VILLAGE SETTLEMENTS BILL 1901

House of Assembly, 19 December 1901, page 469-70

Second reading

**The ATTORNEY-GENERAL**, in moving the second reading of this Bill, said it would result in economy to the State. The object of the measure was to make the settlements absolutely independent of the Government, and its provisions were based upon the report of the Commission which visited the Murray two years ago. It was proposed to divide the property of settlers into three classes—horticultural blocks, commonage blocks, and irrigation property. Each of these would be valued. In clause 17 it was proposed that “the Commissioner may from time-to-time lease any of such blocks to a person not a member of any such association, and thereupon such person shall be deemed for all purposes to become a member of the association within whose district such block is situated. Not more than two blocks shall be leased to or held by the same member, and each lessee shall hold his block for his individual use and enjoyment. The amount of the valuation of the improvements, excepting buildings, which would be valued separately on each horticultural block, together with interest at the rate of £4 10/ per cent, per annum, would be a first charge upon such blocks, would be deemed a debt due by the lessee for the time being, and would be paid to the Commissioner by the lessee by forty-two annual instalments. The commonage blocks would constitute a debt due on behalf of the whole settlement, while the irrigation works would remain vested in the Commissioner of Crown Lands, the liability to repay in instalments in each case being the same as that which applied to horticultural blocks. When the owners of the horticultural and commonage blocks cleared off their debts the lands would become their property. Of the 13 original settlements seven were left. There were 90 families on them, and some of them were doing exceedingly well. The Lyrup colony consisted of 80 acres, which were under vines, and last year raisins to the amount of £1,800 were sold. Others were not quite so prosperous. If the present inspector of village settlements had had charge of them from the beginning the loss to the State would not have been so great. The total expenditure on the settlements was £82,000. Inspector McIntosh valued the assets at £63,000 making a loss of £19,000. Clause 16 provided that—“The aggregate amount of the sums so written off, and also the total indebtedness of any settlement which has been or may hereafter be closed, shall be provided for in seven equal parts by the Treasurer on the Estimates during the seven years next following the year in which the decision of the arbitrators or umpire shall have been arrived at.” This scheme would give great relief to the revenue, and it had passed the House of Assembly without alteration.

The Hon. A. W. SANDFORD said this Bill indicated a return to sounder and anti-socialistic principles. There were seven distinct stages of ownership in connection with the Murray lands. The first occupier was the blackfellow, and then followed the Crown lessee, who used it for pastoral purposes. The third stage was the formation of the village settlements to get rid of the unemployed difficulty, and the fourth was the establishment of communistic societies. Where were the members of the Council who had prated so loudly about the ultimate success of these socialistic experiments? Where were the men who assured them that every penny of the £82.000 lent to the settlers would be repaid? The fifth stage was the transition one—the substitution of individualism for socialism; the sixth saw the surrender of the settlements to the Government, and the seventh the handing back of the blocks by the Government to the settlers. Parliament could not do better than support this Bill, which would stimulate the settlers to look well after their holdings, and ultimately, give them a chance of acquiring the fee simple. Clause 35 was a novel one. It stated—“Every member of each association shall provide or contribute towards the maintenance and working of the irrigation works and the care and cultivation of the commonage lands of the association, whereof he is a member, such labor (not being less than 30 days during every successive period of six months while he shall be a member) as the Commissioner shall require, or such sum in cash as the Commissioner may consider the equivalent of such labor, and every such member shall be entitled to credit in the books of the association for the value of such work as such value shall be assessed by the Commissioner, or for such cash ae the case may be”. He was afraid this would lead to trouble and discontent among the men, though it might be overcome by the less physically fitted making a contribution that would be equivalent to the labor they would have to give. They were told that the loss on the settlements was £19,000, but he would put it down at double that amount. It would be six months before they could arrive at the actual loss on the settlements, and later on petitions would, no doubt, come in from the settlers, asking for a reduction in the value of their improvements. owing to certain circumstances arising which they could not prevent. History would tell how much the village settlements socialistic scheme had cost the State. He would support the Bill.

