

a raft, seeing that the soil consists of a mixture of clay with shale in between. That is quite a sound building structure to work on.

I shall also quote Mr. Parry's opinion in regard to the foundations—

425. Would there be any difficulty about erecting buildings there?—Not the slightest. I was working in Mr. Cavanagh's office when the Christian Brothers' College was built, and I know there was no difficulty about the erection of that building.

I have now quoted the opinions of three of the State's leading architects.

The Minister for Lands: I wonder why the Leader of the Opposition did not read them.

Hon. C. G. Latham: I did not want to take up too much time of the House.

Mr. STYANTS: There are two or three other phases I desire to deal with, but I understand the Leader of the House wishes an adjournment. I therefore ask leave to continue my speech at the next sitting.

Leave granted.

House adjourned at 6.11 p.m.

Legislative Council,

Tuesday, 3rd September, 1940.

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The PRESIDENT took the Chair at 4.30 p.m., and read prayers.

QUESTION—MINING.

Copper, Lead, etc., at Northampton.

Hon. E. H. H. HALL asked the Chief Secretary: 1, In view of the shortage of copper supplies in Australia, as reported in the "West Australian," of the 28th August, will the Government send the Government Geologist to the Northampton mineral

areas to report on the possibilities of obtaining copper from old or new copper mines in that district? 2, In view of the fact that the Broken Hill Pty. Co., Ltd., has contracted to sell to the British Government for the period of the war and three months thereafter 13,870 tons of lead per calendar month f.o.b. Port Pirie, at £18 16s. 7d. (Australian) per ton, will the Government endeavour to do something to assist in reviving the lead-mining industry in the Northampton district? 3, As it is stated that in addition to lead and copper in the Northampton district, zinc and other minerals exist, which, owing to the present world situation might be profitably mined and disposed of, will the Government arrange for the Government Geologist to make a thorough examination of this mineral district with a view of obtaining a full report on any mineral deposits contained therein?

The CHIEF SECRETARY replied: 1, The Government has recently been in touch with the Commonwealth authorities to ascertain which minerals are required at the present time to assist the national effort. It intends to utilise its geological officers to investigate deposits of any necessary minerals accordingly. Northampton district will be included in such investigation. 2, Advice received by this Government has been to the effect that the present Empire lead supply, both ore and metal, is in excess of demand. 3, Naturally when visiting Northampton, the geological staff will give attention to all mineral deposits.

BILL—POLICE ACT AMENDMENT.

Introduced by the Chief Secretary and read a first time.

RETURN—GOVERNMENT MOTOR VEHICLES.

Cost of Fuel.

Debate resumed from the 28th August, on the following motion by Hon. C. F. Baxter (East):—

That a return be laid on the Table of the House showing the cost of fuel used by Government motor vehicles for the years 1933-34 and 1939-40 respectively.

THE CHIEF SECRETARY (Hon. W. H. Kitson—West) [4.37]: The hon. member who introduced the motion stated that had

the Minister or the Government given him the information he sought in a question asked some time previously, there would have been no need for the motion, and that the failure of the Government to supply that information was his justification for asking for the preparation of a return containing the particulars mentioned in the motion. At all times I have been exceedingly anxious and have gone to a good deal of trouble to provide information sought by hon. members, and if they cast their minds back over the period I have occupied this position, I think they will find that I have seldom failed to supply such information.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: It is your duty to do so, is it not?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: On this occasion the information asked for was not supplied because to give it in its entirety was not possible. In reply to the question asked by the hon. member I gave an answer that would have been accepted by most reasonable people. Unfortunately Mr. Baxter, by the introduction of the motion, suggests that the information is available. The same state of affairs, however, exists today as existed when I replied to the question. The hon. member has asked for a return covering the periods 1933-34 and 1939-40. From my reply, which is printed on the minutes of the proceedings of the House, members will find I stated it was not possible to give the information asked for because certain dockets had been destroyed up to 1934. That is the position at present. I am advised that even for the 1939-40 period a considerable amount of work and expense would be entailed in providing all the figures asked for. The question arises whether it is worth while to expend the money to supply figures that cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered comparable. The years 1932, 1933 and 1934 were depression years. They comprised a period when all Government expenditure was severely curtailed; when we might say the State was bankrupt. Members will probably recollect that at about that time the Commonwealth Government took over the State Savings Bank. Every member knows that not only were economies practised at that time, but that they were ruthlessly practised. Consequently, any figures that might be obtained as a result of the motion would have no value as a comparison with figures of the present time. The earlier period is about

seven years ago. Some remarkable developments have taken place, and there have been unusual activities during the last seven years. Every Government department has increased its activities to an extent that makes it impossible for any figures that might be produced to be of any real value.

