



VERMIN BILL.
Second reading,

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. W. Copley) said it was unnecessary for him to remind hon. members of the great ravages of the rabbits, and the enormous cost they had put the country to. They had tried rabbit parties, and they cost about £140,000; after that they tried payment for scalps, and that had cost £160,000. The Government determined they would not go into an expenditure of that kind again. The experience of the other colonies was the same. He never had been a believer in the Government erecting long lengths of rabbit fencing, which were then left to the tender mercies of the general public. From the report of Inspector Hübbe it was proved that vermin-proof fences when erected by private people had been effective. He said:—"Vermin-proof fences have been highly successful in protecting lands from ingress and increase of rabbits in the following infested areas:—Mr. Allan McFarlane's Wellington estate, Messrs. L. R. and J. Bowman's Campbell House and Poltalloch estates, Sir W. W. Hughes's Warrenger and Warrung estates; whilst within the last few months Mr. T. McCallum, of Magrath's Flat, and Mr. John Gall, of Cantara, in the Coorong district, have, by a judicious system of rabbit-proof fencing and poisoning, successfully grappled with a difficulty which threatened to become ruinous. Many other instances could be given, but I consider these cases are sufficient to show the value of the system advocated herein. In concluding this report I would call attention to the fact that the erection of rabbit-proof fencing alone will not be sufficient to free infested districts, although until such fences are erected any moneys expended in rabbit destruction, no matter how carefully such expenditure is administered, will be entirely thrown away, therefore the erection of fences and destruction of the destructive pests should proceed simultaneously." The object of the Bill was to help people who were willing to help themselves. The Government recognised the magnitude of the evil and that private people alone could not grapple with it, as action must be taken by all simultaneously. There was no doubt in some localities there were areas of Crown lands which for various causes had not been disposed of, and for the Government to deal with those by rabbit parties would be practically to deal all round with the question. They were anxious in these localities, especially the North-East district, to arrange with the farmers at once to save their crops from absolute ruin. Therefore clause 4 of the Bill provided that the Government should direct the expenditure of such sums as might be necessary for the purpose of erecting or contributing to the erection of vermin-proof fencing, and, subject to regulation, to supply wire-netting. It was provided that no netting should be supplied after January 1, 1891, because the Government wanted action to be quick and simultaneous. This was intended as an urgent and not a continuous measure. The passing of this Bill would give the Government power to assist District Councils and private individuals to meet the exceptional danger which threatened them. There was also a power to close roads, which had been opposed in another place, but ultimately carried, and he hoped would be passed by the Council. He moved the second reading.

The Hon. J. V. O'LOGHLIN seconded and approved of the Bill, but was sorry it had not gone further. He thought rabbit parties had been of service in destroying the rabbits at Anlaby and other runs and other places, and in the areas abutting on the cultivated country they ought to have put on rabbit parties at the present time. He had been up the North-East a few days ago, and found that there were crops within four miles of Terowie where the wheat had been eaten bare. It was impossible for them to keep these lands clear on account of the swarms of rabbits upon the adjoining areas of Crown lands. It was not fair that a fence between private owners and Crown lands should be charged wholly to the private owner, who would not be troubled but for the Government land. The provisions of the Fencing Act should apply to this, and apply to Government as well as other parties.

The Hon. F. KRICHAUFF agreed with every word that had fallen from the last speaker. He knew at Mount Muirhead and Mayurra the District Councils had expended more than a rate of one shilling in the pound, and had tried by simultaneous exertions to get rid of the rabbits. The Crown ought to bear part of the expense, and in many cases if the Government gave the material the farmers would put up the fences and maintain them, and there

would be no bother about instalments. Unless that was done there were many people who would get no relief at all from the Bill. He should oppose the closing of roads unless clause 18 be amended, because a continuous fence would not do unless it was a rabbit-proof fence.

The Hon. J. H. ANGAS thought the Government were to a great extent responsible for the increase of rabbits upon the lands vacant through the resumption of large areas of leasehold runs that were not required for any other purpose. The rabbits first became numerous in the North-East. (The Commissioner of Crown Lands—"No; on the Anlaby Run.") The rabbits on the Anlaby Run were destroyed seven years ago. If the rabbits were not destroyed on the Government lands they could not expect that the owners of adjoining land would destroy them on the other side of their fences. They had heard that the Government were going to do all sorts of things to exterminate this pest, but they put off and delayed until the rabbits spread for hundreds of miles, and were advancing every year like an army or locusts. The fencing would no doubt induce some people to take action, but it would only affect a small area. There were vast tracts of country outside which it did not touch. As a rule the District Councils were not the parties likely to carry out the work of rabbit destruction, but he agreed that if Government supplied the wire-netting to the settlers some good would probably be done. There was too much red tape about the other part of the measure, and the working was cumbersome and complicated. He did not know what quantity of fencing was likely to be put up, but a great deal of netting would be required, and if the Government had not got it in stock it would take a long time and cost a great deal of money to import it. It would also be an assistance to parties who put up their own vermin-proof fences in localities not included in the Bill if the Government would give free carriage for the wire netting. He did not see any provision which demanded that the Government would destroy the rabbits on their land. If the Government were not under the same conditions as others the Bill was of very little value.

