**DROUGHT RELIEF ACT AMENDMENT BILL 1920**

**House of Assembly, 17 November 1920, pages 1671-3**

Second reading

**The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. G. R. Laffer)—**This Bill is introduced to overcome a legal difficulty which has arisen in the adminis­tration of the Drought Relief Act, 1914. That Act defines “ Minister ” to mean the Minister of the Crown to whom the administration of the Act is for the time being committed by the Governor. In the rush of work which followed the passing of the Act in 1914 the necessity for having a proclamation committing the administration to some particular Minister was overlooked, and the omission has only just been discovered. The Act has been administered ever since its coming into force by the Commissioner of Crown Lands, and he has assumed—without having the formal authority— all the powers of the Minister, as defined by the Act; that is to say he has advanced moneys and supplied commodities to persons who have applied for assistance under the Act. The result is that the Commissioner of Crown Lands has no power to recover the moneys advanced, or the cost of the commodities supplied, since all the powers of recovery are vested in a “Minister ” who does not exist. A proclamation committing the administration to the Commissioner of Crown Lands at this stage would be effective only as to contracts made after the date of the commitment, and would be useless as conferring on the Commissioner any power to recover moneys already lent. These circumstances are set out in the preamble to the Bill. The operative clause is clause 3, which says that the Commissioner of Crown Lands is deemed to be the Minister to whom the administration of the Drought Relief Act, 1914, is committed by the Governor, and administration of that Act is deemed to have been so committed from the time of its passing. This will enable the Commissioner to take proceedings to recover money in respect of past as well as future contracts. It will thus be seen that the Bill is purely formal in character, and is intended to prevent persons who have become indebted to the State for assistance supplied in the drought time being able to repudiate their obligations by taking advantage of a legal technicality. The Bill is purely of a formal character, and I move the second reading.

Bill read a second time and taken through Committee.

On the motion for the third reading—

Mr. BUTTERFIELD—Everyone will support a Drought Relief Bill, but there should be some means of obtaining payment from those who are well able to meet their obligations after periods of good seasons. We know of people who have owed the Government considerable sums for drought relief for a good while, and they can well afford to pay. The Government should not be too lenient with people of that character.

Mr. DENNY—In districts where drought relief has been granted inspectors should be appointed. I hope there will be a Minister specially appointed for the outside country whose duty it would be to see that the land is properly cultivated and to give encouragement and concessions to the farmers there. There are many thousands of acres of mallee land, particularly in the Pinnaroo district, which is not being cultivated at present. Either the men are in need of financial assistance or they are simply holding off for a sale. I was hoping the Ministry would have taken particular interest in this matter.

Mr. Robinson—They have done more than any previous Government in their administration of the mallee country.

Mr. DENNY—They should insist on the blocks being cultivated.

Mr. Reidy—Ninety per cent, of the settlers say that the holdings are too large.

Mr. DENNY—I am sure they are. I realise that the difficulty cannot be got over under this Bill, but I take the opportunity to ask again that when a redistribution of portfolios comes about the Government should consider not only the question of an efficient shoot scorcher, but should appoint a Minister to look after this branch of rural settlement.

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS— I quite agree with Mr. Butterfield in the main, but I have had no knowledge that men who are capable of paying for drought relief are evading their obligations. There may, of course, be cases where people in a position to pay are omitting to do so.

Mr. Denny—The majority of men will not pay until they are fought. Why should they ?

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS— We are anticipating a great harvest and good prices this year, and the majority of men who owe money to the Government will be able to meet their debts. The honorable member for Adelaide referred to the districts east of the Murray. In those districts we have two permanent inspectors who do nothing else but inspecting and reporting as to the conditions of the farms. The honorable member also stated that the settlers should be forced to cultivate their land. I believe that under some of the leases the settlers are compelled to clear so much land every year. The two inspectors work permanently in the district.

Mr. Denny—They have no powers.

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS— They have considerable powers. Their reports give the absolute position of the settlers. In addition, Cabinet has agreed to the appointment of a special inspector to deal with those areas, which appointment will be advertised in a few days.

Mr. Fitzgerald—What is the screw ?

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS— Four hundred and fifty pounds a year, with travelling allowances.

Mr. Denny—What will be his powers as to cultivation ?

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS— He is appointed in an advisory capacity. He will give the settlers the benefit of his advice, and he will also inform us as to the condition of the settlers and as to whether the Government should assist financially or otherwise. The honorable member for Adelaide stated that practically all this Government had done was to offer a bonus for the shoot- scorcher. This Government has done as much or more for the mallee farmer than any previous Government. It is not a matter of a scoot scorcher. Our offer is a reward of £10,000 for the purpose of obtaining an effective method of clearing mallee lands. If that is achieved we will do more for South Australia than has been done since the introduction of superphosphates. I was informed by one of our leading engineers the other day that he would give a trial very shortly of a device for clearing mallee land at a cost of 5s. or 7s. an acre. I told him that if he was successful he would not only make a fortune for himself but for the State. The Bill is intended to safeguard the interests of the State in connection with money advanced to the mallee farmers.

Mr ANGUS—I realise the necessity for this short Bill. I quite agree with the honorable member for Adelaide in regard to Crown lands and mallee lands. The Government, in the near future in the country east of the Murray, will have to insist on the lessees working the land in accordance with their leases. All the later leases I think since the year 1912 or 1913 have a clause in. them which compels the lessee to clear and cultivate his land.

Mr. Reidy—Do not make that statement on broad terms, because we will have to tell you that you fail to understand the conditions.

