. Although my Party favours this type of legislation, its members do not altogether approve of the way the Australian Wheat Board has conducted the stabilization scheme and the marketing of wheat during the past two or three years. Firstly, we believe that sufficient regard has not been had to the interests of the rest of the community. We believe the Wheat Board has been inclined to attach too much importance to the interests of farmers and not enough to the interests of other sections of the community, particularly the manufacturing section

The SPEAKER—I think the honourable member is widening his argument on the Bill.

Mr. O’HALLORAN—Yes, but it is probably the last opportunity I shall have of making an effective protest against things which may be done.

The SPEAKER—I think the agreement will be a subject for close examination if the ballot is agreed to, but not otherwise.

Mr. O’HALLORAN—If the Bill is agreed to I shall have no choice and the scheme will be a fait accompli but I bow to the Speaker who I think is, as usual, right. In my remarks there is a note of warning and I hope those responsible for the drafting of the agreement will heed it and see that the scheme ultimately, submitted as the result of the ballot will have regard to the interests of wheatgrowers. The wheat industry is important and is responsible for much employment and the production of a commodity to be exported overseas to help maintain Australia’s trade balance. Any scheme which has the interests of the industry at heart is worth consideration, and as the ballot gives the farmers an opportunity to decide on the scheme I support the Bill.

The Hon. Sir GEORGE JENKINS (Minister of Agriculture)—I remind the Leader of the Opposition that when the Agricultural Council meets there are five representatives of the Labor Party and one solitary member of the Liberal Party present, so he can be assured that the interests of the consumers are properly eared for.

Bill read a second time and taken through its- remaining stages without amendment.