**SEED-WHEAT BILL 1896**

**Legislative Council, 10 November 1896, pages 318-24**

Second reading

**The CHIEF SECRETARY** moved the second reading. It was a matter of urgency. The farmers should know immediately what would be done for them, and the Government should be put in a position to know what steps they could take to help them. He anticipated no opposition. All would recognise that something should be done in the disastrous season to tide the sufferers over the depressed time, and give them an opportunity of getting crops in this year, with hopes of a more favourable season to follow. Last year there was a failure of the crops on the Murray Flats, and arrangements were made with District Councils to allow farmers to get wheat and seed their land. There was another disastrous failure this year, and those who got wheat last year would have enough to do to get sustenance for their families. This year, too. the failure of the crops was much more widespread than last, and assistance to a much greater extent was required. It was proposed to apply the same system and afford relief through the local bodies, who from their circumstances would best be able to judge cases and be best able to control the distribution of seed wheat and make arrangements for the repayment of the value advanced in that direction. The Bill provided for the Government through the District Councils supplying seed wheat to farmers in districts where crops had failed under certain conditions. Subsection 1 of clause 5 provided that the Councils should see that the wheat was given only where really required, while subsection 2 set out that they should see that the seed supplied was used for sowing the ground, not to be sold or used as feed for stock or anything else. Subsection 3 provided that each Council should repay to the Treasurer the cost of all seed supplied, with interest at £5 per centum per annum from January 1, 1897, the whole to be paid on March 1, 1898; provided that in the case of any principal and interest paid to the Treasurer on or before due date one-fifth of the interest so paid should be rebated to the District Council paying the same. The chances were that a good season would follow the disastrous ones we had passed through, and the farmers would have till March, giving them ample time to garner the crops to repay the advances. Clause 6 provided that the amounts advanced to District Councils might be taken as a set-off for any subsidies due to them by the Government. This gave the latter a further security. Clause 7 allowed the District Councils for their own protection to take securities offered by the farmers, while clause 8 provided that the cost of the seed and interest should be a first charge on the crop grown in 1897, and on the farm whereon it was grown. Clause 11 provided that advances made last year should be dealt with under the Bill. Clause 12 allowed farmers outside the borders of District Councils to come under the provisions of the Bill. He believed there were a very few such on the West Coast. While the Government had shown its desire to help sufferers it had also taken every possible precaution for security through the District Councils for the repayment of the value advanced under the Bill. He hoped they would expedite the Bill through the Committee.

