IRRIGATION AND RECLAIMED LANDS ACT FURTHER AMENDMENT BILL 1917

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Second reading

**The MINISTER of AGRICULTURE (Hon. R. P. Blundell)—**This is a Bill to amend the Irrigation and Reclaimed Lands Act of 1914. It deals with three important matters so far as the administration of the department is concerned. First of all it deals with an alteration of the principal Act, 1914, clause 79, which fixes the rate of interest at 4 per cent. It is felt it would be better and fairer to everybody if the fixed rate were taken out, and it was left to be adjusted from time to time as is done in other departments in connection with Vermin and Acts of that character. Under the Act of 1914 we have to advance money at 4 per cent., but we are unable to obtain money at that rate, so honorable members will see that there should be some discretion to enable the rate of interest to be varied in accordance with the terms under which money can be borrowed. Clause 4 of the Bill is really the machinery under which that proposed alteration will be made. Clause 5 is a new subsection which will commend itself to honorable members. It provides that the Minister shall have power in any cases where it is shown that the irrigated block has been seriously neglected, and has deteriorated in value because of the neglect of the lessee, to determine the lease. These irrigation blocks give the finest opportunity there is anywhere in Australia for a man to become successful. The Department has gone to a great deal of expense in draining the land and providing plant to irrigate the land, and there are men who do nothing on these blocks. Trees have been planted, but they have been allowed to die, and everything on some blocks is going to rack and ruin. The Department should have the right to determine those leases, because it is wrong from the point of view of the State that a man, after having all these improvements on which money has been spent, should be able to allow them to de­teriorate so that they become useless. These blocks were established not to lie idle, but to be utilized and to provide a livelihood for the individual, and to contribute to the general prosperity of the country. In one or two cases this clause could, with great advantage, be put into operation, but at present we are perfectly helpless. The power will only be exercised where it is absolutely necessary that something should be done. The Department has always been ready to meet the difficulties of settlers, and has never treated them harshly, and the clause will only be put into operation when we are satisfied that the individual after repeated warning will not put his block to proper use. After the clause has been put into operation and the Government sell the lease the individual will be entitled to any amount over and above what he owed for rent and other advances. Clause 6 deals with the construction of drains and drainage works in the irrigation area. Unfortunately, we have discovered that some action should be taken to cope with seepage on various reclaimed lands. We have been fortunate in that respect, but we have to realize that seepage does exist, and it may become a serious trouble, and unless it is tackled with firmness and determination it may mean the wiping out of the whole settlement. We have evidence on one or two blocks that trees are dying, and if it is allowed to go on the whole blocks will be ruined. It is all right where the water can get away, but in one particular block there is a clay bank which prevents the water from doing so. The Department is taking steps to drain the water off, but before we can provide drains to take the surplus water, we must have power to go on to the land to make the drain. In the case I refer to, the owner is anxious to let us go in but in a big scheme it will be necessary to pass through other blocks which are not affected. We cannot allow the objection of one individual to stand in the way of what is necessary in the interests of the community. Mr. Muspratt, who has had a great deal of experience, is giving this matter careful consideration, and if necessary, the Government will be prepared to invite some person who has had actual experience of seepage in other countries to come to Australia and assist them with advice.

Mr. Reidy—Does that give power to go on private land?

The MINISTER of AGRICULTURE—Only on irrigation and reclaimed land under the Irrigation Department. I cannot tell honorable members the size of the drains, but that matter will have to be decided by the officers. The Bill also provides that there shall be power to declare a drainage rate. The question of seepage is going to be a very big thing and will involve, perhaps, a whole series of drains through the reclaimed area. This is not a matter that can be dealt with by the individual settler. It is a question of national importance. The Bill provides that the Minister may put on a rate to cover the cost, and use the money for purposes provided in the Bill. It is necessary that we should deal with this difficulty in an effective manner at the beginning. The trouble from seepage is small practically at present, but the policy of the Government is to make every provision to deal with it should it grow into a big thing. Thousands and thousands of pounds that have been spent on the Murray settlements will be wasted if the seepage is not dealt with effectively.

The Hon. J. Verran—According to clause 5, the Minister may have the power to take over blocks which are not being practically worked. What would happen to any improvements on those blocks?

