**IRRIGATION ACT AMENDMENT BILL 1925**

**House of Assembly, 15 December 1925, page 2255**

Second reading

**The MINISTER of IRRIGATION (Hon. W. J. Denny)—**This short Bill amending the Irrigation Acts, 1922 to 1924, is necessary in order to give the Government power to put into operation certain recommendations contained in the report of the Irrigation Commission relating to settlers other than discharged soldiers, and to make one or two other necessary amendments to the principal Act. Clause 3 enables the Commission, with the approval of the Minister, to reduce the rent of any block in an irrigation area, and to direct that the rent payable for any such block shall be payable quarterly in ad­vance. The rent of blocks held by discharged soldiers is fixed by the Minister of Irrigation, and therefore the power of reduction with regard to discharged soldier settlers is given to the Minister. The facts which render it necessary that the Commission should have power to reduce rents will be found on pages 24 and 25 of the Commission’s report. The Commission made a reclassification of the land at Mypolonga, Wall, Neeta, and Pompoota to enable it to arrive at a decision as to what was a fair rent to be fixed. With regard to the quarterly payment of rent, the power in the Bill is asked for so that it can be applied in respect of rent for land in reclaimed swamp areas. It is expected that lessees of swamp lands will find quarterly payments much more convenient than annual payments, since in the dairying industry the proceeds of the produce are received regularly throughout the year. Clause 4 re-enacts section 46 of the principal Act with certain, amendments. That section limits the area of “reclaimed or irrigable” land which a settler may hold in an irrigation area to 50 acres. The clause proposes to give the Commission power to allow settlers in certain cases to hold up to 100 acres of land suitable for irrigation if that is necessary to enable them to make a success of their blocks. The reason will be found in the report submitted to the Government by the Irrigation Commission. The areas referred to have already been classified and subdivisional plans are being prepared with a view to their gazettal for allotment as soon as opportunity offers. Prompt action in the direction indicated is, therefore, necessary. Clause 5 empowers the Commission to remit the whole or any part of the moneys expended by the Commission in making improvements on behalf of a settler under section 100 of the Irrigation Act, 1922. Under this section the Commission is empowered to expend money up to £30 an acre in making improvements on irrigation blocks, and the amounts so expended are treated as an advance made to the lessees of the blocks. The Irrigation Commission came to the conclusion that civilian settlers in the Holder division of the Waikerie area were over­charged for grading done and pipe lines laid on their blocks and reductions were in consequence recommended. Clause 6 gives effect to a recommendation of the Commission explained on page 25. In reclaimed swamp lands the Commission recommends a reduction in. rent and a water rate calculated on the basis of 30s. an acre. It also recommends that where in past years the total of water rate and rent charged for any such lands exceeds the new rent, plus water rate at 30s. an acre, the settler should be credited with the difference. I move the second reading.

The Hon. Sir HENRY BARWELL secured the adjournment of the debate until December 16.

**IRRIGATION ACT AMENDMENT BILL.**

Adjourned debate on second reading.

(Continued from December 15. Page 2200.)

The Hon. G. R. LAEPER—This is a short Bill which embodies recommendations of the Irrigation Commission. The provisions of the measure apply to civilian settlers. Only recently certain concessions were given to soldier settlers in the lower river areas, and it is only fair that civilians should be placed on a somewhat similar basis. For quite a time there has been much dissatisfaction at Mypolonga, and the measure proposes to give relief, not only to settlors there, but to those at other swamps. Clause 4, perhaps, is the most important. While it embodies the recommendations of the Commission, there is one aspect which I desire particularly to place before the House. The Commission recommended that it should be empowered to increase the area of blocks, that is, to give a settler up to 50 acres of irrigable land, but in no case was the total area to exceed 100 acres. While I want very strong evidence to depart from the recommendations of the Commission, which has gone into this matter very thoroughly, I question whether 50 acres of irrigable land is not too much to place in the hands of one man. There has been a tendency to treat irrigation blocks as grazing land. Such land is much too rich and valuable to be used only for grazing. It should be cultivated and utilised for the hand feeding of stock. Under grazing the quality of land deteriorates, and consequently does not produce to its full value. Unfortunately, in dealing with some of the areas on the lower river we were forced to bring them down to a dairying basis, but we must remember that in fixing the price of land we are doing it practically for all time. In 20 years time it may be found that this land can be utilised much more profitably. Magnificent crops can be grown on it, and there is no land in Australia which will produce heavier crops of lucerne and maize. It is true that the quality of some of the upper swamps varies. The first class land is carrying a cow to the acre, the other parts of the swamps do not do as well. I question very much whether it pays a dairyman to employ labor. Surely no one would say that it is profitable to employ labor when it would cost l0 lbs. or 11 lbs. of butter every day to pay for the labor of one man. Yet this is one of the reasons advanced by the Irrigation Commission for making the blocks larger. The Commission points out that a larger area would enable a settler to employ labor, and consequently get about the markets, with benefit to himself. There may be something in the suggestion, but it must be generally conceded that the price of dairy products leaves scarcely any margin for the employment of labor. To a large extent it is a family proposition. The people complain about the cost of dairy produce, but I question whether there is any industry giving a poorer return for the labor spent on it than the dairying industry, which has to compete in the world’s market. The Commission suggests that the settlers should be asked to pay quarterly. Dairying is an industry from which there is a constant return, and if the