The Hon. J. DARLING seconded. The Government were to be congratulated upon the steps they had taken. The country realized the deep necessity of the case. He was sorry that the forecast he had made in June and July last had not been realized. From the experience of the past they had reason to expect that following a previous dry season they would have a fair rainfall, but this year it had not been so. Every colonist in South Australia would deeply sympathize with the farmers in the dire circumstances to which they had been reduced, and it behoved every one both in and out of Parliament to give more than his mite to relieve the distress. The fund now being raised by both sections of the Press, which had been fairly liberally responded to would to a great extent relieve the necessities of the urgent eases. He was glad that the Government did not intend to interfere with the private fund, which would go far to relieve the distress in the drought-stricken parts of the country, and to provide food for the sufferers. The greatest care should be taken in the purchase of the seed wheat. A great injury might arise through the injudicious purchase of wheat, and he hoped it would not be necessary to import any seed from California or India. They must be careful or they would injure the farmers and damage the high character of the grain and the value of the manufactured products of the wheat. If the wheat from California was examined it would be seen that it was not to be compared with that grown in South Australia. The bakers, who were the best judges, complained of the difference, and he himself had noticed that bread made from imported flour was not nearly so white nor so sweet as that manufactured from the locally grown article. His own impression was that it was not necessary to go beyond the Southern seas for seed. They could get a first-class change of wheat from New Zealand. The long-bearded wheat and the Purple Straw from New Zealand could be introduced. He was the first to send the Purple Straw to New Zealand. Then there was the wheat from Riverina. Adelaide was being supplied with wheat at the present time from that place, and if it were not for New South Wales many of the mills now at work at Port Adelaide would be idle. A large portion of the wheat that might be required could be secured from the Riverina, and it could be brought into South Australia cheaply. He did not know the attitude of the Government upon the tariff question, but there had been little seed wheat introduced duty free during the last twenty years. He understood that on a few occasions the Treasurer had, on his own responsibility, refunded the duty when he was satisfied that the wheat had been used for seed, but the amount refunded had been infinitesimal. If it was right for the Treasurer to do that it was right that it should apply all round, and the law should be altered so that all could take advantage of it. If the crops in the Wimmera district were not a failure wheat could be secured from there, and besides there were our own crops. He had seen a few samples of this season’s wheat, and some crops were going from 10 to 12 bushels to the acre. If rain had fallen fourteen days ago they would have had a bountiful harvest, because the present weather was most favourable to crops that had had rain. If it had not been for the wheat and flour that had been imported duty free some years ago the colony would now be witout wheat and flour, for during the past forty-two years he had never known wheat and flour to be so scarce. In 1855, when flour was £52 per ton, there was more in proportion to the population than there was at present, when the price was from £10 to £14 10s. There were some safeguards in the Bill, but some Councils would have a favourable season and some would have nothing, and the Bill proposed to mortgage the income of the Councils for the wheat supplied. The failure was a great national calamity, and the favoured districts should have a portion of the burden placed upon them as well as those districts where the crops had been failures. Why should not Adelaide as portion of the colony bear a portion of the debt? There was the chance that a portion of the fund would never be returned. It had been stated, and he thought it came from the Government, that last season the Government had advanced some £5,000 for seed wheat and none of it had been returned. The majority of the farmers who received it were in the drought-stricken districts, and therefore they could not pay it back. By-and-by a large portion of the money advanced under the Bill would not be returned and the general revenue would have to pay it. He had great faith in the public fund, but it was charity, and he had greater faith in the Government, because they were backed up by every right-thinking person in the colony. He had been told that the millers had not subscribed to the fund, but when it was decided what to do with the money he did not think the millers and grain merchants would be behindhand in their subscriptions. He hoped the farmers would be blessed with a rainfall shortly, and that what wheat there was would not be spoilt.

The Hon. J. L. STIRLING would not oppose the Bill. He hoped that when he ventured to criticise a measure it would not be regarded as a note of discordance. Members were here to express their sympathy when they could, but at the same time they should treat matters in a businesslike way, and not discard the business instincts which characterized them in private life, and go neck and crop for all Bills just as they were introduced. Something should now be done for the farmers. The present Bill was one which appealed to the sympathy of members, and to a certain extent to their sentiment, but it was somewhat removed from the hard and fast lines of commerce. He had intended to draw attention to the point Mr. Darling had raised that the Bill threw the whole burden of a national calamity on districts which had been the least favoured. The South-East, for instance, had practically not suffered, yet the Bill would relieve it from rendering any assistance. This was an occasion on which the responsibility should have been accepted by the Government. The District Councils might be made responsible for the distribution, as no one was in a better position to take the responsibility, but the responsibility the Bill threw on them was unfair, and was one which he, as Chairman of a district, would hesitate to accept. Take, for instance, a district which included Murray Flats and a portion of the hills. On the Flats the crops were absolute failures, but along the edges of the ranges some of the farmers had fairly good crops. The whole Council had, however, under this Bill to accept on behalf of the ratepayers any deficiency which might occur m repaying the loans given. Experience had shown that farming on the Murray Flats was precarious, and not likely to prove remunerative in the long run. Was it fair that people in a district who were not likely to want assistance themselves should have to go bail for those who needed it? In these circumstances there was no certainty that the Councils would accept the responsibility. Then what would become of the individuals who really wanted the assistance? There was a clause in the Bill renewing the term for the repayment of the loans granted last year. If they were going to build against the farmers’ responsibilities in connection with these loans they were going the right way to break their hearts. To put the responsibility as this Bill did on the Council which had suffered most was charity working in the wrong direction. Was it likely that all the precautions provided in the Bill would be carried out by the Councils? It was hard to refuse applications from needy persons, but the Councils not only had to give the wheat but to see that it was not disposed of to other persons. He would be loth to undertake that responsibility himself. The Bill said that interest was to be the first charge on crops grown in 1897, but was that sufficient safeguard? Next season might not be a good one. If the people who had loans could not repay them would the Councils have any right to levy a general rate to recoup the Government? The Bill was not explicit. Was the debt only to be chargeable by the Councils to those who had received it? The Government were not going the right was about being liberal. In some districts in the North they were so badly off that seed wheat would be wanted by everybody. (The Hon. W. Russell—\*‘No; some of the farmers have the money to buy it.”) There were districts, any way, where the condition of the feed and crops pointed to the universal need of help. He wanted to see the Bill on a basis free to those who wanted assistance, and so that the Councils would be freed as much as possible from responsibilities.