I propose to give the House a little information to show that it is unreasonable to expect that the figures asked for should be produced. At the same time I would advise members that we have nothing to hide, and are quite prepared to supply such information as is available. I do not think we should be asked to do more than that. Mr. Baxter, when speaking to the motion, took the opportunity to criticise the Government in several directions. He pointed to several ways in which he considered the Government might economise to a greater extent than it has done up to date. I propose to refer to two or three of those points. The hon. member was inclined to suggest that Ministers were not exercising as much supervision over their departments as they should. I cannot agree that there is any abuse of any material description taking place at present. Ministers are at all times subject to the Treasury. The hon. member himself understands the difficulty Ministers have in securing approval for any additional expense, and should realise that in nine cases out of ten it is the Treasury that has the last say. In no period of the State's history has there been closer supervision over expenditure, nor have more inquiries been made as to the necessity for expenditure, than takes place to-day. I cannot get one-half of the money I should like for my different departments. If one of my departments requires the assistance of an additional officer, the necessity for that increase in staff has to be proved up to the hilt before authority is given. The hon. member also complained about the long delay that had occurred in the reply being given to his question. One would have thought that, as a result of his experience as a member of a Government, he would realise that the information asked for in a question cannot always be supplied on the following day.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: I did not complain about the extension of time given for the reply, but about the reply itself when given.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: An extension was asked for because at that time returns had not come in from all the depart-

ments concerned. When all the returns did come in, the position was as disclosed in my reply. I do not know that there is any room for criticism in that regard. I should like to explain what takes place in matters of this kind. Naturally, someone has to be put in charge of an inquiry of this kind, so that he may obtain the information desired. In this instance the Under Secretary for Works was asked to supply the particulars. He communicated with every department of the service. Some of the replies are rather illuminating. I propose to quote one or two of these to show the difficulties that sometimes occur when information of this kind is being sought. Let me take first the Public Works Department. The following reply was received from the Under Secretary:—

As verbally requested, I have to report that in order to ascertain with any degree of accuracy the cost of petrol supplies to this department for the years 1933-34 and 1939-40 respectively, it would entail the scrutiny of the copies of approximately 35,000 local purchase orders and 50,000 Government Stores requisitions. The way my staff is situated at present I cannot conveniently spare an officer to undertake this work. Assuming an officer could scrutinise 1,500 to 1,700 of the above documents per day, which is problematical, it would take from ten to twelve weeks to collate the information required.

There is a note at the foot of the letter saying that the approximate cost of getting that particular information is £70.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: When you gave your answer you mentioned the sum of £40.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: That was the information available to me at that time.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: I am not blaming you, but it was an error on the part of the department.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I do not wish the hon. member to imagine I think he is blaming me, because he knows quite well that Ministers cannot be expected to accept blame in a matter of this sort. I do not say blame is attachable to anyone. That, at any rate, is the reply from one of the departments. I have a report from the State Sawmills. I do not propose to read the whole of it, but here is an extract—

I regret that this department is unable to answer the whole of the first part of the question relative to the total cost of petrol during the year 1932-33. Even if the vouchers were available, it would take two clerks a long time to extract the information for our several mills and branches, as it would mean a dissection of all invoices from the oil companies for the whole period, and even then

would not be complete. The State Sawmills has a large local trading turnover, quite apart from its export activities, from its several metropolitan and country yards as well as from the country mills, and if a temporary rush of business renders it necessary, outside carters are also hired. The expenditure on petrol between the two periods is therefore not comparable for the reason that in 1932 we were just emerging out of the depression period, and the turnover that year in the local trade was only £71,466 as against a figure in 1939-40 of £116,167.

Members will realise that while they may consider it quite easy to secure information of this description from each Government department, that is not always so. I have other reports. I shall not read them all, but will content myself with citing those typical of the situation that is revealed. Here is a note from the Director of Public Works—

The cost of petrol consumed by motor vehicles operated by the Public Works Department and Main Roads Department is not dissociated from other items of running costs in the accountant's records. Details would show on local purchase orders and stores requisitions, but these have been destroyed for the years prior to 1934. It is not possible, therefore, to state the cost of petrol used by departmentally-owned motor vehicles during the year 1932-1933. The cost of petrol consumed during 1939-1940 could be ascertained, but as all local purchase orders and stores requisitions would need to be viewed, the amount of work involved would be very heavy.