men are not able to pay quarterly they cannot pay half-yearly or yearly. Therefore, I support the suggestion. It would be in the interest of the settlers if they were called upon to pay every week or every month, but, of course, that is not possible. One thing which has brought some of the areas into the condition they are to-day has been the lack of proper grading, and the Irrigation Commission must grapple with the matter. One has only to go on the areas which have been settled for a considerable period to see the condition the drains have got into. The drains were handed over to the settlers, and they were supposed to maintain them, but they did not do so. These drains were excavated to a minimum depth of 4 ft., but to-day many of them are not more than 18in. deep. That means raising the water level, and, where that occurs, crops cannot be grown profitably. The question arises whether the Commission should not take the matter out of the hands of the settlers and maintain the drains in a thoroughly efficient manner. The more water that is pumped on the land the more has to be pumped off. The seepage water is conveyed to the lowest level where there is a pump to draw it off and throw it into the river. Mr. Morphett’s property is an example of how reclaimed areas should be kept as regards drainage. At the top end the minimum depth of the drains is 4ft. to 5ft., and that gradually increases to 14ft. at the bottom end. As a result of that there is ample drainage and sufficient depth from the top of the soil to the water level for plants to grow to perfection. At Long Flat and Neeta I have seen the water within 10 in. of the surface. Crops cannot be grown under those conditions. The rock under the country along the river is mainly limestone, and on limestone country you get deleterious salts of one description or another. The most important question so far as the swamps are concerned is to reduce the seepage water to a proper depth. With regard to the size of the blocks, there is the aspect as to whether a man can profitably work 50 acres of that soil. When the settlement of these swamps was first proposed Professor Custance was detailed to investigate them, and his report was that the soil was far richer than the swamp lands on the Nile. He questioned whether there was richer land, in the world. These swamps have deteriorated because the water level has been allowed to rise. At Mypolonga water was pumped into the back channel in order to allow the settlers to water their cows. That water gradually seeped through and has had a bad effect on the land. These swamp lands are too valuable for grazing purposes, and should not be used for the purpose but for growing crops. I raise no objection to the Bill, because it is only fair that the civilian settlers should be considered. I support the second reading.

Mr. REIDY—When we were discussing the- Discharged Soldiers Settlement (Relief) Bill. I endeavored to direct the attention of the House to the omissions in that measure by reason of the fact that it did not deal with settlers, other than those on irrigation areas. This Bill justifies what I said with regard to bringing outside settlers under the same advantageous conditions as are set out under this Bill for settlers on irrigation areas. The new clause to be embodied in this Bill provides that the Commission may have power to reduce the rent payable for any block in irrigation areas. Here is a very good system of machinery for dealing with lands which have been overvalued, but we have no such system as regards outside lands. There the power rests with the Minister. Under this Bill we will have a proper board of experts appointed to deal with the case of reducing charges. A similar clause to this should be embodied including soldiers in other settlements apart from irrigation areas. Then we would have a board of experts whose duty it would be to inquire definitely into each case, and recommend, subject to the approval of the Minister, the amounts of rents or other charges which should be paid by the settlers. I commend to the Minister the necessity for including other settlers in a clause such as this. If a board of experts is appointed, and they are sent out to value in other portions of the State as well as irrigated areas, and to recommend a reduction or any alteration they may consider necessary, then we would have a practicable scheme whereby other settlers living on farms away from the Murray could be dealt with. The Minister must have some board to recommend. Here we have the machinery set out in a practical way whereby a board can, with the approval of the Minister, make necessary reductions. I desire that a similar board should be appointed to deal with other areas apart altogether from irrigation areas. There is a larger acreage held away from the River Murray by settlers than is held along the Murray areas, and the power in the hands of the Minister to-day has no effect. If there were a board such as this whose definite duty it would be to inquire into cases and make recommendations for reduction where necessary, we would get a system whereby the settlers apart from irrigation areas would get the same justice as those in irrigation areas. I recommend to the House the necessity for including under a similar board settlers living in agricultural areas away from the Murray.

