**LAKE BONNEY IRRIGATION BILL 1894**

**House of Assembly, 9 August 1894, pages 874-80**

Second reading

**The COMMISSIONER of PUBLIC WORKS**, in moving the second reading of the Lake Bonney Irrigation Bill, said after all the figures they had had from the Treasurer that afternoon he did not intend to speak lengthily, but the matter was of such an im­portant nature that members must excuse him if he kept them for some time. The establishment of an irrigation scheme at Lake Bonney was no new question, as it was brought before the House in 1888 by Mr. Glynn, and again two years ago by Mr. Hack. Last session Mr. Homburg brought it forward; while in 1888 the then Commissioner of Public Works, Mr. Catt, gave members an opportunity of visiting the locality, and of seeing for themselves its suitableness for carrying out an irrigation scheme. The advantages of irrigation in an arid country were patent to everyone who had given any attention to the matter. It was, therefore, unnecessary to go fully into that phase of the question, but he would like to say a few words with regard to what had been done in other countries. If they looked to ancient times they would find in Mexico, Arabia, Egypt, and coming to more recent times m Western America, that communities were combined to carry on irrigation works under a concentrated system with local supervision with great success, and some even existed till to-day. Even the Pueblo Indians and Mexican natives, who were in comparative ignorance, appointed local managers to administer the law with regard to rates and the division of the water. They were obeyed with faithfulness. He would like to refer to a work prepared by Mr. Richard J. Hinton, who from many countries had gathered much information on irrigation generally. In that work he was pleased to see there was a reference to a member of that House—he meant Mr. E. W. Hawker, who had met Mr. Hinton and had given him some information concerning the works now being carried out in South Australia. In his work Mr. Hinton showed the real importance of the State taking more direct control over irrigation than it had previously done. At the commencement of the irrigation works in California about 1870 they were carried out on the principle of “every man for himself,” and the last man had no water. A man would tap a stream and take perhaps ten times the amount of water really necessary under proper management, and the people below him, although they had gone to the expense of connecting channels, were left perfectly waterless when it was a necessity for them to have water. In point of fact one man had as much as 18 ft. of water over his land in one year, whilst all those below were left practically waterless. This led to numberless law suits, and the question of riparian rights was agitating the people of California for a long time. But after a few years, the irrigationists being only mortal, wearied of growing oranges for the Californian lawyers to suck all the juice. Accordingly they sent a man of their own class—a Mr. Wright into the legislatures—and through his agency a law known as the Wright law was passed in California. That law provided for local districts under State supervision giving such districts the same power as we had practically over the Beetaloo water district, viz., the power of levying rates, making their charges, and specifying the amount of water that shall be provided to each man’s block according to the necessities of that block. At the outset this law was very strongly opposed by the large landowners who held land within the borders of the irrigable district, and who would have to come under the rates. Many of these were not using their lands, and were merely holding them for speculative purposes. Consequently they were forced either to sell or pay for the rights they possessed. Now, however, the whole thing was on a settled basis, and in 1891 instead of irrigation being at a standstill it was estimated that in the two following years there would be 2,500,000 acres reclaimed and placed under irrigation in California alone. Years ago members would recollect they used to see in their geographies what was termed the great American desert, comprising hundreds of thousands of acres. This great area, and in fact the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, comprising, as Mr. Hinton said, 700,000 square miles of land, which was only very sparsely settled because of the irregular rainfall, was to-day rapidly being irrigated. Enterprising settlers who had gone west to settle there with the idea of making a living were only a few years ago studying the possibility of moving somewhere else because one dry season meant absolute ruin to them. By artesian sinking, however, an unlimited supply of water had been struck, and the result was that to-day hundreds of irrigation settlements were springing up on this slope. Moreover, the idea was that the country there which now contained only a few hundred thousand inhabitants would—owing to irrigation—in a few years carry over 50,000,000 people in small holdings. The other States, following the example of California, had carried out laws dealing directly with irrigation, and it was in fact simply history repeating itself. The very first act of the State of Idaho was to petition the United States Congress to obtain direct power over all the land and all the water in their State, in order to carry out a complete irrigation scheme instead of allowing it to be carried out as had been done by private individuals in other places. The petitioners pointed out that they had already spent 10,000,000 dollars in the construction of their channels and irrigation works; that they had reclaimed over a million acres of land, and that they had increased the value of that land from ten to fifty- fold. Amongst other resolutions carried in 1801 by the State of Arizona was the following:—“That all natural streams and lakes within the boundaries of this state capable