He goes on to deal with the number of vehicles, and says—

It is estimated that there are 45,000 vouchers to go through, and that would entail six weeks work costing approximately £35.

Then I have another report from the Agricultural Department, which reads—

In the year 1933-34 the number of technical officers employed by the department was 71, and in 1939-40 the number was 99. Practically every one of these officers is required to visit country districts for the purpose of advising settlers, and further, the activities of the department have increased very considerably, as the staff includes additional veterinary officers, a veterinary pathologist and agrostologist and several additional agricultural advisers. In addition, there are several more officers stationed in country districts than was the case in 1933, and each of them is continuously travelling by motor car. It will, of course, be realised that if cars were not available the usefulness of our technical advisers, whose services are always being sought by settlers, would be very considerably curtailed. It might be mentioned that each officer using a car has to send in, weekly, a return which shows the trips made each day. These returns are carefully checked regarding the mileage run, and also to make sure that the officer is arranging his itinerary economic-

ally. Further, every officer is allotted a fixed amount for travelling expenses annually, and this amount must not be exceeded. Hereunder is the information desired by Mr. Baxter for the year 1933-34—

Cost of petrol	£105 14 11
Paid by way of allowance—	
35 officers, £2,965 14 6	
4 officers, 242 9 1	
—	£3,208 3 7
39 officers.	

I quote that in extenso in order to emphasise the big difference there is between present-day conditions compared with those that obtained in 1932-33 or 1933-34. Following up this line of thought, Mr. Baxter was somewhat critical of the fact that dockets had been destroyed in some departments, and he suggested that in any business concern or department that was properly run, such dockets would be retained for 15 years or so.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: No, not the requisition orders but the books. If you read my speech, you will see that is what I said.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: Very well. I caused this matter to be referred to the Auditor General for his comments. I have, of course, my own knowledge of business practice, and I know what happens in most private firms. I know the extent to which dissections are carried out by firms. I doubt if there are many that go to greater lengths in such matters than Government departments. The Auditor General in reply to our inquiries, said—

Referring to the verbal inquiry by your officer this morning in regard to this matter—

He refers to the dissection of vouchers—

—as stated in reply to a question given in the Legislative Council on the 20th August, 1940, orders and requisitions are purely supporting documents to pay vouchers, and I am not interested in their retention after audit. In the circumstances, therefore, the length of time for which documents relating to expenditure should be held is a matter for the management, but I think they should be retained for a period of at least six years.

Those are the views of the Auditor General.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: Surely someone should keep records of petrol purchased and its distribution.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: Of course, such records are kept. Mr. Holmes will realise that in stores orders we deal with running costs, spares, tyres, petrol, oil, and so on. Consequently there is no further dissection, except in some instances. The hon. member will understand further that with the hundreds of vehicles concerned and

the large number of orders going through daily, the regulations governing such transactions are covered by the Auditor General. He is the man who has to be satisfied. Once he has been satisfied, then the supporting vouchers have no further value, and would merely serve to take up a lot of room that possibly would be required for some other purpose. In such circumstances, there would be no point in keeping them for an inordinate time.

Hon. E. H. H. Hall: Did I understand the Minister to assure the House that no separate records of amounts spent on petrol, tyres, or spare parts, were kept?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I said that in many instances the dissection of such dockets does not take place. The hon. member will surely realise that it would be futile to spend money on such work.

Hon. E. H. H. Hall: I should not think so.

Hon. L. B. Bolton: Every city business does it.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: Every business does not do it in every instance.

Hon. L. B. Bolton: Every big business does.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: No. There are many directions in which it cannot be done. In any event I have already informed the House that the Government is quite prepared to supply the information that is available, according to the returns to hand. I am now giving reasons, and supporting those reasons in what appears to me a very satisfactory manner, why it is not possible to give the actual information that Mr. Baxter has sought.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: Why did you not give them before and save all this time?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: Just before the House met to-day I looked up the minutes to see what reply I actually did give to the hon. member's question and as it is rather interesting I will repeat it. The hon. member asked what was the total cost of the petrol used by all Government owned or subsidised motor vehicles during the years 1932-33 and 1939-40 respectively. This is the reply that I gave—

Investigations show that in regard to some of the major departments the local purchase orders and store requisitions for the years prior to 1934 have been destroyed, and as the cost of petrol is not dissociated from other items of motor running costs in the accountancy records, the desired information is not obtainable for the year ended 30th June, 1933.

