APPROPRIATION (FLOOD RELIEF) BILL 1956

House of Assembly, 21 August 1956, page 339

Second reading

The Governor recommended to the House the appropriation of such amounts of the general revenue of the State as were required for the purpose mentioned in the Bill.

**The Hon. T. PLAYFORD (Premier and Treasurer**)—I move—

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 appropriate the sum of £300,000 from the revenue of the State for flood relief*.

Members will appreciate that as this is a new matter it is not possible to include it in the ordinary Supply Bill that will be discussed a little later this afternoon. The amount the Government has available to it for new lines under the Governor’s Appropriation Fund is very limited, and it has already been fully appropriated for flood relief. Therefore, the appropriation of a further £300,000 is urgent because, unless the money is made available, the work being undertaken to prevent damage to property on the river would have to be discontinued for want of funds. There is also the question of hardships to settlers that is being dealt with by Sir Kingsley Paine, and relief could not be provided without passing this measure. The Bill is only one of a number that the House will have to consider in connection with flood relief.

Motion carried.

Resolution agreed to in Committee and adopted by the House.

Bill introduced by the Hon T. Playford and read a first time.

The Hon. T. PLAYFORD (Premier and Treasurer—I move—

That this Bill be now read a second time.

I thank members for enabling this Bill to be dealt with as an urgent measure. Members are all aware of the damage and hardship which is being caused along the Murray River by the devastating floods which are being experienced. The local people and the local authorities have been working and organizing people to assist with protective work, but the full measure of protection necessary has been quite outside the resources of those people on the river. It has therefore been essential for the Government to expend funds on this very necessary work.

The Governor’s Appropriation Fund limits the amount which the Government can spend for this purpose to £100,000, and, so that the assistance being given by the Government can be carried on without interruption, it is necessary for £300,000 to be provided by Parliament for expenditure on prevention, reduction, control and alleviation of damage, hardship and loss sustained from the Murray floods.

Parliamentary authority for the expenditure of this sum will enable the Government to continue assisting the people on the river to fight these disastrous floods and to alleviate hardship where necessary. The Government has appointed three committees to handle these matters. One committee will supervise flood protection work in conjunction with the local people and recommend to the Government the financial assistance to be made to local authorities from time to time so that their worthy efforts in fighting the floods will not be interrupted; and a second committee will supervise the removal of dairy herds from flooded pastures and arrange fresh pastures. The third committee will be His Honour Judge Paine, who will make the recommendations in all cases for assistance to relieve personal hardship.

His Honour will make recommendations to the Government on the appointment of a committee which will have some local affiliations and which will comprise persons who understand the local position and, it is hoped, some of those who are assisting with the Lord Mayor’s Appeal which will be launched tomorrow. At the invitation of the Government the Lord Mayor is launching a public appeal and I am sure I will have the support of the Leader of the Opposition in making a Government donation of £50,000 to commence the fund if this measure is approved. Various local organizations which have been fighting these floods are in urgent need of financial assistance as they have expended their resources. Two or three grants have been made and, in some instances, councils have been told not to worry about payments for Government equipment as they will be considered by Parliament in due course.

An approach has been made to the Commonwealth Government and it has agreed to subsidize on a pound for pound basis amounts provided by the State for the alleviation of personal hardship. The Commonwealth has also agreed to consider proposals relating to the rehabilitation of the areas and for the re-establishment of levee banks that have been breached. I discussed this matter with the Commonwealth Treasury last week and I am sure we will get sympathetic consideration. The Government does not intend to ask the taxpayer to shoulder the whole cost of rehabilitation, because that would be impossible. I believe the settlers are prepared to do their utmost and consider it their duty, but it is quite obvious from the magnitude of the disaster that many settlers would never be able to re-establish themselves from their own resources. Unless action of this nature is taken there will be a permanent reduction in the production from these rich areas and grave hardship will be suffered not only by settlers, but by business people in neighbouring towns and, indeed, the whole community. The Government has appointed His Honour Judge Paine chairman of a committee to recommend what action should be taken and that committee will secure the best advice possible from Government departments and from responsible people. In the meantime further negotiations will take place with the Commonwealth Treasurer to ascertain whether funds can be made available for rehabilitation purposes. There are precedents for such action. For instance, in connection with the floods in New South Wales, the Commonwealth Government allocated £3,000,000 for the purposes of alleviating hardship in and rehabilitating the flood areas. From conversations held last week, I believe this matter will be dealt with realistically by the Commonwealth.