The MINISTER of AGRICULTURE—In those cases we would sell the lease, and any liability owing to the Government would be paid. The lessee has a legal right to have any money that is left. There is one case in connection with these settlements to which I wish to refer. In the midst of the beautiful surroundings of the well-kept blocks we found one young fellow sitting down and doing nothing, and the whole of the improvements are going to rack and ruin. It is a scandalous waste of public money, and the object of the clause is to prevent that sort of thing. The Bill does not interfere with the general principles of the Irrigation and Reclamation Act, but gives the power to deal with the question of seepage. I am sure the Bill will commend itself to honorable members.

Mr. LAFFER—Although small, this is one of the most important measures discussed in this House this session. We have spent an enormous amount of money in connection with irrigation and reclamation, and it is time those in authority considered the question as to whether they are getting the best value for the money spent. Few honorable members understand how serious a menace to irrigation is the question of seepage. Until this is dealt with on a proper basis and a scientific method, we will never get rid of the trouble. It stands to reason that in a dry country like the Murray lands, the water that sinks into the subsoil is bound by capillary attraction to come to the surface, and bring the deleterious salts. Practically the whole of the irrigation settlements are on a limestone foundation, and these salts occur wherever you get that particular foundation. I am glad the Minister is obtaining authority to enter upon these properties in the interests of the State. Take the settlements from Murray Bridge to Renmark; instead of those settlements remaining under the Department of Irrigation, they should be placed under the Director of Agriculture, because once the land is prepared, and the water applied to the land, they become agricultural propositions and not irrigation propositions.

Mr. Angus—I have said that in this House several times.

Mr. LAFFER—We shall never get the required efficiency until this is brought about. I have the greatest admiration for the Director of Irrigation, but he has his limitations. This work requires a scientific method, so as to deal with the question of seepage, and if the operations are put under the control of the Director of Agriculture, the work will be carried out efficiently. I know the conditions along the reclaimed areas. The water remains in the seepage channels week after week, when it should be emptied out and give an opportunity for further seepage to take place. On this question depends absolutely the success or otherwise of the irrigation settlements. Quite recently, in company with the Minister and Director of Agriculture, I attended a conference in the hills. The Director was only there a short time, but he struck a note at that meeting which, if carried into effect along the Murray, would double the value of that land. He advocated the cultivation of the berseem, specimens of which he had brought out from Egypt. If it is properly applied in this State, the results of its cultivation would pay the expense of the Director ten times over. The settlers on the irrigation areas of the Murray seem to be wedded to lucerne growing, but irrigationists on the Nile would not grow lucerne. They would put their land to the highest possible use, and would grow produce on it which would give them much more valuable returns than lucerne. The great advantage of berseem over lucerne and such fodder plants is that it will grow in the winter just as luxuriantly as does lucerne in the summer. Thus they can get two crops off their land in the one year. They could grow berseem in the winter, and put in some such fodder as maize in the summer months. I would like to see the Agricultural Department in closer touch with the reclaimed areas, because the Director would probably be able to bring about a new era so far as those settlers are concerned, what with his expert knowledge of the right things to grow, and his scientific advice in respect to the banks and the encroachments of the water. Another question of importance is the rebuilding of the banks along the reclaimed areas. The whole matter will have to be carefully considered from this point of view. Last Friday I was on the lower reaches of the lakes in a neighborhood in which a road approached a jetty for a distance of 40 chains along the lake side. With the water coming in, it had undermined the road. It has a rotten foundation, and as soon as the seepage enters it becomes of a constituency like mud. In the case of the banks the situation is similar, and the chances are that with the water seeping in, those banks will subside considerably. In the interests of the men along the river it would be well for the Government to secure experts from the other States to confer with the Director of Agriculture. It has now been suggested that a reinforced concrete core should be put into the banks. It would be unwise to do that until there has been further expert consideration. Such a core would only be adding to the weight of the banks, and tend to their subsidence. It is probable that every 20 or 30 years the Murray settlers will be flooded out. They must look forward to such reverses, and provide for them, just as the settlers in the far north have to put up with periodical droughts. Along the upper reaches of the Murray we have probably gone in for too much watering and not sufficient cultivation, and we have to find out what is the proper means so as to give the right amount of vigorous growth and not injure the land to any greater extent than possible. It should be the maximum growth with the minimum of water; for the more water that is put in, the more likelihood there is of injuring the soil.

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