**ADVANCES TO SETTLERS ON CROWN LANDS BILL 1908**

**House of Assembly, 4 November 1908, pages722-5**

Second reading

**The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS**, in moving the second reading, said the Government had felt for some time that it ought to do more for settlers on the outside Crown lands, and for that reason had brought in this Bill to make advances to settlers. Compared with the other States it was rather late in the day. Legislation on similar lines was now in force in Queensland, New South Wales, Western Australia, and Tasmania. Crown lands had been offered at reasonable rates, especially to those who took perpetual leases. The greater part of the lands now to be disposed of was in the mallee country and semi-dry areas, and some incentive was required to entice people to take, up that land. A large number of people who went out were men, who by thrift and industry, had saved a few hundred pounds and gone into the mallee country, but before they had been there long they had realized that they had not enough capital to go on with. They could not get a very big return, and when some land speculator came along, and offered a little more than it had cost, they were tempted to sell out, and leave the country. It should be the object of the State to keep those men on the land. That was the aim of the Bill. It was proposed that the Act and the fund (which should be such moneys as might from time to time be provided by Parliament for the purposes of the Act) should be free from any political control. In other States applications went to the Minister. He did not think that was a wise provision. In matters of money it was as well that it should be free from political control. The Act and the fund were to be administered by an Advances to Settlers’ Board, consisting of the Surveyor-General (who would be Chairman) and the three members of the Land Board, who would be assisted by officers of the Lands Department. There would therefore be no necessity for the constitution of a new department, and the cost of administration would be very small, as in any case the improvements would have to be inspected by officers of the department. All those officers were pretty well conversant with the improvements on agricultural lands. There would therefore be no duplication of work in this respect, as would be the case if the Act were administered by the State Bank. The board might make advances to any holder of a lease of Crown lands or an agreement with covenant to purchase of an amount not exceeding 12*/* in the pound of the fair estimated value of the improvements (if any) already made on his holding and those proposed to be made thereon. Advances might be made by instalments as the improvements were being affected, and if at any time, in the opinion of the board, any money so ad­vanced, had not been applied for the pur­pose for which it was advanced, or had not been carefully or economically expended, the board had power to refuse any further payment, and to require immediate repay­ment of amounts already advanced. At no time should the advances to any one settler exceed £350. In Western Australia the maximum advance to one settler was £500, in Queensland £800, and in Tasmania £500. The New South Wales Act did not specify any amount. Advances should be secured by a mortgage of the settler’s lease or agreement to purchase. In the event of the purchase of the land being completed the board would hold the land grant under mortgage until the advance was repaid in full. The Bill contained other usual provisions for amply securing the money . He did not intend to make it apply to repurchased lands. The State was undergoing sufficient risk in letting people have that land at the price paid for it. The Government had to be careful in that respect. Besides, repurchased land was generally of better quality, and settlers obtained a return quicker than they would in this mallee country. The improvements on which it was proposed to make advances were ring-barking, clearing, grubbing, fencing, draining, erecting or making permanent water improvements, boring for water, erecting permanent buildings, or such other improvements as were prescribed by regulation. For the first five years interest only should be paid on the advance; after the expiration of that period the settler should repay the advance with interest within a term of 25 years by half-yearly instalments. He thought that was pretty reasonable. The Bill generally was drawn on the lines of the Queensland and Western Australian Acts. In Western Australia they advanced to the full value of the improvements made or to be made, but the South Australian Government preferred to follow Queensland by limiting the advances to 12/ in the pound on the valuation. In the other States the funds were provided by the issue of mortgage bonds or debentures, but the Government pro­posed in the Bill to constitute a fund called "the Advances to Settlers’ Fund,” to the credit of which the Treasurer should set apart such moneys as from time to

