**RENMARK IRRIGATION TRUSTS ACTS FURTHER AMENDMENT BILL 1914**

**House of Assembly, 10 November 1914, pages 1477-80**

Second reading

**The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. P. W. Young)—**It will be necessary, after the second reading of this Bill, to have it referred to a Select Committee, under the Standing Orders, because it is a Bill of an hybrid nature, and semi-private, because it advances the interests of a local body, and purports to invest certain land in a local body. The object of this Bill is to make available for allotment to the Renmark settlers and others certain land adjacent to the Renmark settlement, which formed part of the area originally held by Messrs. Chaffey Brothers, but which is now commonage lands. This land is too high to enable it to be profitably irrigated, but it is suitable for grazing and cultivation, and might be worked with advantage by Renmark settlers in conjunction with their irrigable lands. The Bill also provides a method of enabling the Renmark Irrigation Trust, No. 1, to pay off its existing liability to the Government for principal and interest on loans for the development of the settlement, amounting to nearly £20,000, which liability they are otherwise quite unable to meet. For the purpose mentioned, the best portion of the land referred to, amounting to 6,392 acres, is vested in the Trust in fee simple, and the land so vested is to be offered by the Trust for sale on agreement for sale and purchase, on the same terms as under the Crown Lands Acts. Another portion, containing 9,700 acres, and consisting of inferior land is to be offered by the trust on leases for grazing, or for grazing and cultivation. The leases are to be granted for a term not exceeding 21 years, subject to re- valuation every seven years. The right is to be reserved to the Crown to resume possession for purposes of closer settlement, or for irrigation ana reclamation, of any land leased, on six months’ notice, and the Minister of Irrigation and his officers are to have the light to enter upon the land for pur­poses connected with irrigation. This portion is not vested in the Trust. The balance of the land, containing 538 acres, is to be dedicated as commonage for the Renmark settlement, but may be resumed for any public purpose or for settlement. In providing for the allotment of the land, and the fixing of the rent or purchase money, the machinery provisions of the Crown Lands Acts have been adopted as far as possible. A Board, consisting of three members, to be called “The Renmark Allotment Board,” is constituted. Two of the members are to be ratepayers of the settlement, nominated by the Trust., and the third is to be a member of the Land Board, nominated by the Minister. The functions of the Board are chiefly to fix, subject to the approval of the Minister, the size, and the annual rental or purchase money, of the blocks to be offered by the Trust. Clauses 7 to 16 deal with matters of detail connected with the Board and its functions and proceedings. In the allotting of blocks, other things being equal, Renmark settlers are to be preferred. All money received by the Trust as purchase money or rent is to be paid to the Treasurer towards the liquidation of the Trust’s liability to the Government. Provision is made for two amendments in the Renmark Irrigation Trusts Act of 1893—to increase the maximum rating power of the Trust from 10s. to 15s., and to obviate the necessity of calling a special meeting of ratepayers before imposing a special rate. The other clauses of the Bill are not specifically referred to deal with incidental matters. The Renmark Irrigation Trust is indebted to the Government to the extent of £19,000, and in recent years they have been unable to make repayments because they have been overwhelmed with expenditure in connection with the upkeep and maintenance of their plant and drains. To some extent they are the victims of mistakes made in the past, and for which they are not re­sponsible. The Trust was created to take over Chaffey Brothers’ settlement, and a great deal of that land was made freehold at the time on the assumption that Chaffey Brothers had effectively carried out their obligations as regards machinery, drains, and other expenditure of the settlement. Some time afterwards, however, the people found that the machinery and drains were not all that they ought to be, and a great deal had to be learned with regard to irrigation on the banks of the Murray. Not only did they lose a great deal of water in the way of seepage, but it is found that this leakage has a serious effect upon the roads, and therefore the people are put to a considerable expenditure, with a result that the total result is more than absorbed in the up keep of drains and machinery. The matter was brought under my notice last year, and in discussing the question it was pointed out to me that a considerable area of land was set apart for commonage purposes. The settlers felt that as that land was equal to any on the south side of the Murray for agricultural purposes, they could profitably employ their teams and plant during their slack seasons in cultivating it for agricultural purposes, and in this way supply their needs in hay and chaff. That is in keeping with our policy in connection with our irrigation settlements. The reason we are doing it this way is that the Trust think that if we allow them to handle it they will be able to get the special value, which will just about meet the obligations to the Go­vernment. When the question of utilising this land was put before me I put the proposition to the Cabinet that if we could get a substantial sum it would be a fair thing for the Government to consider whether it would not be a setoff against the indebtedness. This land really belongs to the Trust. Although the Government have the right to resume, the settlers have a considerable right to the land, and we should not take it away from them. The land at present is of very little use, and any extra values placed upon it will be due to the settlers alongside, and we think that extra value belongs to the settlers. Perhaps the best way I can deal with the position is to read the following memorandum I submitted to the Treasurer on my return in March, 1913:—

