DISCHARGED SOLDIERS’ SETTLEMENT BILL 1917

House of Assembly, 7 November 1917, page 1105

Second reading

**The MINISTER of REPATRIATION (Hon. R. P. Blundell)—**The Bill seeks to remedy defects in the legislation passed in 1915 for the treatment of returned soldiers and for their settlement on the land. We have now had some considerable experience which has enabled us to arrive at what may possibly be a Bill which will satisfactorily meet the requirements. I use the term “possible” in connection with settling returned soldiers on the land, because new problems are continually cropping up which are hard to anticipate. In this Bill we propose to transfer the whole of the administration of the Act dealing with the settlement of soldiers on the land to the Minister in charge of Repatriation. Hitherto the principle has been to have the control partially under the Minister and partially under the Commissioner of 'Crown Lands, which has been found unsatisfactory. A special officer will be appointed to interview these men and make arrangements for their mortgages, purchases of cattle, and other requirements. The whole of his time will be fully occupied. He will be the superintendent of land settlement for soldiers, and the present staff will be under his control. Outside of that there will be no increase of the staff. We owe a great obligation to the soldiers who have gone to the front, and every reasonable provision ought to be made for the proper settlement of these men upon the land. In connection with the definition of a returned soldier we have to make some alteration, so that our legislation may fit in with the legislation operating in the other States. At a conference of Ministers held recently it was agreed that the definitions for settling returned soldiers on the land should be made uniform so that no soldier of this State would be debarred from coming under the operations of the Act of another State. We have also provided that where there is a widow of a soldier or a mother of a boy who is a dependent, and who previously made a living on the land, in these cases subject to tie approval of the Committee they may have all the benefits that would accrue to a returned soldier. At the present juncture we have received 441 applications for land, 291 applicants have appeared before the Land Settlement Com­mittee, and the number approved to go on training farms or direct on land was 263. The number of applicants in abeyance were 23. Of those approved for training farms 53 have left without being allotted land, representing 20 per cent, of those passed. Seventy men have been settled on their blocks. In addition 33 men have been definitely approved for blocks, but are waiting until the land is ready. The fact that 53 men were approved to go on a training farm demonstrates the value of the system adopted in South Australia. In Victoria they have no training farm, and the men go direct on the land. We find that a number of men after they have been a month on the farm generally say to the manager, “We are satisfied that farm life will never suit us.” The majority of these 53 men have left because they realized that farm life was not suitable to them, but a few have been discharged for other reasons. Every man who cannot convince the committee by references to farmers that he is capable of managing a farm must go to the training farm. We weed out not only the man who does not like a farming life, but the man who, after three- or four-months’ experience demonstrates that he will never make a successful farmer. These men are given other employment, or set up in a business suitable to them. It would involve the State in a heavy loss if these men were put on the land. While the percentage of men actually settled on the land in South Australia may be small in comparison with the other States, I venture to say that when the bulk of the men come back, and the results are compared in the various States, unless the other States adopt our system, we shall be able to show a greater number of successful eases than they. The Premier of Western Australia stated at the land conference that he would settle every man on the land who came along. When he was asked whether the men would be put through any training he replied “No, we will give them the land and the advance.” That is a suicidal policy, which can only end in absolute failure. It is a waste of money, and although our training farms have been expensive to establish, we have to realize that the Commonwealth is prepared to pay half the loss entailed. But eventually, as the men come back, there will be very little loss—only the initial expenditure—and the farms will help to pay their own way. Even so, it must not be for­gotten that they are training farms. When Parliament goes into recess, I shall be pleased to arrange for members of both Houses to pay a visit to the training farms, so as to give them the fullest information. This is an immense question, involving great expenditure, and I shall briefly quote figures in connection with the proposals for land settlement and will put before the House not only the expenditure that will be possibly involved, but some of the benefits that will follow successful settlement. Under the system of soldiers’ settlement, if we are successful in settling returned men, when they all come back, on the basis of the percentages that we have up to the present, it will mean that so far as production in South Australia is concerned, we shall have accomplished as the result of the war something in the way of developing agriculture, dairying, and such industries, that we would never have known otherwise in 50 years. It opens up immense possibilities of progress and development. According to estimates, we shall probably have to settle on the land over 15,000 men in South Australia alone. That is, taking the percentage—out of the 33,000 who have enlisted—of those who have expressed a desire to go upon the land. This total does not provide for the men who will have settled on the land, following their fathers on their own farms or on blocks privately secured for them. We shall purchase land during the next few years for the settlement of soldiers, which in ordinary circumstances would not have been brought into closer settlement for many years. Honorable members may think that the total for whom we are preparing is excessive. But in addition to the indications which the men gave before leaving, there is this consideration, that great numbers of those who have returned, intending