The Hon. C. WILLCOX was glad that the Government had come to a common-sense view of the position with regard to the Village Settlements, and regretted they had not made a similar proposal years ago. Everyone knew it was impossible. for the village settlements to prosper under the socialistic principles of communism. Such experiments had been tried frequently, and always ended in failure, because there was no individual interest in the scheme. The amount of money which had been expended in settling those people on the land had been very considerable, and was much greater than was stated by the Government. Private individuals had, during the first two years, subscribed very largely towards providing stock for the settlers. He was glad that the Government realised that something must be done now in the way of providing individual interest. The valuations placed on the village settlements were simply monstrous. It was just as well to take a straightforward view of the matter, and say at once that they had lost three-fourths of the money spent on the settlements. He was quite sure that they would not find a buyer to-day, who would give £10,000 for those valuations. The effect of the new regulations and conditions would be to place matters on a sounder footing than they had been hitherto. In the first place, there had been a number of men who went on the settlements without any idea of husbandry. They were allowed to go their own sweet way until the Government appointed an inspector to advise them. A great deal of mischief had already been done, but that official understood the management of such settlements, and the condition of affairs had improved. He trusted that the settlements would ultimately prove successful, and that the Government would realise their anticipations in the shape of interest on the money expended. He was afraid, however, that before long the settlers would say that it was impossible for them to keep up the payment of interest at the rate of 4½ per cent. He supported the Bill.

The Hon. H. ADAMS said Mr Sandford had seized this opportunity to discount the system adopted in regard to the settlements, and to ridicule those who had any share in their establishment. He was prepared to take his share of the responsibility, and he congratulated the Government of that day on the amount of success that had been achieved in connection the experiment, notwithstanding what had been said to the contrary. At the time it was looked upon merely as an experiment. Hundreds of unemployed men were walking the streets, and as a solution of the difficulty, it was decided as an experiment to send them to those settlements. The experiment had proved a marked success. It would, at any rate, give a greater return then the construction of the Military road which had been undertaken for the same object, and which was now buried in sand and was a dead loss. It was also better than sending the unemployed to certain Murray lands, which were to-day as bad as ever. They had sent to the settlements a class of people whose children would not return to the city again, but would remain there. The experiment had also paid better than sending farmers into the arid country where they had to find them seed wheat and reduce their rents. Those formers were not now able to stand by themselves like the settlers at the village settlements. Also, if a balance-sheet were prepared it would be found that the experiment had been less disastrous to South Australia than the Government's transactions in connection with the pastoral industry. He supported the Bill, and hoped with other members that the village settlements would prove an object lesson and that on the banks of the River Murray they would find other people following their example—utilising lands which were formerly looked upon as useless.

The Hon. G. RIDDOCH said he was glad that they were drawing near the end of the village settlements, which he had opposed with all his ability. He had seen them, and must admit that he was impressed with the fact that the men were a better lot than he expected. They had struggled under very great difficulties, and he hoped they would prosper under the new conditions. He understood the Attorney-General to say that the liability which he expected to recover from those settlers was about £63,000. He also said that there were about 80 settlers in the seven settlements. That meant that about £800 was due from each of those settlers, and calculating interest at 4½ per cent, would mean that they were liable for about £36 each per annum. He fancied the Government would not receive that amount by a great deal.

The Hon. E. LUCAS said this Bill proposed to do exactly what was intended to be accomplished by the amendment moved by Mr. Parsons in the Crown Lands Bill, and he intended to support it. The object of this measure in the main was to provide that a class of settlers whose interests were almost identical with the blockers should become owners of the land they occupied; and therefore those members who voted for Mr. Parsons's amendment must vote for this Bill for the same reason.

The Hon. J. WARREN protested against the statement repeatedly made that the village settlements were established for the relief of the unemployed. That was not a fact, and he did not wish the statement to go unchallenged. The fact was that the Government brought in a Crown Lands Bill and the labor members insisted that a clause should be inserted for the establishment of the village settlements on socialistic principles, somewhat upon the lines of the communistic settlements at Paraguay and in other parts of the world. If the Government had been sincere, and wished to relieve the unemployed, they could easily have done so by giving proper encouragement to settlers to develop the country.

Second reading carried. Bill passed through committee without amendment.

Standing orders; Bill read a third time and passed.