of being used for the purposes of navigation or irrigation are hereby declared to be the property of the State. The common law dealing with riparian water rights shall never be applied in this state.” This resolution was practically embodied in the constitution of that state. Besides this the States of Colorado, Dakota, Wyoming, and others had also passed laws with the object of placing the irrigationists under State control and dividing them off into districts as in California. He had referred to these laws to show the effect they had upon settlement and production. In 1891, after these laws were passed, there were in course of reclamation and already irrigated in States, which a few years before were considered arid, no less than 25,000,000 acres. In some of these instances the rainfall was less than the rainfall at Lake Bonney. Not only that, but the values of these lands had in many instances risen from 1 dollar an acre to 50, 100, and 150 dollars an acre. In California, to show the growth of production, he would say that in 1870, when irrigation was commenced, the number of orange and lemon trees was 46,000, but in 1891 the number had increased to 4,374,721, and other fruit trees in proportion. In the state of Colorado, which only a. few years ago was considered a mining state only, over 4,500 artesian bores had been put down and four million acres were now under irrigation. The southern part of California was more like our dry northern country than any part of America, and that country instead of being considered a desert, as it was a few years ago, was now one of the most productive places to be found in America. He had referred to those cases to show that the State should have direct interest in construction and control of the works. Mildura and Renmark were examples of the result of the proper application of water to land, and credit was due to Mr. Howe for the introduction of the Bill which first allowed the experiment of the Chaffey’s scheme on the Murray. Twenty years ago private people went in for irrigation and in many cases lost, and the State was now enabled to utilise the experience dearly purchased in some instances and in the case of the Mildura and Renmark colonies we could guard against the errors they had made, and so be enabled to carry out the proposed scheme as a successful undertaking. Last year Mr. Hornburg pointed out that private persons could carry the work out at a profit. (Mr. Homburg—“ I said nothing of the sort. I said let them risk it if they liked. ”) He did not think Mr. Homburg would have advised friends to go in for an undertaking if he thought they were going to lose. The experience in Victoria had been that those who were carefully cultivating their holdings were making a good thing. Some of the colonies there in the Wimmera and elsewhere had proved a success where the water could be easily placed on the ground without much expense, but where they had tried to bring water under great difficulties on to poor lands and had spent too much money on preliminary works they were a failure. A plan was placed in the Bill so that every member could have an idea of what the area to be dealt with was like and what the river levels were. A great deal of the expense incurred in other places with regard to wire-netting would be avoided at Lake Bonney, as by putting up 18 ½ miles of fencing they could shut in the whole area of the land without having to fence the various blocks. The main principles of the Bill were so clearly drawn that members would see there was no real necessity for extensive explanation. The first part was purely preliminary, while the next part referred to the subdivision of the blocks. They proposed practically to irrigate 10,000 acres of land under the first trust, exclusive of roads and channels, and they proposed to divide it into a thousand blocks, each of about 10 acres. They limited the blocks because they believed in the idea of practical settlement of the land and did not wish to attract speculators, as all the money put in the scheme was for the benefit of the settlers whom they expected to live on the land. The management of the settlement was dealt with in clause 14, and the maximum purchase money for a block was £220. Settlers would be divided into two classes, “working”and “paying” settlers, and there would be 500 of each, but there was power to allow working settlers to become paying settlers, and they would not allow the working settlers increased more than the number of paying settlers. The working settler would receive 30s. for his work, but £1 would be deducted towards the payment of his block. The paying settler, who would not have to reside on his block until the block was ready for him, would pay £1 per week. Thus the £1 per week paid in by the paying settler would not only pay the extra 10s., which had to be paid in cash to the working settler, but would pay in proportion for the supervision and machinery. As to the eligibility of selectors clause 20 stated :—“ The following persons shall not be eligible to become settlers, that is to say—(*a*) Persons who have not been continuously resident in the province for two years immediately preceding tlie 30th day of June, 1894. (b) Persons under 18, or in the case of working settlers over 00 years of age. (c) Asiatics, *{d)* Persons holding, or being or having been interested in, land in the province improved with the aid of advances from the public funds which have not been repaid.” We had in various places homestead blockers who obtained loans from the Government upon their land, and it would be an exceedingly unwise policy to depopulate one place for the sake of populating another. We wanted to discourage the idea of people deserting their old holding to go on to a new one. Clause 24 was another important one, which said :—“ Each settler shall fulfil his agreement in every respect, and shall be entitled to the possession and user of the block allotted to him, and to the produce