

DROUGHT RELIEF BILL.

Second reading.

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. T. Butterfield)—Most members are familiar with the necessity for the introduction of this Bill, namely, the unfortunate circumstances of a few settlers during last harvest. During the past year it has been necessary for the Government to afford temporary and immediate assistance to a small number of settlers in this State, in order to permit them to tide over periods of depression caused by drought. The Government have followed the usual course of granting the necessary assistance on the assumption that Parliament would subsequently approve and authorise these proceedings. This Bill is substantially the same as other Bills introduced in past years for this purpose, and provides in clause 3 that the Minister may give assistance to farmers in drought-affected areas by the supply of seed wheat or other commodities. The Bill only authorises a supply of commodities up to December 31, 1926, and provides that the Minister's declaration that any area is or is not drought affected shall be final and conclusive. Clause 4 provides that the Minister may grant assistance in any case where he is satisfied that the applicant bona-fide intends forthwith to put his land or portion thereof under crop, and is unable to do so without assistance, or has fallowed his land or part thereof, and bona-fide intends to put his land or part thereof under crop or requires the commodities applied for to feed his stock, or to maintain himself and his family on his land.

Clause 5 requires every applicant to sign an acknowledgement and contract in the prescribed form, while clause 6 provides that the cost for the commodities is to be repaid to the Minister by the applicant, on or before February 1, 1927, or upon the alienation of the farmer's interest in the land in question whichever first happens. The applicant will be required to pay 6 per cent. interest on the amount of the advance, while in cases of special hardship the Minister will have power to extend from time to time the date of repayment of the advance or interest. Under clause 7 the amount of the advance is to be a first charge on all land held by the applicant at the time of making the advance. If any default is made in repayment of principal or interest, the Minister will have the same powers of sale as are given to a mortgagee in like circumstances, under the Real Property Act, 1886. Clause 8 gives retrospective effect to the Bill, and validates any advance made in the proper manner by the Minister before the passing of the Act. Clauses 9 to 14 provide penalty provisions for making false statements, or improperly dealing with commodities supplied under the Act and various other offences, and also deal with other matters of procedure which do not require particular notice. Clause 15 empowers the Treasurer to make advances to the Minister for carrying out the purposes of the Act, and in addition provides that the advances under the Act, and the expenses of administration are to be defrayed out of the moneys paid to the Minister in repayment of advances under the Act. Any deficiency is to be made good out of moneys provided by Parliament for the purpose. This Bill is merely a repetition of Acts which have come before this House occasionally, because the Government are compelled to give drought relief in necessitous circumstances to farmers. Last year the season was slightly patchy and a few farmers were in bad circumstances. The Government gave relief knowing well that this House has always approved of the action of any Government in that direction. Every application for relief received sympathetic consideration, except in a few cases where men on the West Coast previously had not been following the occupation of farmers in the particular district for which they applied for seed wheat and super. In those cases we did not agree that they were entitled to drought relief because they were men who were merely making their first start and in some cases

had declared to the Land Board that they had sufficient capital to work the land allotted to them. In all cases, however, where men had been farming and their crops had failed we rendered assistance. It is unfortunate that in some cases assistance given by the Government in the way of seed wheat, superphosphate, or horse feed is not employed to the best advantage. I have seen drought relief used in circumstances that did not give the farmer much chance of reaping any advantage from the assistance or of repaying the advance. A farmer cannot expect to get a reasonable return from land on which the bush is 2ft. or 3ft. high, from rough stubble country, or from land which, though it has not been planted for some years, is just ploughed up and has seed wheat and super thrown on it in a haphazard fashion. There may be cases where the liability for drought relief will not be met, but if that happens the taxpayers will have to bear the burden. Generally speaking, Parliament approves of the assistance given in this way, and taken all round it has been of immense value to the country. I move the second reading.

The Hon. G. R. LAFFER secured the adjournment of the debate until August 19.