Mr. FITZGERALD—The argument of Mr. Reidy has much to recommend it and I sup­port it. Mr. Laffer said this was some of the richest land in the world. To insert a clause giving any person double the quantity of land which it was at first intended should support a settler and his family is altogether outside what was intended by members on this side of the House. If we restrict the provision absolutely to 50 acres of irrigable land and add a good slice of back country to it we will be doing what is in the interests of the State and the settlers. I am sure that 50 acres of the richest land that can be held in South Australia together with a quantity of the back country would meet requirements. The argument of Mr. Reidy that there should be some board similar to the Irrigation Commission which would have power of recommendation to the Minister with respect to the revaluation of certain outside lands has a good deal to recommend it. Because I feel sure the Land Board could do that, it should take the place of the Irrigation Commission in the making of recommendations on similar lines with respect to settlers not on the irrigation areas. If the Minister can see his way to excise the permission to any person to hold more than 50 acres of irrigable land I would like to see it done. I feel that we should restrict the clause to 50 acres and as much outside country as is considered necessary.

Mr. STANIFORD—I support the Bill, which is very necessary. There is no doubt so far as settlers on the lower Murray swamp areas are concerned that the Commission should have fairly wide powers to deal with those areas. The report of the Commission points out that it has been due to the fact that holdings have been too small that they are in their present condition. The report states:—

The Commission is satisfied that the difficulties of settlers are largely due to the fact that the holdings allotted to them were too small.

The experience of men down on those swamps bears out that opinion. More particularly at Mypolonga settlers have pointed out again and again that they have not had sufficient irrigable land to enable them to earn a reasonable living. Their holdings have ranged from 15 to 20 acres. The Commission considered that settlers should be placed in a position to earn a fair living on their blocks. Those who know anything of dairying know of the long hours of toil associated with that industry, and I quite agree with the Commission that they should have a sufficient area to enable them to make a good living. Clause 3 provides that the Commission may, with the approval of the Minister, reduce the rent payable on any block in an irrigation area. I quite agree with that because the Commission should have fairly wide powers. I recently attended a meeting of settlers at Mypolonga to consider the Commission’s report. The Commission recommended that the rent for first-class land should be £2 an acre, and inferior land should be charged for proportionately. The settlers were unanimously of the opinion that £2 was too high for the best land they held, and they suggested that £1 would be sufficient rental. Possibly, if the Commission has the powers proposed given to it there may be a compromise as far as rents are concerned, and the amounts fixed on a basis satisfactory both to the Commission and to the settler, because after all each case must be dealt with on its merits. Mr. Laffer referred to the fact that some of the land at Mypolonga had deteriorated during recent years. The Commission mentioned in its report:—

The Commission found, after a careful inspection of the swamp land, that portions of the areas coming within the scope of this inquiry (particularly at Mypolonga) had seriously deteriorated through want of better drainage, and the trouble was extending.

The Commission have proposals for dealing with the drainage at Mypolonga, which I hope will have the effect of restoring that land to a satisfactory condition. Mypolonga was one of the earlier settlements on which a certain amount of experimental work was carried out. It was there that the settlers were given combined fruit and dairying blocks. That was not a success, because the men were unable to devote their time to the dairying block when they were attending to the fruit block, and vice versa. I find that the grading at Neeta was the cause of the swamp land being brought below its value, and in their report the Commission stated:—

In carrying out the grading large areas have been ruined by stripping the top soil off a clay subsoil, and in some cases even moving the clay subsoil and covering up the good soil. The costly system of terracing was adopted especially on Neeta, whereas a general smoothing out of the surface and the excision of high bumps from ratable land would have been much more economical and effective.

I approve of the Bill so far as it gives the Commission the right to review rents and make adjustments, so that the settlers will have sufficient land to enable them to make an effective living. After all that should be our purpose. These men have spent many years on the Mypolonga settlement and we should make it possible for them to continue there. I support the Bill.

Mr. McMILLAN—I am rather surprised to see that under clause 4 there is practically no limit to the area of land a man may hold on a reclaimed swamp area. It seems strange that this power should be vested in the Commission, when on page 24 of their report, under the heading of “ Reclassification of land and adjustment of holdings,” we find the following:—

The Commission received a wide range of opinion from experienced witnesses in reference to the number of cows one man could manage, the figures varying from 10 to 25 cows without milking machines, and from 20 to 35 with milking machines. The Commission considers that it is desirable that settlers should, where possible, be given a sufficient area to carry at least from 25 to 35 cows for the following reasons:—

If the report is perused further, it will be found that the land was put down with a carrying capacity of one cow to the acre. Following their report, the Commission came to the conclusion that a herd of 20 to 35 cows was sufficient for one man.