This amount of £300,000 should be regarded as a carry-on amount to enable the flood fighting work to continue and to assist in alleviating the distress and suffering that has resulted. The peak of the flood is only just reaching South Australia and it must run the course of the river and it is hard to estimate how much further damage will result. It is quite apparent, however, that we will be involved in heavy expenditure if we are to take effective measures to re-establish the river areas.

Mr. O ’HALLORAN (Leader of the Opposition)—The Opposition joins with the Premier in his desire to pass this Bill without undue delay. By that, I do not mean that members should be debarred from making worthwhile suggestions for the solution of the problems that arise as a result of what is probably the greatest calamity in South Australia’s history. Already we know of some of the dangers that have been encountered by the people all along the river in their efforts to protect their homes and holdings. There has been an almost continuous struggle with the rising flood waters and I pay a tribute to those many other South Australians who have voluntarily gone to the assistance of the river people in their herculean task. In many instances the areas sought to be protected have been engulfed by "old man river” despite the magnificent efforts of those concerned, but that does not militate against the value of the efforts made.

I was pleased to hear the Premier say that this might be regarded, in effect, as a first instalment of what Parliament will subsequently have to do in order to restore these valuable areas along the river to their former productive value and to re-establish near to the basis of their old prosperity the many fine towns on the river. At the moment we are concerned mainly with two things—firstly, the protection of those areas remaining to be protected and, secondly, the alleviation of individual hardship where it has occurred. No doubt there are cases where serious individual hardship is already being suffered. One of the committees mentioned by the Premier is to consider the question of moving dairy herds to other pastures. In this regard South Australia is fortunately situated because the State is probably having the best season ever for pastures and grazing. This particularly applies to the pastoral country. I do not know whether consideration has been given to obtaining agistment in some of these areas and an examination of the position might be worthwhile. I realize that we could not transfer milking cows but there are some dry cattle that could be sent away for agistment purposes and pasture could be found not far from the river. I have in mind some areas in my district that are almost within walking distance of the areas from which the cattle would come. I make the suggestion so that others more competent that I can consider it. If the dry cattle could be sent to these other areas it would make the position of the settlers much easier and give some of the owners in the washed out swamps an opportunity to derive an income.

We shall have to spend large sums of money in the rehabilitation of flooded areas, and South Australia is not the only State affected, for Victoria and New South Wales are similarly situated. I am sure the settlers will themselves assist to the maximum of their financial resources in their rehabilitation but after that has been done consideration must be given to the control of the waters at the source of the river. We must rehabilitate the higher lands from which the water comes and we must undo the results of the greed of man over many years. By a process of reafforestation, and the restoration of natural protective cover, we could slow down the flow of water. I remember reading where a gentleman who has spent the best part of his life in studying the problem said that in some cases the run off had been accentuated 14 times as a result of the denudation of timber and foliage. I suggest for the consideration of the Commonwealth and the other States that the scope of the River Murray Commission be increased to control the waters in the catchment areas as well as those in the river. We must now try to save all we can and provide succour for those suffering from the floods.

Mr. JENKINS (Stirling)—I commend the Premier for introducing this timely Bill and join with Mr. O’Halloran in paying a tribute to the people who have been nobly fighting the mighty Murray River. I commend also the people who have volunteered each weekend to assist the settlers in their fight. Some of the settlers are just about out on their feet. They no sooner get home after a day’s work, have a meal and get to bed than they are called out in the night when another levee breaks. I pay a tribute to the men of the Engineering and Water Supply Department. On Sunday I visited the Jervois area and when the threatened break came at 10.30 at night the men had just gone to bed after working all day. They turned out again and while I was there, they were busily organizing the work to see that the best could be achieved from what was being done. These men are entitled to a great deal of praise, as well as the settlers.

I agree with Mr. O’Halloran that livestock should be sent away as soon as possible from the flooded areas. Some of it could be placed in those areas where there is ample feed this year. In connection with their being sent away, I understand there is a difficulty in being able to assess the return of milk from a particular cow. In some instances cows have been put out for agistment on other people’s property and those people have obtained the whole of the proceeds from the cows. Where there are only one or two cows it may be all right, but where a larger number is concerned it would be equitable for an assessment to be made of the return from the cows so that the owners could be reimbursed to some extent. In my district where stock has been moved to properties the families washed out have accompanied the cows and milked them. This is a good arrangement. There will be many problems and it is a matter to be looked at closely by the committee in charge of the agistment arrangements. I was glad to hear the Premier say that £50,000 would be allocated to the Lord Mayor’s fund for immediate assistance to settlers. There are a number of settlers who have lately gone on to their holdings after putting all their cash into plant and stock and who are now not getting any return. They will be financially distressed and the Lord Mayor’s fund will be applicable to them in the main. It will assist them to a great extent. The Bill has to go to another place this afternoon so I will not delay its passage here. It is a good measure and only the forerunner of further appropriations of money by this House. There is no chance at this stage to estimate what the State will be called upon to pay.

