**DROUGHT RELIEF BILL1923**

**House of Assembly, 30 August 1923, pages 442-**

Second reading

**The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon G. R. Laffer**)—I move the second reading of this Bill, which is introduced for two main purposes. Firstly, it is designed to secure the ratification by Parliament of the action of the Government in the earlier part of this year in assisting settlers in the drought-stricken areas of Eyre Peninsula and Peebinga by the supply of goods. Secondly, it will, if passed, authorise the Government to continue to assist settlers in those regions so as to enable them to carry on until the coming harvest. It is a matter of common knowledge that the past two seasons on Eyre Peninsula have been particularly dry and that the farmers have had very poor returns from their land. During last season the difficulties of the settlers have been aggravated owing to the scarcity of water in the local supplies, and the consequent necessity for making long trips in order to obtain water from the supplies brought up by railway. The obligation to spend so much time in water-carting, hampered the settlers to such an extent that they were unable to put in full crops for last harvest. When, in addition to their other misfortunes, the settlers were faced in March last with a refusal on the part of storekeepers and merchants to do business, except upon terms of cash, or credit for one month only, many of the settlers found themselves unable to continue working their blocks. They thereupon appealed to the Government to tide them over the prospective season. It was obvious that if anything was to be done, it was of no use unless done immediately. In the light of past experience, it was realised that if the settlers could be kept on their blocks over the next season there was little doubt but that would be able to pay for any assistance rendered them. On the other hand, if help were refused, it would mean the abandonment of many blocks, and the settlers (and possibly their creditors) would loose altogether the results of their arduous toil in bringing new land under cultivation. The Government, therefore, in order to relieve the situation, did two things. It refrained from making any immediate demand for rent from any settler who was not in a position to pay just then; and it instituted a system of supplying the settlers with necessary commodities. It is proposed by this Bill to ratify this system, and authorise its continuance up till December 31 next. The system was as follows:—A representative of the Government was sent out to Eyre Peninsula and Peebinga in order to investigate the circumstances of the persons who applied for relief. Every case was considered on its merits, and in a number of eases assistance was granted. The method adopted was for the Government’s representative to give the settler an order which he could present to his storekeeper or merchant for such quantities of seed, chaff, super, and general stores as were necessary in each particular ease. The settler receiving the order signed a written acknowledgment, and agreed with the Commissioner of Crown Lands to repay the cost of the commodities, with interest at 6 per cent., by February 1, 1924, or on transfer or mortgage of his holding. He also agreed to use the goods on his land, and to give the Commissioner a bill of sale over the next crop, when called upon to do so. This system is retained in the Bill. By clause 3 the Commissioner of Crown Lands is empowered to supply farmers in drought-stricken areas, or cause them to be supplied, with seed wheat or other cereals, manure, hay, chaff, flour, and any other commodities which are necessary, in the Commissioner’s opinion, in order to assist the farmers. The Commissioner may procure these commodities himself, if he thinks fit. No goods, however, are to be supplied after December 31 next.

Mr. Harvey—Would you apply that to drought-stricken navvies?

The COMMISSIONER OF CROWN LANDS - I do not think the cases are analogous. Requests have been made to the Government to provide work for men, and the matter has been considered. Mr. McIntosh this afternoon asked in regard to men along the river, and we have not turned down the request. When men have been on the land for a number of years and met a season like the last one, we should do something to keep them on their farms. Nsvvies get as much consideration as any class of the community. Clause 4 limits the power of the Commissioner by restricting the cases in which assistance may be granted. Only in cases where the Commissioner is satisfied that a settler cannot crop his land or feed his stock or maintain himself and his family without assistance can he supply any goods. Clause 5 proposes to give statutory force to the practice which has been hitherto followed, in requiring settlers receiving assistance to sign an acknowledgment, which really amounts to an agreement to repay at the times mentioned in the acknowledgment. The Bill in clause 6 embodies the terms as to date of repayment contained in this acknowledgement. As a result of this clause there will be a statutory as well as a contractual obligation on every settler to repay the cost of his goods, with interest at 6 per cent, on or before February 1, 1924, or on making any assignment of his interest in the land occupied by him. The Commissioner may extend the time for repayment, or postpone the time from which interest is chargeable. Clause 7 proposes to make the amount owing by a settler in respect of goods supplied under this Bill a first charge on his land. This follows the policy adopted in previous Drought Relief Acts. Clause 8 validates the action of the Commissioner in supplying commodities to applicants before the passing of this Bill, and contains the necessary machinery for bringing these cases under the operation of the Bill. Clauses 9, 10, and 11 create offences and are designed to prevent any abuse of the provisions of the Bill. Clauses 12 to 14 are machinery and need no special comment, and clause