to go back to their factories and offices and the like, have found that, either as the result of their two or three years of open-air life, or because of the condition of their nerves, they are unable to re-enter indoor occupations. There is only one place for them. That is out on the land. Figures have been supplied to me by Professor Perkins, based upon the percentages that we have already secured. Taking a basis of 15,000 men, Professor Perkins says that, going first into the dairying industry, there will be a capital value of 400,000 acres at £8 an acre, totalling £3,200,000. Then there will be advances of £500 each to 5,000 settlers, a total of £2,500,000. Next there is the assumed expenditure on factories and preliminary expenses, £300,000; making a total in dairying alone of £6,000,000 sterling. Then with regard to fruitgrowing and minor agricultural pursuits, the capital value of 20,000 acres at £15 would be £300,000; and £500 advances to men, £500,000, making a total in this section of £800,000. With respect to general farming, there would be advances of £500 each to 9,000 men, £4,500,000; the repurchase of 500,000 acres, £2,500,000; 1,500 houses on repurchased land, £300,000; the clearing of mallee blocks, £3,000,000; fencing of mallee blocks, £600,000; 4,500 houses on mallee blocks, £900,000; the provision of water on mallee blocks, £250,000; making a total of £12,050,000. This would be less £900,000 as the value of mallee blocks repayable in instalments, leaving a total of £11,150,000. The grand aggregate in connection with the three industries, namely, dairying, fruitgrowing and such pursuits, and general farming is given by Professor Perkins at £17,950,000. I think Professor Perkins is over-estimating the amount and has not made allowance for the men whom we know from practical experience do not want to go on the land. I have cut these numbers down by 50 per cent, and I think that is well within the mark. The amount will be over six millions. The question of providing the money cannot be passed over. The Commonwealth Government undertook, when they entered into this work, that they would provide the money necessary for land settlement. They are willing to borrow the money and advance it to the State, and they will share in the loss of interest that will accrue in the advances that are made to men because there is to be a reduction of interest for a number of years. That has to be borne equally by the State and Commonwealth. As a State we could not undertake the expenditure of six and a half millions, when there was a possibility of its not coming back, but not only do we hope that it will come back on easy instalments, but that there will be an increase of the prosperity of the State. I will give an idea of what is estimated will be required by the various States for the first few years. The Commonwealth have already made provision for three years advances. The figures were worked out on the basis that in the first year New South Wales will settle 600 men, Victoria 300, South Australia 500, Queensland 500, Western Australia 1,000 and Tasmania 100. These figures gradually increase up to the third year. The figures so far as this State is concerned show that we did not over-estimate the number of men that would be settled in the first year, because we have actually settled 441 persons. The Commonwealth advance to South Australia in the first year was £250,000, and the total for three years is £1,350,000. That money is already assured, and I think it will be more than sufficient for the next three years, providing that the war does not end suddenly. If it does, the whole of these figures will have to be revised, and the Commonwealth will have to provide a great deal more money than was suggested in the first case. It is remarkable that Senator Millen and Mr. Groom, in dealing with this question, paid no attention to the question of finance. They spoke about spending millions, but neither put forward any proposal as to how the money was to be secured. So long as the Commonwealth is able to borrow money, I see no difficulty in South Australia going ahead with the work, but if the time comes that the Commonwealth cannot borrow the money, more especially after the war is over, we can make up our mind that we cannot carry out our obligations to the returned soldiers, and there will be other obligations that we cannot carry out, and it will be impossible for the State to make any progress at all. When one looks at the Budget Speech of the Federal Treasurer, however, and realizes the tremendous amount of money raised in Australia alone by five million people, he must realize that after the war is over, and things become normal, we should be able to meet our expenditure year after year, and also provide a few extra millions for the settlement of soldiers. I believe there will be no difficulty in the Commonwealth raising the money necessary for the settlement of soldiers. While we will expend in the settlement of the whole of these men over £6,000,000, that will be spread over a number of years, and as the years go on there will be a return of interest and rents, and there will be increased productions and wealth that must come to this State. All these things will tend to help us meet our responsibilities in this direction and at the same time help us to develop our State in a manner in which I do not believe we would have developed it in fifty years under peaceful conditions. If we are ever in a position to invite British soldiers to come here from the old country and we can settle a percentage of them in this State, we will increase the amount of money which has to be found, but we will be adding to the population and production of our State. We would be only too pleased to welcome those men who have been fighting side by side with our boys, and it must not be forgotten that by adding to our population it would help us to meet the financial burdens which are looming in front of us. We all have to realise that in connection with the war we are doing things we would never have done had it not been for the war. Take the Bill relating to Advances for Soldiers’ Homes, which we passed tonight. What chance would there have been of passing a Bill like that or a Bill like this if it had not been for the war. At present there is no legislation on our statute books anywhere nearly as liberal as is this Bill. There are other matters upon which I would like to touch, but I will content myself by reading the report on the Bill itself:—