Mr. Butterfield—My lease contains those terms.

Mr. ANGUS—I was dealing to-day with a notice from the Minister to a farmer in my district calling attention to the fact that unless these conditions were complied with the lease would be cancelled. The settlers in the mallee area have not been com­plying with these conditions, and we will never get settlement in that country until we insist on the settlers clearing the land. The honorable member for Victoria stated that 90 per cent, of the farmers in the area east of the Murray admitted that the holdings were too big. I say that he does not know what he is talking about. Has he seen 90 per cent of the farmers ?

Mr. Reidy—Yes. We interviewed everyone of them.

Mr. Robinson—We corresponded with everyone of them.

Mr. ANGUS—I am prepared to say that he has not interviewed 90 per cent. I admit that some of the holdings are too large. There is a bigger problem in that country. Those who do hold small areas are not being compelled to work the land or they are not able to work it. Much of that land which should have been supporting the railways in that country is not in a condition to do so, and as a result the railways are not paying. In future, some provision should be made whereby men receiving drought relief shall be compelled to make the very best of the advance by cultivating the land and working it on proper lines. I know of men in my district who have received considerable relief but who are not farming their land so as to obtain the best results. I believe the appointment of a practical inspector will be of great assistance to the Crown Lands Department and to the farmers in helping them to develop their country.

Mr. Denny—He will have no real power.

Mr. ANGUS—The power will lie with the Minister in insisting that the conditions of the leases are complied with. If the lessee does not comply with the conditions he should be threatened with foreclosure, which in most cases would have the desired result.

Mr. ROBERTSON—It is not in the interest of the Government to have a pauper population on the land. We have a number of farmers in the district of Wooroora on Australia Plains and through to the Murray Flats who have been there for years, and they are little better off to-day than they were when they started. It is in the interest of the Government to retain the people on the land. We cannot afford to allow people to leave the land, and I trust the Government will very leniently with the farmers who have been battling for years. No doubt this year there will be some fine crops in South Australia, but the Government should remember that the farmers will only receive 2s. 6d. on the delivery of their wheat. They will be given a certificate which no doubt many of them when pushed for money will have to have discounted at the bank and pay interest on the money. It all tells up, and I know the ups and downs of farming.

Mr. ROBINSON—I do not want the Minister to deal too harshly in regard to the payment of drought relief in the district to which my colleague has referred. I cannot congratulate the Government upon the manner they have administered the drought relief. It has been a hard struggle on the part of my colleague and myself to get any consideration for the men. Fortunately we were able to convince the late Mr. Robert Kelly that it was in the best interests of the Government and the State that these men should be given some relief, but it was not until they had had a deluge of rain that they were supplied with seed, super, and horse feed. These men were told in cold-blooded fashion that they were on the wrong track although many of them had £600 or £700 worth of machinery and stock. They were told that the country was unsuitable for cereal growing and that they should go in for dairying. After a deluge of rain Mr. Kelly came to the conclusion that they would get a crop, and he granted them relief. I am pleased that they will get good crops, but they would have had handsome crops if they had secured seed in time to plant before the rain came. In future in connection with drought relief measures the Government should deal with the men who want relief in a most lenient way. If the Government cannot give more assistance than banks and private storekeepers do, then drought relief by the State is a farce. In my district, which probably comes before the Government more than any other district, most of the farmers have liquidated their debts, but those who have not will never be able to do so. The men getting relief have many other obligations, and we must remember they will only get 2s. 6d. for the first payment.

Mr. GUNN—I do not suppose any member wants to deal harshly with farmers wanting drought relief, but this discussion has turned on the question of cultivation and the size of holdings. We want to know that the areas in the Murray country and other parts which receive more drought relief than any other district are being worked. Mr. Angus is of the opinion that the farmers in the Murray country do not think their holdings are too large. The Railways Standing Committee have had the opportunity of securing the views of a large percentage of the farmers. In the report presented to the House to-day it is stated that the Railways Standing Committee sent a circular to every farmer east of the Murray asking for information in regard to the size of holding, the area cultivated, and what crops were expected. We have also had the opportunity of examining quite a large percentage of the farmers. If we take Moorook and Mantung, hundreds which the Railways Standing Committee have been considering lately, we find that the average of 42 replies in the hundred of Moorook was 1,536 acres, and the average of 27 replies in the hundred of Mantung was 1,370 acres. The average replies would be somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,000 acres. The Moorook holdings range from 247 acres to 7,180 acres. Theie are a number of very large blocks, and some of them have not had a stick taken off. In Mantung, the smallest block is 500 acres, and the largest 9,050 acres. In these two hundreds there are few instances in which there is an obligation to clear. They simply have to put a ring fence around the block and destroy the vermin. The Railways Standing Committee were so emphatic on this point that they agreed to the following resolution

1.That the Committee recommend that legislation be enacted to compel landholders to utilise their holdings to their full agricultural capacity. 2. That with the object of promoting closer settlement, the Committee recommends the resumption or acquisition, at present day prices, of excess areas of agricultural land which has been held out of use.

There are large areas that are held by men who have no intention of working them, and if a railway is built they will be able to reap a fortune. The Railways Standing Committee saw this and they point out that it is time to take steps to see that land held for speculation is worked to its fullest capacity. Even building a railway will not guarantee that that will be done. Some of the leases have a provision that a certain amount of clearing must be done. That makes for cultivation, but other leases have only the provision for a fence and the destruction of vermin, and the owners find an excuse for not doing that.

Bill read a third time and passed.