That epitomises what I have just been saying. Then I went on—

Accurate information for the year ended 30th June, 1940, could only be obtained by an examination of many thousands of local purchase orders and store requisitions. This would entail the employment of additional clerical assistance, at a probable cost of £40, and it is considered that this expenditure is not justified, as the comparative information for 1933 is not obtainable.

It is not possible to separate the petrol cost in regard to subsidised vehicles, as the allowance paid, in practically all instances, covers all charges associated with the employees' vehicles.

Considering the nature of the questions asked that was a particularly good reply. It certainly contained all the information that was sought.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: How does the Auditor General know that the petrol purchased is properly consumed?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I do not know how the Auditor General is going to satisfy himself on that point. I should say it would be the heads of the departments who would have to be satisfied and not the Auditor General.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: He would want to see the vouchers.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: He sees all the vouchers. The documents we are referring to now are documents that have to be sighted, and once they have been sighted they are of no further value. The entries in the books are certified to by the officers of the Auditor General's Department, and in view of the excellent way in which the officers of the Audit Department carry out their duties—and of this Mr. Baxter must have some knowledge—we should be satisfied with what the Auditor General has to say. I do not think there is any need for me to add anything further on this particular question. I shall now deal with the more general criticism the hon. member offered. In the first place he mentioned that the cost of administration had gone up by £95,000 during the last three years. I think the actual amount is £97,000.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: I said £97,000.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: When one considers that the basic wage has been increased during the last three years by 8s. 5d. per week, that in itself will account for more than the figures quoted by Mr. Baxter, and I assure the hon. member that the present Government has always honored the awards

of the Arbitration Court and will continue to do so even at the risk of being accused of increasing the cost of administration. I have already stated that with regard to the service generally, it would be very hard to imagine a more stringent supervision than is taking place at the present time in connection with expenditure, not only increased expenditure, but ordinary expenditure in the departments. The first matter the hon. member mentioned in respect to which he said the Government might give serious consideration if it desired to practice economy, was the employment of inspectors. From his remarks one would imagine that he had not a very good idea of the duties carried out by some of the inspectors to whom he referred. Members will realise that most of the inspectors are appointed under particular Acts of Parliament. Thus their appointments are statutory. The hon. member suggested that certain inspectors might travel together and he also stated that the duties performed by some might be abolished. I am advised that in all cases, wherever it is possible for two inspectors to travel at the same time, it is arranged for them to do so; but it is not very often that the opportunity occurs for that to be carried into effect. At the same time, there is an extraordinarily close supervision over the itineraries of the inspectors and the inspectors and the duties they perform as well as the districts they visit. The hon. member went a little further and suggested that there was room even in Government departments for the appointment of another inspector. It seems rather odd that he should criticise the number of inspectors already employed and then proceed to advocate the appointment of still another. He suggested that as far as the Public Service was concerned, it would probably pay handsomely to appoint an inspector to assist the Public Service Commissioner. It is a fact that the Public Service Act provides that the Public Service Commissioner shall himself carry out all inspections in connection with the service. During recent years a system of inspection has been inaugurated whereby the Public Service Commissioner has utilised the services of the Secretary of his department and another officer for what might be termed preliminary inspections. It may be of interest to members to know that quite recently the Civil Service Association of this State protested to the Public Service Commissioner and the Premier that inspections were being carried out by other than the

Commissioner himself. Of course the association had to be informed that it was not practicable for the Public Service Commissioner to carry out all the inspections himself, and therefore he was obliged to utilise the services of certain officers to carry out the preliminary inspections so as to enable him to discharge his duties more quickly and perhaps more efficiently. In that connection the Treasury employs five officers who are classed as inspectors, and they are constantly reviewing the expenditure of all the departments. It is through the efforts of those officers that very frequently departmental heads and even Ministers are not able to secure that which has been recommended, and it is on the score of inability to find the money that this negative result follows. Every item of expenditure is very closely scrutinised and even though a Minister may strongly recommend that a certain thing be done, something that will involve expenditure, it does not necessarily follow that the recommendation will receive approval.