The Hon. W. RUSSELL was glad to have heard the criticisms of the Leader of the Opposition. He had seen in his travels an indescribable state of affairs, but many men had wheat in hand, and others had told him that they had the money to buy seed. There had been large returns quoted in the past, and knowing that some people had asked how it was that one bad season threw the farmers on their beam ends, but it should be remembered that when the crops had been good during the last season or two prices had been low. He congratulated the Government on the liberality of the Bill and the Premier on having drafted it so quickly. He only wished that the Playford Government in 1888 had acted in the same way as this Government had acted. If they had done so much good would have resulted, but that Government said much of the land was not worth sowing. They, however, gave one Council £3,000 to spend on roads over which there was nothing to be carried. Had they given half the money for roads and half for seed wheat more good would have been done to the farmers and the colony. They believed in local government, and those who lived on the scene and were elected for the various wards would know the wants of the farmers, and would perhaps know those who did not require assistance. Was it fair if the District Council of Hawker gave £5,000 that the District Council of Strathalbyn should share in the responsibility of it? (Hon. J. L. Stirling—“You misunderstand me altogether.”) The Bill was on the right lines. He did not know a single District Council that was unwilling to take the responsibility. The only one they heard of during their travels was Orroroo. Surely Mr. Stirling would admit that there was enough State socialism in the Bill without binding the whole colony as regards the responsibility. The farmers of the colony generally were thoroughly in sympathy with the Bill, and when they were in a position and had the opportunity to pay they would be only too glad to pay the advances back. He knew at one place— he thought it was at Hammond—where they had got wheat, and it was said they were not in a position to pay, and they approached the District Council and asked if they could give them anything to do to work off the liability. If a Committee were appointed to advise as has been suggested there would be a greater liability to make mistakes, and it was far better to let the local governing bodies do the work. He was pleased to see the Conservative element taking such a view of the Bill as they did. Mr. Stirling was a Scotchman, and had a warm heart; and the other leader of the Opposition, Mr. Ward, had been called a friend of the farmer, and he hoped he would not fail in his duty now.

The Hon. E. WARD would give a practical recognition of his sense of the necessity for the Bill by not delaying its passage through making a long speech. He knew the distress and the urgency of making provision to enable our farmers who were in distress to have at least an opportunity to recover their position. The Bill had his most cordial support except as to clause 4, which he would seek to strike out. That limited the supply to 250 bushels. Each case should be dealt with on its merits, because it was apparent that the larger the area from which a man had got no return the greater the distress would be, and if they limited the assistance the less the opportunity he would have of recovery. They could trust those upon whom they were throwing the responsibility of the distribution to deal with each case on its merits. Looking upon the lessons of the past, he congratulated some members of the present Government, or one member at least, and other members of the Legislature who seven years ago absolutely and persistently opposed any attempt to distribute seed wheat to farmers, upon the pleasing fact that those hon. gentlemen had given such practical proof by supporting this Bill, and upon having “the virtue to repent and the energy to atone.”