Mr. BYWATERS (Murray)—I wholeheartedly support the Bill. With other members I commend the excellent work of the settlers who have been involved in this flood, the greatest flood in the history of white man. It has been a national calamity, as others have said, and by taking an active part in the work I have been in direct contact with the settlers and the people who have come from the city and other areas at the weekend. One good thing has come out of the flood. It is the spirit of co-operation that has existed between the city workers and the men on the land. One has come to learn the problems of the other. This spirit of co-operation has meant that the country man has learned in conversation of the problems of the city man, and the city man has seen on the spot the difficulties of the settlers. This spirit has been of benefit to all concerned. In many instances I have seen settlers out on their feet through working long hours in battling all day against the flood, milking morning and night, and then having to patrol levees at night.

According to today’s press we have about 600 unemployed persons in this State but I believe there are more. They could have been usefully employed in assisting the settlers to fight the flood. The volunteers have worked magnificently at weekends, but on week days more use could have been made of our unemployed people. I commend the Lord Mayor’s appeal and the help given will be greatly appreciated by the settlers. The Premier said the settlers would have to try to help themselves. I know they will be only too happy to do that after the flood waters have receded, but many of them are committed to heavy mortgages and they will find their task very difficult. I suggest the Government might help them by providing long term loans. They would bethen able to rehabilitate themselves without having to rely on charity. It has been heartbreaking to see people moving furniture, etc. from their flooded homes. They deserve all the assistance that is promised by the Lord Mayor’s fund. I suggest also that there should be a Parliamentary visit to the flooded areas. Members are called upon to vote on measures like this without having any real knowledge of the position. All the flooded areas should be visited by Parliamentarians and I hope the Government will be able to arrange a visit, possibly in September. I support the Bill, which is an attempt to salvage everything possible from the devastation in the flooded areas.

Mr. QUIRKE (Burra)—I support the Bill. I have had a look at the floods around Renmark and at the southern end of the river. It must be heartbreaking for a person to see a lifetime of effort inundated in the way some settlers have overnight. At the same time as we provide money to alleviate the suffering of these people, we must recognize that circumstances are such that similar floods could easily occur again. At one time the Darling River alone was navigable for 1,000 miles to the sea, but today it is silted up. In the event of further good seasons with bountiful rains, which could easily occur, disastrous results could recur; therefore I trust that we will not overlook our responsibility to provide money to see that, as far as it is in our power, similar floods will not occur again. The banks should be consolidated to hold the pressure. That this can be done has been proved by the pressure being withstood by the new banks made of new earth and consolidated where possible by running tractors across the top. Some of the present levee banks will have to be removed from inside areas because they will form obstructions, but when this earth is removed it should be moved to the first line of defence so that the consolidated banks will have the better chance of withstanding any future flood. If we do that, we will receive the thanks of the children of the people who today are suffering.

An irrigation system is a permanent system: it is not here merely this year or for the next ten years, but goes on ad infinitum and helps provide a permanent source of income and livelihood for a number of people and food for a much larger number. That is one of the factors that we must look after in the general economy of the State, and I hope that, as there is no niggardliness now about what is to be done for the people in distress, the same spirit will be present when it comes to providing money to give definite and permanent protection. That applies particularly to the southern dairying areas where the maintenance of Adelaide’s milk supply relies on the irrigation of the dairying areas adjacent to Murray Bridge. It has been said that it will be necessary to ration milk in Adelaide after this flood.

Mr. O’Halloran—One-third of the milk supply of the metropolitan area comes from that area in the autumn and early winter.

Mr. QUIRKE—Yes, and there is no other place where you can get it. To restore these areas the water will have to be pumped out and will probably drown out pastures. When these levee banks are built again, they should be high and wide enough to withstand a flood. We should not need more than one lesson. I congratulate the Government on the earnestness of its proposal and the speed with which it is operating. I know that the people to whom this money will go and on whose behalf it will be spent will be extremely grateful to Parliament for doing what is being done today.

Bill read a second time and taken through its remaining stages.

Later the Bill was returned from the Legislative Council without amendment.