15 contains the usual financial provisions. The assistance we have given has been confined to four things—-seed wheat, superphosphate, horse feed, and food to carry the men on. As to superphosphate required by the men, the officer I appointed to do this work asked me if we were to cut supplies down or grant the full quantity desired. I instructed him that if a man had the land he should give him all the superphosphate he required, because it would give him an opportunity of getting his crop. I sent an officer away to the West Coast on this question. Some of the letters received from those areas were very pathetic. They showed that the merchants who had been providing commodities, say, on a yearly bill, said that now that the settlers had their crops there would have to be monthly settlements, and if the Government had not given any assistance there would have been much hardship. I made arrangements for two officers to go there, and gave them full power to grant relief, instructing them to give assistance in every deserving case. The people there appreciated what was done. We had no legislative authority to do this, but this Bill validates the action taken, and we felt strongly that the men were battling against adverse conditions, especially after the extreme droughts on the West Coast, and the Government were not only justified, but it was their duty to do everything possible to assist the men to stay on their farms and to produce crops to the fullest advantage. The reason this Bill gives the Government power to continue to afford relief up to the end of the year is that the monthly settlements referred to are still required. I feel, sure honorable members am in sympathy with what the Government have done, and realise that the Government were in duty bound to assist these men. I move the second reading.

Mr. ANTHONEY secured the adjournment of the debate until September 4.

**DROUGHT RELIEF BILL.1923**

**House of Assembly, 4 September 1923, pages 473**

Adjourned debate on second reading.

(Continued from August 30. Page 444.)

Mr. McINTOSH—There is little in this Bill that will cause any discussion. It is initiated owing to the action of the Minister in assisting the people in the drought-stricken areas in Peebinga and the West Coast. Owing to the promptness of the Minister a good deal of distress was relieved, and the settlers assisted in putting in their crops. There is one important matter in connection with the measure, however, to which I would draw attention. Clause 3 provides that no commodities shall be supplied after December 31, 1923. That brings us to the point that this Bill is only to authorise what has already been done, and makes no provision for the future. That is to say, the Minister with promptness anticipated Parliamentary Sanction, and agreed to provide assistance to the farmers, and he has brought down a Bill to sanction that, but suppose on a future occasion we find the Minister who is not prepared to anticipate Parliamentary sanction and says that he has no authority to act, we will not have any relief and then we would be placed in the position that no one would grant any relief. I suggest that we should make this Bill permanent and give Parliamentary sanction for granting relief when occasion arises without leaving it to be a matter depending upon the good grace of the Minister for the time being. In order to do that, it would only be necessary to strike out the proviso in clause 3 and make one or two other alterations in the other parts of the Bill. If this statutory power were given, a man could go to the Minister with a right for assistance, and the Minister would be able to proceed at once with the matter. In Peebinga the intentions of the Minister, which were liberal, were not interpreted as they might have been. In some cases men were not granted relief for the simple reason that before seeking assistance they had called a meeting of their creditors. These men were in no worse position than other men. In every case where the creditors were called together they agreed to allow the man to go on, but notwithstanding that, the officers did not give him any assistance. All the men owed a considerable sum of money, and the men who called meetings of their creditors were in rather a better position than the others, because the other men were likely to be shut out at any moment, but those who had called their creditors together had the protection of the Insolvency Act, which provides that a proposition might be arranged or a scheme agreed upon for the settlement of a man’s affairs. I am not blaming the Minister in regard to the matter, because I realise that he acted with great promptness, and his instructions were liberal. Recently I had a petition handed to me to be presented to the House, which pointed out that about £60,000 was still outstanding of the Drought Relief Fund, and it was suggested that in cases where a farmer’s average return was under 7 bush. he should have the amount due by him remitted. I did not present the petition, because I felt that many men who had reaped less than 7 bush. had paid the money, and that although in many cases there might be justification for the petition, in many others those who had not paid the money were in as good a position to pay as those who had. I intend to support the second reading, and commend the Minister for his promptness in granting assistance and the earnestness with which he carried out the work. We saw him one morning in connection with the trouble at Peebinga. He met us very sympathetically, and within a few days the inspector was in the district interviewing farmers. But in order that that promptness may always be given effect to, I suggest amendments to make this Bill a permanent measure.