The Hon. J. WARREN regretted the necessity for the Bill. The cause of the distress was partly owing to the fact that the Government had encouraged a number of men to go upon land which was not fit, and never would be fit, for the settlement they adopted. Men had been induced to take up small blocks, and had been unable to turn the land to the best account. They had been living as it were from hand to mouth, and had never had the opportunity to lay by something for a rainy day. Then we had overvalued the lands and undervalued the energy of the people. There was not a harder-worked portion of the community or a section which endured greater hardships than those who went into farming and pastoral pursuits, and they deserved every consideration from Parliament. Then the farmers had suffered too through the agitation of those for putting on taxes and encouraging protection. Nearly every article used on the farm was protected for the benefit of other classes. The clause giving power to a District Council to recover in the same way as they would a rate seemed a sort of cutting of covenants. How would this affect the person who had advanced money on the farm? Although there was a great cry against moneylenders and those who made advances in this way they should deal fairly and justly with all classes. He agreed with Mr. Stirling that it would be better if the District Councils were, in this matter, in the nature of Boards of Advice. They could give the Government all the necessary information. He failed to see why a Council in say an impoverished district should be put to the expense of maintaining a staff of officers to see that all the requirements of this Bill were carried out, because a great deal of oversight would be necessary. He could not agree with Mr. Ward’s amendment.

The Hon. G. McGREGOR complimented the Government upon their prompt action. He agreed to a great extent with what Mr. Russell had said, but he did not think that hon. gentlemen had made himself particularly plain in regard to his references to Mr. Stirling. He had not the slightest doubt but that Mr. Stirling had acted in perfect good faith. (Hon. W. Russell—“I don’t doubt that.”) While in the North, in company with other members, the farmers who attended the very large gatherings were unanimous in declaring that 80 to 90 per cent, really required no further assistance than that given by the extension of the State Advances Act, and that probably about 10 per cent, of the farmers would require the assistance of seed wheat. But even the 10 per cent, did not desire this as a gift. The great majority of those who spoke did not speak on behalf of themselves. Most of them declared that any Seed-wheat Bill would not affect them, that they were prepared by ready money or money advanced on ample security to provide for their own wants, but they spoke for the small minority who really required assistance. Was it not better that the people who really desired assistance and were prepared as soon as possible to take the responsibility should have it rather than that it should be thrown upon the whole colony? If in the future it was found impossible for the District Councils to meet their obligations it would be time enough to consider what to do. If the District Councils were to act only as Boards of Advice, and to take no responsibility, they would not exercise the same discrimination as they otherwise would. As to a District Council of which half was in distress and the other half prosperous, did Mr. Stirling imagine that those who had enough and to spare would object to those in distress in the same Council being assisted? A District Council in such a position would be all the more ready to take the responsibility. Mr. Stirling reported a district that would not require assistance to the same extent as would that reported by Mr. Darling, and yet Mr. Stirling would be ashamed to report a man or woman who would be so mean as to say in their fulness they would not help any one who was destitute. The people in the Southern District would have no objection to the Bill. The clause which limited the amount of assistance to 250 bushels might be all very well in the southern portions of the colony, where holdings were not so extensive; but in the North, where farms ranged from sometimes 1,000 to 2,000 acres, and on which there had probably been 1,000 acres under seed last year, and a few hundred under fallow, it would be a great pity for any of that land to be without seed next season. If in 1889 the farmers had got all the seed they wanted, many of them might have been in a position to-day to weather their difficulties. Considering, to, the very rich harvests there were in the North in a successful season, it would be an advantage to the colony that all acreage should be sown. The Chief Secretary seemed to think when he spoke to him that it would be impossible for the Government to assist the fanners to that extent. The District Councils, knowing they would be responsible for the amount distributed, might be given power to distribute according to the requirements of the different farmers under the Councils not exceeding 500 bushels. He did not believe that the settlers on the Murray Flats had any desire to be pauperized; it was their intention when they had an opportunity to pay through their District Council every penny they had received. Mr. Warren had said that past Governments were to blame to a great extent for the present calamity, because they had forced people into country not fit for farming. That had been the argument of the pastoralist ever since farmers went north of Gawler. Over 50 per cent, of the farmers that went into would be unable to do that without employing additional assistance. He did not think the Bill provided for any subsidy to the Councils in respect to this supervision or inspection. It was impossible and ridiculous to ask the Council to provide an overseer to see in every farm that the seed was properly sown, and that nothing else was done with it. The Bill from one point of view seemed to be of an extremely comprehensive character. He wished it had not been. It meant giving the Government a blank cheque to fill in for any amount they pleased. The Council had no idea given them as to the amount that would be spent, and it would be better if a maximum had been stated. The Government might then if necessary exceed the amount voted, and ask Parliament for an extra grant, and he was sure it would be given. It was the safest course to adopt. He drew attention to clause 8. Did it not cut existing covenants? It was reasonable to think that many people who would be assisted would have previously mortgaged their farms for assistance, and if the Government were to have the first charge it would be cutting the ground away from the existing security. (The Hon. D. M. Charleston—“What would be the value of the security without seed wheat?”) He admitted it would be better to keep the people in occupation than to allow them to go, for then the security would be hopeless. (The Chief Secretary—“If it were not for this Bill the people would not be able to get other assistance if their places are mortgaged?”) He recognised that. Then as to the grants. Did that mean that the Government were going to hold their hand in respect to grants to the Councils this year? If that was so it would place the District Councils in a disadvantageous position. It would be a mistake, because the main roads were dependent entirely upon the grants from the Government, and it was undesirable to allow them to go out of repair, so that the Government might be in a safe position as regards the money advanced. The Government should not stop the subsidies, because in a time of hardship the local bodies could undertake improvements and maintenance possibly at a cheaper rate than at other times. If after the first year the Councils proved defaulters it would be time enough to stop the subsidies. Although a Bill of this character should be passed it was their duty to criticise the details and find out what expenses they might be called upon to meet.