The Hon. J. WARREN was under the impression the Bill had been brought forward in a hasty manner, principally on account of the destruction by rabbits in the neighbourhood of Terowie, and the reason for that was on account of their coming from the Crown lands. Clause 4 very ingeniously attempted to throw the responsibility and cost upon the owners of land irrespective of the Government. He had been recently at Terowie, and found the local feeling was that the pastoral lands proper should be fenced off, and the rabbits on the other lands should be killed by the people themselves. They opposed the idea of giving the wire-netting to the farmers all over the plains, as the money would never be recovered. He did not see the use of clauses 7 to 31, as they were simply the provisions of last year's Land Act, and tended to complication. Clause 4 appeared to allow the farmer to apply for the whole of his farm, whilst what was wanted was to fence the whole of the Government land. This would cost an enormous sum of money, and was not needed.

The Hon. J. BOSWORTH regarded the question as serious and difficult, and the Bill scarcely could grapple with it. So long as the vermin had full possession of unless Crown lands people would not take them up. The best course was to let the lands at a peppercorn rental, so as to secure clearing away the vermin. Unless the rabbits on the Crown lands were killed or fenced in the difficulty would not be met.

The Hon. W. K. SIMMS would support the Bill, which he was glad the Government had introduced. Unless the rabbit difficulty were overcome there would be practically confiscation of the land. He regarded the Bill as concessionary to the tenants of the Crown, but regretted that they did not bind themselves to take steps for coping with the difficulty so early as they ought to do. The rabbit-proof fencing had been found to be the only effective method of dealing with the nuisance. The Bill should be carried as soon as possible if it were to be of any use, and he would support it.

The Hon. A. R. ADDISON approved of this measure as tending to localize the evils of the rabbit nuisance, and evils must be localized to be properly grappled with. But past Governments were largely to blame for the rabbit pest. They had stuck to the lands, and would not allow any one to have their use except at prices that no one

could pay. They had been repeatedly urged to bring down the rates of rental to such a limit as would enable people to occupy them. They should have offered the lands for what they could get, and have let them for the most nominal rental, with a condition for destruction of vermin, rather than hold them as breeding-grounds. At the proper time he should endeavour to strike out clause 21, which gave the Government power to come back upon the District Councils for any expenditure incurred. (The Commissioner of Crown Lands—"The Chairman of a District Council is speaking now." Laughter.) The expenditure should be a first charge on the land, inasmuch as its value would be improved by putting up the wire fencing. On what principle should the Government have the power to come on the rates? The only fair thing was to make the expenditure a first charge on the land. In other ways he should support the Government in carrying the Bill, as it attempted to grapple with a great evil in the settled districts of the colony.

The Hon. J. H. GORDON would draw attention to the fact that the Commissioner of Crown Lands had strongly opposed during the consideration of the Crown Lands Bill, 1888-9, the provisions which were in essence similar to those in this Bill. (Laughter.) He declared then, as recorded on page 1710 of "Hansard" reports, that wire fences to keep out rabbits were of no use. (The Commissioner of Crown Lands—"Your chief says that history is not reliable." Laughter.) Then the present Commissioner of Crown Lands was attempting to illustrate the fact. (Laughter.) The hon. gentleman at the time he was referring to said that he was prepared to stake his reputation on the point he maintained, and even gave illustrative instances. He said that he himself had put up a wire fence, and on one side a yellow and on the other a black rabbit. He put tempting food on the side where the black rabbit was, and the yellow rabbit was over the fence in no time. (Laughter.) How was it that the hon. gentleman now came down to the Council, and never having made due confession of his mistake in staking his reputation, was found advocating the very thing he had so strongly opposed? (Laughter.) When the measure referred to was in Committee the Commissioner of Crown Lands not only staked his reputation, but he declined to give the District Councils the right to expend the money. Thus after objecting to the whole policy of the measure he now brought in a Bill to affirm the same principle. (Laughter.) The Commissioner of Crown Lands—"I am not too old to learn you see." Laughter.) He hoped not, indeed, for the hon. gentleman had very much to learn. (Laughter.) But he thought the hon. gentleman ought to acknowledge to the Council that he had made a mistake, because some hon. members of that House paid attention to what the hon. gentleman said, and he ought in consideration for them and their trust in his statements to explain what had wrought the change in his views, especially as some of them might be slower in their processes of mental evolution and could not follow changes so quickly. (Laughter.) He would call attention to Part III. of the Act of 1889, where would be found a clause embracing all that was attempted in this new measure by a series of cumbrous and intricate provisions, and which simply enacted that District Councils might apply for a loan, which the Government could grant, and which must be expended to the satisfaction of the Government under regulations which it could impose. All the cumbersome machinery of this present measure he begged to warn the Commissioner of Crown Lands would be set aside the very first opportunity, and he anticipated that sooner or later it would be swept away in favour of the simple methods provided in the Act to which he had referred. There was another point in this measure which would need attention. It would be unwise to allow individual owners to operate under the provisions of this Bill unless there were arranged a systematic treatment of the whole frontier line that might be exposed to the incursions of the rabbits. If Jones fenced and Brown, his neighbour, did not there would of course be no effective defence offered, and the provisions now sought to be made would be of no value to the country. It would be absolutely useless as a national work unless there were adopted a thoroughly systematic plan of operations. The whole of the rubbish in the Bill about petitions should be struck out, and he thought that there had been left out one of the most valuable provisions, as contained in section 3 of the Crown Lands Amendment Act of 1889, which should have been embodied. There should be a power to the effect that where no loan was applied for the Government might come in and erect the necessary fences. (Hear, hear.) And, further, there might very