With regard to inspectors of mines and inspectors of machinery the hon. member suggested that the duties of those officers might be amalgamated. The department has advised me that that is not practicable.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: Why are they provided in two Acts of Parliament?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I am advised that what the hon. member suggests is not practicable because of the nature of the duties to be performed. The hon. member was somewhat confused over this matter.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: No I was not.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: As I have already stated, the provision of inspectors is statutory, and rightly so. This is an age of machinery, and it can be very complicated and dangerous machinery if not properly handled. The hon. member's suggestion seemed to me to border on the ridiculous. Inspectors of machinery are qualified engineers, mostly Board of Trade men, whose experience and training has been as ships' engineers, boilermakers, etc., whereas inspectors of mines are trained as practical miners. So it is problematical how the hon. member's suggestion would work out. Inspectors of machinery, in addition to inspecting other industrial machinery, also inspect mining machinery. They know nothing of mining itself, however, nor do inspectors of mines know anything of the manufacture of machinery. It

would be quite impossible for either to attempt the other's job. The hon. member's suggestion that many of these inspectors should not travel by car but that they should use other means of transport does not carry much weight. More often than not by using a motor vehicle much time is saved as members who criticise our railway system, for instance, will realise. Not only is time saved, but there is also the saving of travelling expenses and incidental expenditure associated with their duties.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: I referred to the city, not to the country.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: The hon. member spoke of combining the duties of inspectors of mines and inspectors of machinery, and I do not know of the existence of any mines in the city. As far as possible the inspectors do travel together and every effort is made to reduce expenditure on petrol and thus conserve supplies. It would, however, be quite useless and impracticable to insist on their travelling together as they have quite different duties to undertake and they go different ways. As members who interview heads of departments on many occasions have realised by now, economy is practised to an extent that is sometimes rather embarrassing. Most of the inspectors at present engaged are specialists in their respective lines. They are giving excellent service to the country and the people they serve, more particularly those in the agricultural industry. As regards the inspection of machinery, we have every reason to feel proud of the fact that there have been very few serious machinery accidents in this State in recent years. Compared with the other States of the Commonwealth, our record is especially good, and this, I think is due to the fact that our inspectors are competent men who see that the provisions of the Act are properly observed.

Mention has been made of the increase in the number of motor vehicles in the service of the Government. I do not propose to say anything more about that, other than to point out that in all the departments where there has been a material increase, it has been due to the increased activities of the last year or two. I have received a return from two of the major departments of the service—the Public Works Department and the Main Roads Department. During the last eight years, the number of

motor vehicles of all descriptions in use in those departments has increased from 111 to 146, a numerical increase of 35, or a percentage increase of 31. The principal increases have been as follows—

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Several factors have contributed to this increase. In the Hydraulic Engineer's Branch, for instance, the irrigation areas at Roelands and Waroona have been opened up and the one at Harvey has been considerably extended. These works, and the construction of the No. 3 district irrigation scheme, have involved the use of seven additional utility trucks for supervision of the use of water and maintenance of the works. The Goldfields Water Supply Branch, during the last eight years, has carried out an extensive programme of renovation of the main conduit from Mundaring to Kalgoorlie. During that period, the loan expenditure has increased from £53,800 to £198,000. That is a large increase, and it has been a material factor in the increase of motor transport. The expanded programme of renovations to the main conduit has necessitated the use of four more electric welding plants mounted on vehicles. Many of the motor vehicles are really labour-saving devices, and the records show that their use has more than satisfied the departmental heads. I do not think there is any need to mention what has occurred in the mining industry beyond saying that the mining revival has resulted in tremendous activity throughout the goldfields areas. This has necessitated the provision of motor vehicles for the officers associated with that phase of governmental activity.

Expenditure by the Main Roads Department on road works during 1932-33 was £548,300, while in 1939-40 the amount was £1,115,100, or more than double. Surely no one would argue that an increase of expenditure to that extent would not also involve a considerable increase in the number of motor vehicles and the running costs, more particularly when we remember that most of the officers now use motor vehicles, whereas seven or eight years ago quite a percentage of horse-drawn vehicles was used. I could supply further details, but in view of what I have said, I do not think

that is necessary. The Government is anxious that members have as much information as is reasonably possible to give. We do not think it is reasonable to incur the expense referred to in order to provide the information sought by Mr. Baxter. A considerable amount of information could be given, but it is not complete to the extent desired by the hon. member, and therefore I must oppose the motion in its present form, firstly on account of our inability to supply the information mentioned in the first part of the motion, and secondly because of the expense that would be incurred to supply the information mentioned in the second part of the motion. Even if the motion is withdrawn or negatived, I am prepared to lay on the table a return that will give all the information in the possession of the departments.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: You said that the records are not available previous to 1934. Did you mean the year 1933-34?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I meant the year ended the 30th June, 1934. Even if the records were available, the passing of the motion would put us to the expense of segregating thousands of small amounts, some of them very small indeed.