When visiting Renmark in May this year, the question of the indebtedness of the Trust to the Government to the extent of about £19,000, and their inability to pay same was brought under my notice. It was set up that their indebtedness was largely due to the settlers at Renmark having been the pioneers in irrigation, and that consequently much of their experience had to be obtained at considerable cost, which experience has been available for all subsequent irrigationists with valuable results to the State. They further state that much of their trouble has arisen owing to the lax administration of affairs many years ago, when Chaffey Brothers acquired rights (and sold lands accordingly) before they were entitled, the result being that settlers bought blocks at high prices on the supposition that certain irrigation works had been undertaken, and satisfactorily established, whereas, as a matter of fact, such works had either not been done or had been very inefficiently done, and, consequently large expenditure was required, which-partly accounts for the present indebtedness. The Trust say that they are anxious to meet their liabilities, but they can see ahead of them continuous annual expenditure in repairing their drains and making the roads, which will be quite as much as the settlers can afford to pay in the shape of rates. They pointed out to me the state of disrepair into which most of the drains have fallen, notwithstanding close attention upon their part, and the expenditure of all the moneys available, and I have to admit that considerable work has to be done for many years in repairing these drains, both for the purpose of economising the use of water, and also for the protection of the roads which now severely suffer owing to the leakages. The settlers, like all other producers, are feeling the increased cost of production, and are consequently afraid of the liability to the Government and the necessity of expending large sums of money within the settlement. I discussed the position fully with the chairman of the Trust, who has, without fee, given many years of service to its affairs, and the question arose as to what could be done with the lands commonly known as the “dedicated lands”. At the present time, as I understand the position, the Trust can only lease these blocks on short leases, and the result is that the blocks remain in an unimproved state, covered with timber, and producing the merest grazing rent. On the other hand, I hardly think that any Government would feel justified in revoking the dedication and leasing them under a tenure which would ensure their development. A portion of these lands is, I understand, suitable for