‘This Bill is largely a consolidation of the Returned Soldiers Settlement Act, 1915, and the Returned Soldiers Settlement Act Amendment Act of 1916, but there are several modifications and extensions. The scheme of the Act (as in the repealed Acts) is to enable the Government to set apart areas suitable for discharged soldiers, and to make advances to assist them in working the land. But under the Bill the term “discharged soldier” has a wider meaning than under the Act of 1915. Under the Act of 1915 a “discharged soldier” was defined (section 3) so as to include only members of the Australian Imperial Force or other naval or military force raised in Australia for service in the present war. Under the Bill (clause 4) a “discharged soldier” may have been a member of the British Army or Navy or any other naval or military force raised in any part of the British Empire for service in the present war. It will be seen, therefore, that the benefits of the Bill will be open not only to Australian soldiers but also to soldiers and sailors of any part of the British Empire. The Bill further provides (clause 4) that if a member of any naval or military force raised in any part of the British Empire for service in the present war dies as a result of injuries, &c., received whilst on active service leaving children wholly, or in part, dependent on his earnings at the time of his death, his widow shall be entitled to the benefits of the Act in his place. Clause 5 makes the Minister of Repatriation a body corporate in order to facilitate the working of the Act. Under the Crown Lands Act, 1915, section 161, large estates and lands adjacent to the River Murray suitable for reclamation or irrigation, except—*(a)* lands reclaimed, or in course of being reclaimed, and (b) lands which adjoin and are within a distance of two miles from such last-mentioned lands and belong to the same owner may, if suitable for reclamation, be acquired by the Commissioner for the purpose of closer settlement. Clause 7 provides that the two exceptions (a) and (b) above mentioned shall not apply, if it is desired to utilise such lands for discharged soldiers. Clause 8 enables the Minister, out of moneys provided by Parliament for the purpose, to acquire land by repurchase for the purpose of settling discharged soldiers, and validates any repurchases for that purpose prior to the passing of the Act. Clause 9 provides that no land shall be acquired or set apart by the Government for the purposes of the Act unless a report by an officer of the Public Service is first obtained stating that the land so set apart or acquired is suitable for the settlement of discharged soldiers thereon.’

I should like here to say that in this Act we are providing not only for a valuation by the Land Board and for a report by the Surveyor-General, but it will then come back to the Minister, who will refer it to an expert officer, and he will report to the Minister whether the land is suitable for the purpose before the soldiers are settled on it. This is an additional safeguard to those in operation in regard to the purchase of ordinary land. The report goes on:—

‘Clause 10 is practically identical with clause 5 of the Act of 1915. It deals with the application for and allotment of blocks to discharged soldiers. But the applications are dealt with by the Minister for Repatriation instead of the Commissioner of Crown Lands. Clause 11 substantially re-enacts the provisions of section 3 of the Act of 1916. But under the Act of 1916 applications for advances for the purpose of successfully working blocks were referred to a committee, called “The Returned Soldiers’ Settlement Advisory Committee.” The Commissioner was guided in assisting the block-holders by the recommendations of the committee. The Bill abolishes the Advisory Committee, and the Minister acts on his own discretion. The Bill (clause 11, subclause (3)) follows the scheme of the 1916 Act, and provides that advances by the Minister shall be secured by either mortgage or bill of sale over the soldier’s land or stock and implements.’

The maximum amount that can be given as an advance is £500, but on agricultural land it has been found that £500 is not sufficient to the £500 a house is built, but in an ordinary settlement such as dairying, &c., the house has to be built out of the £500. The report continues:—

‘In case the property is already mortgaged to the Crown, the Minister may accept a second mortgage With such collateral security as he thinks fit. Clause 12 is a re-enactment of section 4 of the Act of 1916, with certain extensions. It provides that advances may be made under the Act to discharged soldiers who have not taken up blocks under the Act, but who are Crown lessees under the Crown Lands Act, 1915, and such advances shall be in addition to any advances made under the Advances to Settlers on Crown Lands Act, 1914, or the Irrigation and Reclaimed Lands Act, 1914. The clause also provides that advances may be made to discharged soldiers who own freehold or leasehold estates, or are farming on shares. An advance may also be made to a soldier who holds a lease (other than a Crown lease) for the purpose of paying rent in arrear. Clause 14 is new. It provides that the Minister may clear and otherwise prepare for settlement any land to be offered under the Act, or the Crown Lands Acts, and may employ discharged soldiers for the purpose.’

In cases where a soldier has to wait six or eight months before he can grow feed for his cows, it is necessary for us to help him in the meantime. I move the second reading.

The Hon. J. VERRAN secured the adjournment of the debate until the same day.