Hon. J. Cornell: How much richer would the hon. member be if he got the information?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: He would be no better off. The two periods are not comparable. If there was any advantage in making the comparison, perhaps it would be worth while to incur the expense of making the segregation, but as the comparison could be of no value whatever, I do not think the expenditure is warranted. As I have indicated, I oppose the motion.

HON. E. H. H. HALL (Central) [5.24]: If the motion does not meet with the approval of members, somebody might see fit to move an amendment. I hope this course will be adopted, because the admissions made by the Chief Secretary in the course of his remarks have certainly surprised some of us. That no segregation should be made of what must be a very large amount spent by departments for petrol, tyres and spare parts is certainly surprising to me. I understood the Minister to say that no segregation was made, and I think he added by way of justification that it was unusual in business to make such a segregation. All

I can say is that in making that statement the Minister was hazarding a guess. I have certainly heard with surprise that no such segregation is made by the Government.

The Chief Secretary: I did not say that at all.

Hon. E. H. H. Hall: Then I misunderstood the Minister.

The Chief Secretary: I left no room for misunderstanding.

Hon. E. H. H. HALL: I asked by way of interjection, "Is no segregation made of the amounts spent on petrol, tyres and spare parts?" and I understood the Minister to say that no segregation was made and that it was considered unnecessary. What check has the department that requisitions and spends the taxpayers' money on the petrol, tyres and spare parts issued to the various departments that draw these supplies? What check has the department on petrol, tyres and spare parts used by the Chief Secretary for his car, or rather the car made available for his use, I take it, while engaged on the business of the country? In the course of my remarks on the Address-in-reply, I said I had been informed that the Chief Secretary was frequently seen in his car at his farm, not far from Perenjori, which is over 200 miles from Perth. I have not seen him there in his car. If I had done so, I would have mentioned it. I referred to the matter here in order that the Minister might have an opportunity to say whether the statement was true, but he has chosen to ignore or evade the question. Very well; it is the duty of members to take steps to ensure that as far as possible a strict check is kept on all supplies. True, we have inspections by the Auditor General's officers, but what do they amount to? Those officers cannot make investigations into or audit inspections of every detail; they accept the certificates of the heads of departments. I commend Mr. Baxter for having moved the motion. If a member who has not been fortunate enough to occupy the high and responsible position of Minister, with all its advantages and disadvantages, seeks information of this kind, he is talking largely without the inner knowledge possessed by a man who has had that experience. Mr. Baxter speaks from a knowledge of some years' occupancy of a Ministerial position, and I have waited for a long time to hear the results of his experience. The fact of his having moved the motion shows definitely that he is not satisfied with the existing practice.

Neither, after having listened to the Chief Secretary, am I satisfied with the issue of and check on these supplies. Personally I am willing to believe that the expense involved in the preparation of figures for the year 1933-34 would not be worth while. However, if the Government has thought it necessary to issue instructions for which there should have been no need, if it has not been thought necessary to keep segregated accounts of this heavy expenditure, we should be assured that in future checks will be maintained and segregated accounts will be kept. When members fulfil the duty to seek information where they are entitled to seek it, in this Chamber, where it is Ministers' paid duty to give such information, we should get it freely and without any harsh criticism such as I myself have been subjected to here for daring to seek explanations regarding the expenditure of public funds. I support the motion.

HON. J. CORNELL (South) [5.32]: For my part, my slogan during the war is and will be economy in all things, even in "Hansard" space. If we get the information asked for by the motion, what earthly use will it be to us? One can only gather information as one runs. Motor traffic transport returns at the present day, as compared with similar returns seven years ago, really afford no basis of comparison. Not only in Government service, but in all walks of life and all business, the volume now is about four times as great as it was in 1933-34. Therefore, if the costs for 1933-34 are worked out as against the costs of 1939-40, of what possible use could the comparison be? So far as I see, its only use would be to attack the Government in relation to elections.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: That was never in my mind.

