CROWN LANDS ACT AMENDMENT BILL 1917

House of Assembly, 1 November 1917, page 997

Second reading

**The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. H. Jackson)—**A portion of the Bill is to deal with the efficient reorganization of the department, and places the officers themselves on the Statute Books. It is also required to rectify a small error which occurred in the Act of 1915. This portion of the Bill is of somewhat more importance, and relates to the indorsement of the blockers’ title. Under the Act it will be remembered that the blockers were not allowed to transfer, and so an indorsement was placed on their deeds, which, without having been removed, prevented them from transferring their lands. At present we have only eight cases where people are holding the land under that Act. Therefore it is felt that we can reasonably give the Commissioner of Crown Lands power to have that indorsement removed without delay, so that there would be a freer opportunity for the transfer of their land if they desired. There was an exception made in the Act of 1915, which made it impossible for the Government to purchase any partially reclaimed land. There is partly reclaimed land along the Murray being offered to the Government, but we cannot take advantage of it. We are here asking for power to deal with such offers. Another point in the Bill deals with the reduction of rent. There are several kinds of agreements with respect to our lands. Concerning some of these it is felt that, notwithstanding the restrictions set out, the Commissioner should have power to deal with each case on its merits, and determine whether there should be a reduction or not. In certain South-Eastern estates, for instance, some of the settlers are under great difficulties with regard to the land they have obtained under the Closer Settlement Act. But closer settlement land is in a different category from ordinary Crown lands, for the reason that the Government have paid a certain amount for the former, and, of course, have not done so with respect to the latter.

Mr. Reidy—If the Government have made a mistake, is it right that it should be handed on to the settler?

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS —If we were to give the powers suggested by the honorable member, I am afraid there would be a tendency to run the State into future debt by reducing the price as compared to what the State paid for it.

Mr. Reidy—But if the case is just, it is better that the Government should pay than that the settler should do so, seeing that it was the Government who made the mistake.

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS I should be pleased to relieve those settlers in some way, and the Government are considering the matter. We have recently had the Engineer-in-Chief investigating a drainage scheme in connection with one of those estates, and we hope that by spending some money in that direction, we shall be able to help those people remain on the land. It is necessary to give the Commissioner power to review rents being paid. In one case the only possible chance of getting a reduction today is by the Land Board reporting that the rent fixed in the first instance was too high. It means that if the Board likes to admit its incompetence to fix the rent properly, the amount can be altered. It is not a fair position in which to place the Land Board or the person concerned. In another case the rate can be reduced once only, according to statute, and that is the end of it, although we may be quite satisfied that the rate should be still further reduced. A clause is to be placed in the Bill which will cover the cases where the Minister has granted reductions, but where the Act says he should not have done so. It has hitherto been understood that no man who holds a lease from the Crown is entitled to part with it unless he gets the consent of the Commissioner of Crown Lands; but we found as the result of a High Court case that such is not the position. The Judge said the wording of our Act in that direction is faulty, and therefore a man may sell his lease without getting the transfer from the Minister. Therefore, to make sure of our position, we are proposing an amendment to cover that point. There is still another matter, and it is the most important. That is to deal with advances for improvements. Up to the present we have been able to advance to settlers for sheds and tanks. Since the price of iron has gone up so high, however, it has been found necessary to go in for some other method of conserving water, so where we are unable to erect sheds and tanks, we are going to consider granting the money in such directions as the building of concrete underground tanks. This Bill will provide for such a position. We are also proposing an advance for improvements in the way of fencing and clearing and getting the land ready for seeding. In Victoria that has been put into operation, and while all the good that was expected of it did not appear, still where men are struggling under heavy financial burdens it must be realized that if we can help them in the early stages of their work, we shall be conferring great benefits. The late Commissioner of Crown Lands (Mr. Goode) had in his mind a scheme whereby the Government should get some up-to-date machinery and clear some hundreds of acres in different localities, enough on each farm to enable a man to get on to it straight away. They tried something of the same sort in Victoria. The trouble, however, is that very often a man can clear his own land even cheaper than the Government with their machinery. We do not wish to saddle either the Government or the individual with a greater liability than can be helped. I agree that the principle is a good one, if it can only be put into practical operation. At any rate, we are making a step in the right direction. We place a limitation upon clearing and grubbing. We will not give a man an advance upon an unlimited amount of land. That amount will be up to 250 acres. We will give him some advance for the work he is actually doing, and we will count it as an improvement. We will welcome any criticism of the Bill, and if honorable members can suggest anything that will make the lot of the struggling producers any easier, the Government will give the matter consideration.

Mr. GOODE—With regard to clearing land, I am glad the Government have taken up the proposal which I put forward, on behalf of the Vaughan Government, and that they have recognized the valuable suggestions made in dealing with proposals for mallee land. The proposal that advances should be made for clearing land is a step in the right direction, but we want to be satisfied that that clearing is permanent, and that merely rolling down will not be regarded as a permanent improvement. It will be necessary to have the stumps rooted out if the clearing is to be permanent. The proposal, however, does not seem to go far enough, and I do not agree with the method proposed by the Government. I suggest that the land should be cleared in advance, under the contract system in preference, by the adoption of power plant, which would give the most economical results. The cost of such permanent clearing spread over the whole area could be made a charge against the land. It is the only way by which this mallee land will be occupied. If the men themselves have to clear the land the cost of horses and implements will handicap them. They cannot afford, like the State can, to purchase these heavy plants. There is land in the West Coast just off the railway line where, on account of the sandy nature, it does not pay farmers to cart wood, and they cannot cart firewood when they are putting in their harvest. I ask the Minister to put in, as an alternative proposal, a provision that the land may be cleared under my proposition. I have discussed the matter with representatives of J. & J. Fowler, the agricultural machine makers of England, who have a farm of 25,000 acres in South Africa, where they are demonstrating what can be done on a big scale with a power plant. I suggest that we should have a plant, which, with a competent gang of men, working on the piece-work system, could clear the land, taking section by section. The settler would then have enough cleared land the first year from which he could obtain hay, and year by year he could clear an extra area, for which he could obtain an advance. The proposal in the Bill is doomed to failure, because of the heavy handicap clearing imposes upon a man. I do not advocate the use of tractors and ploughs, because in rough country the knocking about they receive destroys their life, but where you have two stationary engines, with hauling power in between, the only knocking about is when the engines are travelling from place to place. When the scrub is rolled down, it can be burnt, and afterwards the stumps can be taken out and the land made ready for cultiva­tion. The man can then take up the land and put his crop in at once, and year by year he can clear more acres and secure an advance for his work. By doing that we will be more successful than by compelling a man to go on to the mallee and clear it himself. We do not want a man to be driven off by adverse conditions, but when he goes on the land, which has been cleared, he will be a permanent settler with profit to himself and a benefit to the State. I regret that as I am going away, I will not be able to follow the Bill through Committee. I know the disabilities that exist in trying to clear land by the present methods, which are altogether too costly. It will pay the State to procure such a plant as I have suggested. If they do not employ a power plant, the Government could have powerful teams and gangs of men, who would clear the land more economically than the settlers could do. It will cost the Government less than it will cost the settlers, as the settlers have to work under primitive methods. I have no objection to letting the work under contract. Personally I would be prepared to take charge of such a plant and carry the work out satisfactorily.

Mr. Moseley—The Triumph Plow Company tried it.

Mr. GOODE—Not in the way I suggest. They tried to do it with traction engines. We might call for tenders on a basis of satisfactory results. It is worthy of a trial, and I urge the Government to consider the proposal.

Mr. ANGUS secured the adjournment of the debate until November 6.