irrigation, but the balance lies at too high a level for that purpose . Experience on similar lands in and near Renmark, seems to indicate that with modern farming a good return of hay can be grown, and the settlers make a strong case as to their want of such lands, so that they may grow hay for their own use, and employ their horses and their own labor at times when their orchards do not require same. They point out that chaff has always been an expensive item in their costs, and it was commonly stated that for comparatively small areas of these high dedicated lands they would be more than willing to give substantial prices (£3 per acre) so as to have dry country to work in connection with their flooded areas. It occurred to me that it might be well to grant these dedicated lands on the higher level with power for the Trust to allot same, in which event it was thought that they could obtain almost sufficient money to repay the Government liability, and perhaps the whole of it. I offered this suggestion to the chairman tentatively, and I believe that he and the Trust would be glad of the opportunity of having a means of repaying the Government liability, and at the same time of being able to ensure a more profitable use of the dedicated lands in question. The necessity of having what might be called dry lands has been recognised in all our recent irrigation schemes, and during my visit to Renmark I received a deputation of some of the settlers requesting that part of the neighbouring sheep-run might be resumed and cut up for settlers’ blocks for agricultural purposes. As you are aware, the land is on the immediately opposite side of the river to that strip of agricultural country which is to be served by the Paringa Railway line. The soil is equally good, and the rainfall apparently about the same, and there is no reason why farming immediately around Renmark should not be almost, if not entirely, as satisfactory as immediately south of the river. The suggestion which I make, to sum it up, would have the advantage of keeping our loan position with the Trust on a satisfactory basis, and also of leading to the development of many thousands of acres which are now lying practically idle. I would like yours and the Cabinet’s consideration of the suggestion as, in the event of the adoption of same, legislation will be required, and in the meantime I would like to be in a position to meet a request in this direction which I believe wall shortly come from the Renmark Trust. The Government could not, if the dedication were revoked, obtain anything like the purchase money which the Trust could ask. Their settlers would pay the higher price to the Trust, and practically obtain the benefit of having their liability removed by the increased value which they have created

The Government considered the matter favorably, and after submitting the question to the Director of Irrigation, surveys were taken, and we ascertained the exact area that might be dealt with in this manner. The present Bill is the result of the survey, and the considerations given to it by the Director of Irrigation. These proposals do not affect the extension of the irrigable area.

Mr. Burgoyne—What is the area *?*

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LAMDS—It is about 6,000 acres of undulating country. It is good farming land, but no good for irrigation.

Mr. Vaughan—What is the small block on the plan ?

The COMMISSIONER OF CROWN LANDS—That is a small block adjacent to a number of others which the Trust say that with the machinery available they could make it available for irrigation without much expenditure. The blocks marked “ Y” represent the portions to be dedicated—areas which are all possible irrigable blocks in the future, except in the extreme area of *“* Y,” which is a gypsum area, and we are not parting with it. All the land colored purple is capable of irrigation, and if the scheme is successful and the settlement is put on a sound financial footing it will be desirable for Parliament to consider whether they should not help the Renmark Trust with a grant of money to enable the Trust to extend the plant so as to increase the size of the irrigable area. Then we would be extending an existing important settlement, which, after all, is a better proposition than having a number of new settlements. The Trust are not seeking at present any further financial obligations, but if they are relieved of them they might be able to extend their operations.

Mr. James—What is the size of a block ?

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS—The Trust’s idea is from 50 to 100 acres, and they feel they will have no trouble in getting from £100 to £150 for them, and this money will be earmarked to pay off the indebtedness to the Government. I do not think the Government could ask that price for the land, because it would not be in keeping with the price we are getting for land in the neighborhood. We would be hardly justified in saying that this land has a special value and we will take it, because that value has been created by the Renmark people. If this Bill is not carried we will be forced to ask for a repayment under the Bill of 1907. I understand the secretary of the Trust will come down with a view to give evidence from the Trust’s point of view. The Government officers concerned will be asked to give evidence, and the Director of Irrigation can satisfy the House as to area of the irrigable portions of the land. I invite honorable members to give immediate consideration to the Bill, but in view of our desire to rise early and the fact that the matter will be carefully considered by a Select Committee, the House might take that step and give the Bill a quick passage up to the point of the Committee inquiry. This is a matter involving surveys and reports, and the matter has been delayed also by the fact that we have had to indulge in extraordinary legislation which has taken up the time of the Parliamentary draftsman. The Bill is fairly clear as regards its purport, and I move the second reading.

Mr. VAUGHAN—As the matter is going before a Committee, and I will have fuller details from the evidence of interested parties, I will defer speaking on the matter at present.

Bill read a second time.

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS moved that under Standing Orders the Bill be referred to a Select Committee consisting of Messrs. Goode, Smeaton, Miller, and Angus, and the mover, and that the Committee have leave to sit during the sittings of the House; and be entitled to call for all necessary papers and documents, and report on Thursday next.

Motion carried.