Mr. Blackwell—The clause does not say that there shall be no limit. It distinctly provides a limit of 100 acres.

Mr. McMILLAN—An area of 100 acres is too much for one man to hold on these-valuable reclaimed swamps. The Commission have decided that 40 acres is the living area for a family, and I should like the Minister to give the House more information on the clause. While we have every confidence in the Commission Parliaments, Governments, and Commissions change, and in this clause is a very big loophole which would enable anybody in power to put this valuable reclaimed swamp land to a purpose other than the State intended.

Mr. COLLINS—The last speaker, and evidently the majority of members, are wondering why clause 4 is in the Bill. It is apparent that they have not read the report fully, or that they are not thoroughly acquainted with the new conditions which apply to the reclaimed areas. Up to the present, no person has been eligible to hold more than 50 acres of irrigable land. The clause is inserted with the object of applying only to three or four settlers. The position was brought about in this way. Previous Governments have reclaimed the bend of a river without making any soil survey. It is indisputable that on all reclaimed areas the northern end, over which the river washes, is invariably denuded of the rich black soil from the top, which is deposited at the south end. Consequently, in all areas the northern end is of less value than the southern end. That applies to Wall, Neeta, Pompoota, and Mypolonga. The northern ends of those areas in the first place were cut up into 20 or 30-acre blocks, but now the Commission have reclassified the whole of the land. I had the honor and privilege to eke out a meagre existence on 22 acres at the northern end of Wall, and my neighbor, who had 22 acres of this gray clay soil, was in such a bad way that he nearly went out. Now the Irrigation Commission have classified most of that soil as second or third class land, though the parts that are good have been classified as first class. Consequently Mr. Wundenberg, who holds the northern end of Wall, has 119 acres, which was previously classified as irrigable land. Mr. Laffer knows that along the frontage of Wall there are some big heavy gums and the land cannot possibly be watered, yet my neighbor and myself, when we had it, were charged, for that as first class land. We were debited with water rates on that basis. The Commission have seen the fallacy of those debits, and out of the 119 acres comprising the top end of that swamp, they now consider that only about 30 acres can be classed as first or second class swamp. That 30 acres bears water rates. Under their rating of land theCommission have given Mr. Wundenberg the option of bringing the additional 89 acres into productivity, if possible. They have given him the poor land at a low rate to encourage him to fertilise heavily and to work it up. If he goes on for three of four years working on and experimenting with the land he may find that at the end of that time it may be profitable for him to pay water rates on it. He would then have to apply to have it classed as irrigable land. If it were classed as such he would have more than 50 acres. If a man applies himself to such poor land, and by putting gypsum and other opening substances on it, improves it considerably, he is entitled to the reward of his labor. If this clause, however, stated definitely that no man was to hold more than 50 acres of first class land, and nobody will deny that 50 acres of first class land is more than one man can work, a man who had improved poor land by his industry would be deprived of the fruits of his labor. It does not say that. It says that he shall not have more than 50 acres of irrigable land in the aggregate, provided that the Commission may allow him to hold more if it is necessary, in the opinion of the Commission, that such additional area is required by him to •enable him to work his block. I ask the Minister to stick to clause 4, otherwise it will upset the whole of the Commission’s reclassification as regards the lower areas. If ;anyone does move an amendment it will be evidence that he is not acquainted with the full conditions on the swamps.

Bill read a second time.

In Committee.

Clauses 1 and 2 passed.

Clause 3—"Power to reduce rent.”

Mr. REIDY-—Would it be possible to extend this principle of giving some competent body the right to make reductions to soldier settlers on other than irrigation areas'?

The MINISTER of IRRIGATION—It is not -competent to introduce into this Bill any Clause relative to matters which do not come within the scope of the Irrigation Act. The necessary inquiries are being made as to whether something can be done in the direction desired. Whether it is done on the report of a body or not, the Minister has ample power and can exercise it. As we have the power it is only a matter of taking such steps as are considered necessary.

The Hon. G. R. LAFFER—This clause provides that the Commission may, subject in each case to the approval of the Minister, reduce the rent payable for any block in an irrigation area. In dealing with the upper areas it is provided that the Minister may reduce the rent on the recommendation of the Commission. Can the Minister explain the distinction?

The MINISTER of IRRIGATION—There is no distinction in practical effect, but it; would be advisable in these cases to have the Acts as uniform as possible. Whoever has the final approval is the supreme body. The better plan would be to report progress in order that the matter may be reconsidered.