time might be provided by Parliament for that purpose. Parliament would at all times have its finger on the expenditure, and that would be a safeguard. Just now the banks were very lenient to settlers and would make advances to men known to them; but there were times when the banks had to call in their advances, and that often put the farmers in a very peculiar position. That was why it would be better for them to deal with the Government. The land which had to be dealt with, some was in fair rainfall country, and some in semi-dry areas. At Loxton there was 750,000 acres of fair country and good soil; but with a rather doubtful rainfall—-9 or 10 in. on the average, and in some years only 5 or 6 in. Farmers who had gone there had done exceedingly well but they had been hampered by the want of capital. If they could have gone in heavily for opening and clearing the country they would have been wealthy men to-day. was not going to have it said that they had opened that country and induced the people to go there without knowing the facts. When they gazetted the land open for application they would publish the rainfall for each year as far back as it was available. Then the people would know what they were doing, and would not be able to go to the Government afterwards for concessions. The Surveyor- General was asked for an estimate of the land still available for settlement in the hands of the Crown, not including some which would be thrown open shortly. The report was as follows:—“Northern District. —County Blanchford, 35,000 acres. Central District.—County Albert, 415,000 acres; County Alfred, 50,000 acres; County Russell, 83,000 acres; County Buccleuch, 1£0,000 acres: County Chandos, 37,000 acres; County Carnarvon. Kangaroo Island, -'500,000 acres; total, 1,235,000 acres. South- Eastern District. —County Buckingham, 100,000 acres.” That Buckingham country was poor stuff. “Western District. —County Buxton, 70,000 acres; County Jervois, 100,000 acres; County Robinson, 60,000 acres; total, 230,000 acres. Grand total, 1,600,000 acres. In addition to the above there is about 200,000 acres of fair to good arable land in the vicinity of Kappakoola and Wudinna, easterly of Venus Bay, which would be available if facilities were given by railway to the seaboard. A number of applications have been made for large areas of above lands. The above areas do not include land already open to application, which is approximately 1 million acres. Nearly the whole of the above lands are scrubby and but second class, though with the aid of phosphates and other manures, when the rainfall is sufficient, fair crops can be obtained. The present staff could complete the survey in about three years.” They heard a lot of people going around the country talking about the little need there was to buy land for closer settlement when there was so much Crown lands available. But the fact was that the staff would be through with all the land worth surveying in three years. The Bill would apply also to country already held, but the lull extent of the liability would not be heavy. In the Surveyor-General's last report was a statement of the loans to blockers which showed:— “Amount advanced up to June 30, 1907. £39,226 11/5; amount advanced from July1, 1907, to June 30, 1908, £202; total advanced, £39,428 ll/a. Amount repaid up to June 30, 1097 (including £3,312.0/3 re-couped to loan fund), £33,129 8/10; amount repaid from July 1, 1907, to June 30, 1908, £1,462 19/10; total repaid, £34,592 8/8. Interest received from July 1, 1907, to June 30, 1908, £358 1/5; instalments of principal in arrear on June 30. 1908, £491 1/4; in­terest in arrears on June 30, 1908, £63 18/10.

The above amount was paid from revenue in consequence of cancellations of leases of lands on which advances for improvements had been made, and where improvements existed interest on values was included in rentals.” That was a great tribute to blockers”. Mr. Strawbridge went on:—“The above amount of £3,212, though a loss to the loan fund, was not a complete loss, as an increased rental to revenue is obtained on account of improvements made from advances on lands which reverted to the Crown and were again leased. The system of advances has been of very great assistance to a large number of blockers, more especially when the lands were held on lease, but since the greater number have been surrendered for agreements with covenant to purchase the Act has not been so much availed of, as advances can be obtained at the State and other banks." He believed many of them got large advances to start their sons on farms, and that was a good thing. In a young country like South Australia, which was always advancing, no one need be afraid of launching out and borrowing to make a start early in life. He could never have made a start if he had not borrowed money, and if he had to start again he would borrow much more than he did. The Surveyor-General made enquiries when in Perth recently respecting the working of the Act in Western Australia, and he reported:—“That the Premier stated that up to June 30 last (1908) the total amount advanced by the bank was £743,598, and by that means the following improvements on holdings had been carried out:—Clearing, 378,094 acres; cultivating, 205,973 acres; fencing, 455,457 chains; water conservation, valued at £34,789; and buildings, £78,325. In addition, stock to value of £71,995 was purchased, and liabilities amounting to £42,144 had been taken over; while during the year 2,329 applications for £308,710 were approved. As a result largely of the work of the bank the area under improvement had gone up from 1.017.185 acres in 1899 to 3,064,035 acres in 1907. Up to the present time the bank has only lost £7 10/. He considered that even if 50 per cent, were lost (though quite improbable), the result would be good, because of the number of people settled upon the land. The trustee's annual report for 1907-8 was not obtainable, as it had not been laid before Parliament, but a copy will be forwarded when printed. The total sum advanced to June 30, 1907, was £525,177 16/7, which has been a little too niggardly in this measure. He moved the second reading.

On the motion of the Hon. R. BUTLER the debate was adjourned until November 5.