Mr. MOSELEY—I understand the Bill is to confirm the action of the Minister in granting drought relief to a number of needy settlers in the outlying districts. I commend him most heartily for the work he and the Government did. They anticipated the Bill, because the old Drought Relief measure is quite out of date, and they assisted men who needed it badly. I went to the Minister once and pointed out that there were a good many farmers on the West Coast who were starved out, and had nothing but their good, brave hearts and brawny arms. They had suffered year after year, and were just about down and out. I went to the Minister and he took steps at once to move in the matter. The storekeepers had accepted the position that there was another drought, and they could not give any more supplies. The Minister sent an inspector through the district and granted stores, phosphate, seed wheat, and hay. This was just the culminating point. The rain came shortly afterwards and the settlers were able to put their crops in. I am sure there are no more grateful lot of people than those men are to-day. It was an extreme case and action had to be taken quickly. Owing to the assistance rendered by the Government the settlers will now be able to remain on their holdings. In regard to clause 3, I at first thought it would be wise to make this a permanent measure, but on further consideration I have decided it would be better to deal with every case on its merits. After all drought relief has to be administered very carefully or some may get it who may not deserve it. If this legislation were made permanent people would think that they had the right to apply for drought relief.

Mr. McIntosh—It can only be granted at the discretion of the Minister.

Mr. MOSELEY—I know that, but for the reasons I have stated I think it wise not to make the legislation permanent. The relief granted last year cost only £1,700. It was of great assistance to a lot of people, and I am sure it will be returned fourfold.

Mr. GUNN—I support the second reading of the Bill, and with the two members who have spoken I realise that it is very necessary. The provisions of the Bill will expire on December of this year, and as from present appearances there is not likely to be any drought before then, it is after all practically an indemnifying measure. The Minister did quite right in tiding the people over the difficulties they encountered.

Mr. Moseley—So will you when you are on the Treasury Benches.

Mr. GUNN—If there is a weakness in the Bill Mr. McIntosh put his finger on it when he said there is no provision for anything that may occur after December of this year. if after that a drought comes along it will depend on the Minister whether he will make advances and once more anticipate Parliament. In most of the other States there is statutory authority which enables the Minister to deal with drought situations immediately they arise. I have before me the Western Australian Industry Assistance Act of 1915. That measure is to enable seed wheat and other commodities to be supplied to settlers, and for advances to be made to persons engaged in farming, mining, and other industries. I understand that Now South Wales has a similar Act. Those two States have to use such legislation very often, but in the case of Western Australia not so often as would be necessary in this State because that State is not so subject to droughts as we are. East of the Murray and on the West Coast droughts often occur when the other parts of the State are doing very well. We should have some Act which would enable the Government to grant assistance when a drought is affecting any particular area.

Mr. Butterfield—The Western Australian Act applies to other industries besides farming.