The Hon. J. G. BICE said the Government might congratulate themselves upon the re­ception the Bill had met with from the Opposition. As to the points raised, especially the last one by Mr. Duncan, he did not think there was anything to fear. It was clearly set out that the money was to be a first charge upon the crop, but if there was any danger of the subsidies being stopped that year the matter should be cleared up. So far as he

could see there need be no suspicion that the Government would interfere with the current year’s subsidies. As to the contention that they were placing too much responsibility upon the District Councils the answer was that the Bill had been before the country for a fortnight, and none of the Councils had raised objection. The Orroroo Council had been mentioned, but that had been brought into prominence because the Council had fallen into the error of thinking they were to be made responsible for the amount without having any power to recover. The matter had been cleared up by the Chairman’s letter to Saturday’s papers. (The Hop J. L. Stirling—“Have any other Councils considered it.”) He had spoken to two or three about the question, and none of them had raised any objection. If the clauses were made less stringent they would be making the Councils responsible and not giving them power to recover. They saw by the Bill that the Government while still having the power to recover for the advances made the previous ear were not likely to use the power in a harsh way.

The Hon. Sir E. T. SMITH recognised the necessity for the Bill, and he congratulated the Government upon their action. He took exception to clause 8. He agreed that the money advanced should be the first charge upon the crop, but he did not think they should commit the injustice of adding “and upon the farm upon which it is grown.” It would be doing an injustice to the landlord. He might not have received any rent for years, and it would be unfair for the Government to have the first charge upon the farm. He knew cases where the owner had not received any rent for several years, and in some cases had advanced seed wheat to the farmers. The owner might not be aware that a grant had been made by the Government and the place mortgaged to the State. The Government should not seize any one else’s property. It would be the same if a storekeeper purchased goods from a merchant, and failing repayment the merchant seized the goods and also the whole place. It might be that the farmer might be careless, and secure no crop and the landlord might not receive any rent.

The CHIEF SECRETARY was pleased at the reception of the measure. There had been one or two objections raised. As to the 250 bushels, it was not proposed that every one should be supplied with as much wheat as he required without any limit. Last year the limit was fixed at enough to sow 100 acres. Practical farmers said 250 bushels would be enough to sow 400 or 500 acres, and with an emergency like this that was as much as the Government should be asked to give and the Councils to be responsible for. As to the suggestion that the distribution should be undertaken by the Government, Mr. Stirling agreed that the Councils should undertake the distribution of the seed, but the Government thought it only proper that if they did this there should be some check upon them. Mr. Duncan had raised a fair question as to the set-off, but the Government would withhold no subsidy until a Council had had a fair chance of making its repayments. Then as to Sir Edwin Smith’s point he thought the Government should in an emergency like this have a security. If a landlord would not allow the security to go out of his hand then he would no doubt step in and help the tenant himself. They had had two bad seasons in one part and the Government had not taken extreme steps with regard to the security, and if there was another bad season it was not likely that they would take the extreme course of distraining.

Carried.