thereof during the continuance of his agreement, so long as he shall observe and perform the terms and conditions thereof to the satisfaction of the Commissioner; but except as in this section mentioned, he shall not, until a perpetual lease shall be granted him, as provided by this Act, have any separate interest or property in such block, or in any buildings or improvements thereon.” They did not wish to destroy individual effort, and if a settler wished to grow vegetables or otherwise develop his own block he should have the full enjoyment of the result. He was not, however, allowed to transfer the block or to sell it or to speculate on the unearned increment during the construction of the work. The Bill gave power for the establishment of townships, which would be cut into half-acre blocks and put up to perpetual lease at auction, so that in the case of those who ought for the sake of business and paid a premium on their land the premium would go towards the establishment of factories and other things in connection with the factory fund. The blocks might be worth more than the nominal rental put upon them and it was only fair that this course should be taken. The factory fund and other accounts would be kept separate from the general and irrigation fund. Clause 49 stated:— “ At the expiration of four years from the commencement of the works mentioned in section 10, or sooner, if the Commissioner shall consider such works satisfactorily completed, the Commissioner shall ascertain the price or purchase-money of the settlers’ blocks in manner following, that is to say :— The aggregate of the amounts debited to the Lake Bonney Settlement account, in respect of the matters mentioned in paragraphs *(a)* and (b) of section 40, shall be divided by the number of the settlers’ blocks shown in the plan mentioned in section 8, and the purchase- money of each settler’s block shall be an amount equal to the quotient thus obtained.” Part IV. dealt with perpetual leases and Part V. provided for the management of the settlement after the construction of the trust. The trust was to be established on the same basis as the Renmark Irrigation Trust, with power to levy rates for providing the water. The principal miscellaneous clauses were those giving the Government power for the establishment of other trusts within the 153,000 acres in question. That this was not a faddish or theoretical proposal, but a practical one, would be seen from the closing words of an able leader on the subject in the *Register* to the following effect:—“Our object is rather to draw special attention to its provisions as proposals worthy of serious consideration—proposals which cannot be included in the category of utterly idle theories or fantastic ‘fads.’” As to the water supply, the Engineer-in-Chief in his report stated that even if we have a two years’ drought and are not able to obtain any water after the river is flooded—a very unlikely occurrence—there would be sufficient supply to give 18 in. to the 10,000 acres, and as the annual rainfall was about 11 in., this would mean a total of nearly 30 in. during the year, quite sufficient for all purposes on that soil. He would like to say a word about the cost. The work would take about four years to complete. The plant, channels, bridges, roads, &c., had been set down at £83,000. That was the estimate of the Engineer-in-Chief, but it was possible that the cost of the channels might be somewhat lessened. For planting half of each block, or 5,000 acres in all with fruit-trees the sum of £45,000 might be set down. A thousand three-roomed houses would cost £00,000, and fencing would come to £12,000, making a total of £200,000. The settlers would pay the actual cost. The 500 working settlers at 30s. per week for 200 weeks would cost, it was estimated, £150,000, and the supervision and material would come to £50,000, making the total £200,000. This was made up by paying settlers £100,000 and retaining £100,000 from the working settlers. What did the scheme really mean? It meant the settlement of over 5,000 people on the land. That would, indeed, be satisfactory. It would naturally lead to an increase in the Customs revenue, and that also would be well. The railway returns must improve. It would, indeed, be of general advantage to all. It had often been asked—“What shall we do with our boys?” This would afford a satisfactory answer to the question. Their fathers could take up blocks as paying settlers for them. (Mr. Homburg—“ This is all rhetoric. Can you give us the actual revenue?”) He could not state what an orange tree that did not exist would yield, but he

believed that they had every reason to expect good results from the settlement. (Mr. Howe—“That’s American humor.”) As far as practical results were concerned he trusted that in referring to matters in America he only dealt with those which could with advantage be copied here. For instance, he had never referred to such a malicious habit as lynching with a view to its introduction here. It was no disgrace to refer to anything in another country, even if it were China, if he could by illustration show what could be done by the application of honest labor under certain circumstances. (Mr. Howe—“Will it pay to grow?”) It would do so if we could get profitable markets, and there was no doubt that we could. The Treasurer that afternoon showed that some £50,000 worth of currants, raisins, and preserved fruits were imported in the colony last year, while throughout the whole of the colonies the importation amounted to nearly one million. With intercolonial free-trade or free interchange of native products we would have placed at our disposal the purchasing power of four million people. He would point to the fact that not one of the other colonies was so adapted either by climate or soil for the growth of grapes and apricots as South Australia, and the best fruit would always command a market. moved the second reading of the Bill.