properly have been embodied a provision of this sort—that where an owner erected rabbit-proof fences at his own cost the material should be conveyed free of cost so far as the railway was concerned. It would be a fair concession to allow where men had spent possibly thousands of pounds in the endeavour to clear the country of vermin. (Hear, hear.)

The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. W. Copley) said the Bill of last year only applied to fencing on the places where the boundary of the District Councils abutted on Crown lands, and there had never been a single application under it. The present Act provided that the Government might fence in a block of country and assist the owners of land adjoining. The remarks he made a year ago applied to the Government constructing long lines of fence.

The motion was carried, and the Bill read a second time.

In Committee, Clauses 1 and 2 were passed. Clause 3—"Interpretation." On the motion of the Hon. J. H. GORDON, the word "tenant" was inserted after "owner," and the clause passed as amended.

Clause 4. "Governor may authorize enclosure of unoccupied Crown lands with rabbit-proof fence." The Hon. J. H. GORDON moved that the clause be struck out. He thought the whole of the money should be advanced to the District Councils upon a system, and not to help individual owners. The danger must be tackled on a comprehensive scheme. The Hon. J. H. ANGAS thought the last speaker hardly understood the meaning of the clause. The first portion of the clause referred to the enclosing of Crown lands; then it went on to other lands, and it was only reasonable according to the Fencing Act that both parties should contribute to the cost of such fencing. He did not think such netting should be wholly paid for by the farmers. The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. W. Copley) said only the owners' share was to be paid for. The Hon. J. H. ANGAS said that was not apparent from the Bill. He proposed to strike out all the words after "land" in the fifteenth line of the clause. The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. W. Copley) said District Councils depending on their own self-interest would not take the responsibility of helping the persons who lived on the boundary. The Hon. J. H. GORDON said this Bill would not make them do it. The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. W. Copley)—But it would enable the Government to do it, and it intended that the person to whom the wire was supplied should pay back his share. The Hon. J. H. GORDON—It is very badly expressed. The Hon. J. V. O'LOGHLIN agreed that this was the principal clause of the Bill, enabling individual persons who were suffering from the rabbit pest to apply at once for wire-netting, and so preserve their crops from destruction. It was desirable there should be some united system, as the Hon. Mr. Gordon said, but that would take a long while to establish, and this would give in many cases immediate relief. He believed the farmers would avail themselves of it immediately. The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. W. Copley) said there were a large number of applications in already. The Hon. H. SCOTT suggested that the clause should be amended so as to provide for the Government fencing their own lands. The Hon. J. H. GORDON withdrew his proposition to strike out the clause. The Hon. J. V. O'LOGHLIN proposed an amendment providing that the Government and the owner of adjoining lands should be jointly liable for the cost of fencing. The Hon. A. R. ADDISON proposed that the word "half" be inserted between "land" and "the value of such netting." The Hon. J. H. ANGAS thought if the Government supplied the netting and the owner erected it on his fence and kept it in repair for seven years that would be a fair arrangement. After that then the Government, or whoever held the land, should share in the cost of maintenance. The Hon. H. SCOTT thought where a fence now in existence was made rabbit-proof on land which divided land already leased from the Government the Government should pay half the cost. If they reckoned half the value of the netting and half the cost of putting it up that would be an equitable arrangement. The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. W. Copley) would have no objection to the suggestion of the Hon. Mr. Addison, and the half-cost of erection where fences already erected were not dealt with. (Hear, hear.) The Hon. J. WARREN desired explanation of how the Bill would operate where a road ran between Crown lands and private

land. The COMMISSIONER of CROWN LANDS (Hon. W. Copley) said the Bill recognised no difference in such case between the road and the Crown lands.

The Committee resumed, progress was reported, and leave was given to sit again on the following day.