Mr. GUNN—It does, and I have often said that the time is long overdue when there should be a co-ordination of the functions now entrusted to different bodies as regards advancing money to settlers. We have legislation dealing with advances to settlers, advances to co-operative companies, advances for vermin destruction, and for drought relief, and there are also two or three other Acts of a similar character.

Mr. Moseley—Drought relief is the only one that is not permanent.

Mr. GUNN—Exactly, and we should coordinate all this legislation under the State Bank. Queensland has a Rural Bank, and New South Wales established one about four years ago. The Railways Standing Committee, owing to what they saw east of the Murray, have spoken favorably in regard to a Rural Bank. We discovered that through overlapping and lack of co-ordination that more money has been advanced than should have been. There is a lack of system between the various Government departments administering advances. The Rural Industries Commission also asked the Government to look favorably upon the establishment of a Rural Bank. We have now the State Bank which administers the advances for homes, and all that is required is another branch of that institution to govern advances for agricultural purposes. The Commissioner of Crown Lands in giving reasons for the introduction of this Bill said:—

During last season the difficulties of the settlers have been aggravated owing to the scarcity of water in the local supplies, and the consequent necessity for making long trips in order to, obtain water from the supplies brought up by railway. The obligation to spend so much time in water-carting, hampered the settlers to such an extent that they were unable to put in full crops for last harvest.

I take it that the Minister was referring to the West Coast. We all know that last year the whole of the activities of the Railway Department on Eyre Peninsula was concentrated upon water-carting. Even the carting of wheat was suspended for a considerable period and even then the department could not fully cope with the difficulty, though they did their utmost. Are we speeding up sufficiently to prevent a recurrence of that position? I understand that in connection with the Tod River Reservoir a contract has been let for the laying of 70 miles of pipes. Anyone acquainted with the West Coast knows that 70 miles of main will not extend much beyond the beginning of the good agricultural country. There are 70 miles of poor country before you touch the good agricultural country. I fail to see why another contract should not be let for an additional 100 miles beyond the 70 mile point.

The Commissioner of Crown Lands—It is a question of pipes.

Mr. GUNN—Seeing that so many pipes are wanted, we should not let the smallness of the plant stop us.

Mr. Robinson—The trouble is the Government cannot get the castings.

Mr. GUNN—That has not been the reason for the delay up to the present. I could talk for an hour on what I consider has been the cause of the delay—the inaction of the Government. But I am anxious that we should speed up and wish to help the Government. If the smallness of the plant is the cause of the delay we should enlarge it. I remember Mr. Butterfield stating on one occasion that because so much pipe was wanted on the West Coast it would be advisable for the Government to consider the establishment of pipe works there.

Mr. Butler—It would pay to do so considering the freight.

Mr. GUNN—I believe it would. If a drought occurs within the next few years the settlers will still be without water, and £30,000 or £50,000 is very soon spent in carting water to them. In fact, you cannot estimate what the cost is. Because of the delay on the part of the Government in the work of reticulation the whole of the railway service on Eyre Peninsula was concentrated in the carriage of water. But that did not fully cover the cost. I saw as many as 20 vehicles with three or five horse teams waiting at one siding, and that was happening more or less right through from Cummins to Cape Thevenard.

Mr. McLachlan—That is quite a common thing in opening up new country.

Mr. GUNN—That is a light and airy way of getting over it. But we have had all the experience of the last 50 years as regards opening up back country. We know what the settlers in that country who were without water service have had to contend with. We should profit by that experience and hasten along with the Tod River scheme. As a matter of fact, I think that as we knew it was impossible to conserve water in that wheat belt because of the nature of the country, we should, before we allotted any of the land, have made provision for a water supply. I have dealt with one of the causes that make drought relief necessary. If the Tod River scheme had been established some time ago we would not have had to spend so much money as we did last year, and I do not want a recurrence of what happened then. Prevention is better than the expenditure of large sums of drought relief. I support the Bill.

Bill read a second time.