Mr. BROOKER said he would not copy the oratorical efforts of the Commissioner of Public Works, although he appreciated such a good speech on the subject. This should be viewed by every party in the House as a great national question, and they should do what they could to ameliorate the condition of the workers in youth Australia. Looking at it from this standpoint he hoped every assistance would be given to the Government to make the measure a practical one, and one which would give such results as would bear out the anticipations of the Commissioner of Public Works. He did not wish to depreciate the anticipations of the Commissioner, because when considering the capabilities of the land on the Murray he thought they would to a great extent be realised. At present there was no difficulty about the water supply, although there might be if many more settlements were formed. An expert, who had resided at both Renmark and Mildura, said that at Lake Bonney the land was equal to if not better than any at either of those settlements. The Commissioner had alluded to the produce being disposed of in the neighboring colonies, but he thought we had the world’s markets open to us. In this connection he would remind the House that some fruit from Renmark and Mildura had realised higher prices than the Californian article. In forming the settlement at Lake Bonney they could take Mildura and Renmark as object lessons, and avoid many of the mistakes that had been made there. At its inception many said that the blockers’ system would be a failure, but it had been one of the most successful movements in the settlement of our land. Many said that the reclamation works at St. Kilda would be nothing but a dire failure, but he looked to the time when the Happy Valley waterworks were completed and the Sewage Farm extended to see that land covered with a thrifty and industrious population. He did not gather from the remarks of the Commissioner of Public Works when it was intended to start the Lake Bonney scheme. Did the Government intend to wait till there were 500 settlers willing to plank down £1 per week ? (The Commissioner of Public Works— “As soon as a sufficient number come in the work will be proceeded with.”) Everywhere there was a feeling in the community of what should they do with their boys. As for the girls they could do very well working in vine yards and fruit gardens. The Civil Service was not to be in the future what it had been in the past—an opening for the boys to get into. But if a scheme of this sort would make the heads of families say “ Here is something that —if we pay this amount—we can leave as a property to our children, and upon which they can earn an honest livelihood, they would be accomplishing some good. He was inclined to think a sufficient number of paying settlers could not be found to start this scheme. He was not sure by clause 10 whether the Government intended all these works to be confined to the settlers. As far as possible he thought that should be so. (The Commissioner of Public Works—“As far as conveniently practicable it will be so.”) Regarding the £1 per week to be deducted that amount was rather large. (The Commissioner of Public Works—“ The men have no house rent to pay.”) That was a big consideration certainly, but there was the possibility of broken time. If there was much broken time £1 per week would be too much to deduct from a man’s wages, and it might only leave him 5s. to live upon. He thought there would be a difficulty in preserving the equality of paying settlers and working settlers. If some of the paying settlers “ funked,” and perhaps fifty dropped out, what was the Government going to do with the working settlers who had gone there determined to make a home for themselves ? Were they to be barracked out of the settlement? (The Commissioner of Public Works—“There would be no difficulty of that sort. Paying settlers would not be likely to leave.”) So far as paying settlers were concerned they might make an opening for any one coming from the old country who was willing to become a paying settler. There would be any amount of working settlers, but the difficulty would be in getting paying settlers. Concerning the remarks of the Commissioner of Public Works regarding blockers who might have had an advance from the Government, he thought if anyone was willing to buy their improvements and take up their blocks these persons ought not to be objected to. (The Commissioner of Public Works—“ They would not be.”) Regarding clause 28, did that mean that the settler should have a free hand as to overtime ? He thought there ought to be some systematic planting. (The Commissioner of Public Works — “That is provided for in the Bill. He does it under the supervision of the Public Works Department.”) So far as township allotments were concerned it was doubtful whether it was wise to allow outsiders to come in and for the leases to be knocked down to the highest bidder. It would be better for the Commissioner of Crown Lands to put a value on the blocks and give the settlers a right by selection. It would be wise where the head of a household took his boys from town to the settlement, and their labor was utilised, that some arrangement might be made whereby an amount could be put aside for the labor of the boys. If that were done it would get over a difficulty with regard to some people who would like to go on the settlement. He would give the Government his support, as he anticipated good results from the measure, which he considered was one of the best Bills that they had had to consider since he had been in Parliament.

On the motion of Mr. CALDWELL the debate was adjourned until Tuesday next.