Hon. J. CORNELL: The only benefit I can conceive is that which I have indicated. I utterly fail to see what benefit the information can yield to the man in the street. All it can tell us is that the Government spent so much in 1933-34 and so much in 1939-40. What effect would the comparison have on the powers that be in bringing about the economy Mr. Baxter desires? I had not been many years in politics before I learnt the utter futility of obtaining information.

Hon. E. H. H. Hall: That should not be, though.

Hon. J. CORNELL: The hon. member is a long while waking up.

Hon. E. H. H. Hall: The people are waking up to this.

Hon. J. CORNELL: The hon. member should know that in spite of such motions as this the Government runs the even tenor of its way, and that it takes the consequences at election time.

Hon. E. H. H. Hall: But we should do the best we can.

Hon. J. CORNELL: That is the only phase that strikes me. Even if the motion is carried, there will be no obligation, apart from the aspect of courtesy, on the Government to provide the information. Further, there is no obligation as to the time within which the figures shall be made available. My personal view is that we shall attain as much by accepting the Minister's assurance that he will lay on the Table of the House all such information in the possession of the departments as he considers to be of value. Presumably this means that he will lay files on the Table. Harking back many years ago, when I was practically a new member, Sir Hal Colebatch with other members carried a motion for the production of certain files, and the House was deluged with almost a lorry-load of them. No one could read through the lot. I hope hon. members will accept the Minister's assurance. By carrying the motion we shall probably get nothing beyond what the Minister is prepared to supply without such a demand. Therefore I oppose the motion.

HON. J. J. HOLMES (North) [5.36]: The motion deals with fuel consumed by the Government departments. My mind would be considerably eased if the Chief Secretary could tell us that there is some check on petrol supplied. We live in an age when at all events the younger members of the community cannot cross the street without a motor car. There is nothing they can do without the assistance of motors. One of the most difficult things I myself have to control is the petrol supply at my place in the country—not in the city. At that place we have an underground tank with a bowser which is kept under lock and key, and the petrol is delivered in bulk and nobody is allowed to take any of that petrol unless some responsible person stands by and notes the quantity taken. When I receive the petrol schedule at the end of three months, or at the end of a half-year, I cannot get

the supplies to synchronise with the distribution; and the only explanation I can obtain is, "Evaporation." If that kind of thing goes on where there are only two motor cars, a tractor, a truck, and a couple of lighting plants all on the one spot, and with the petrol supply under lock and key, I tremble to think what happens down here. Who gets away with the petrol? Nobody seems to know, and nobody seems to care. I am told that the Auditor-General sees the vouchers; but there should be some responsible person to deal with petrol, and petrol only—the quantity bought and the quantity distributed. Irrespective of where petrol is bought or how it is bought, it should all pass through one controlling centre. If that were done I should not support the motion, which, perhaps, goes too far. However, it would relieve my mind to know that something of the kind I have suggested was done, and that the petrol supply was handled on business lines, which I am quite certain is not the case now.

On motion by Hon. C. F. Baxter, debate adjourned.

BILL—INSPECTION OF MACHINERY ACT AMENDMENT (No. 2).

Second Reading.

Debate resumed from the 28th August.

THE HONORARY MINISTER (Hon. E. H. Gray—West) [5.42]: This Bill has appeared on the notice paper of this House simultaneously with a similar Bill's appearance on the notice paper of another House.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: But there is only one Bill before this Chamber.

The HONORARY MINISTER: Last session, hon. members will recollect, a comprehensive Bill of the same character was introduced here and failed to pass. Since then the Government has given consideration to the urgent need for certain amendments, and has introduced elsewhere a Bill that omits certain amendments to which strong objection was raised here last session. Therefore it is my belief that the Bill now before another Chamber will pass here.

Mr. Baxter's Bill, by Clause 2, provides an amendment of paragraph 7 of Section 4 of the principal Act whereby the exemption from inspection of machinery driven by oil and petrol engines not exceeding 6 h.p. will be extended to include engines of any h.p.,

and also machinery driven by electricity. An Order-in-Council dated the 28th September, 1922, which provided exemption from inspection of certain types of machinery driven by electric motors, is also extended by this clause, to which the Government raises no objection.

The amendment proposed by paragraph (a) of Clause 3 of Mr. Baxter's Bill in Sub-section 1 of Section 53 of the principal Act is provided for in Clause 10 of a measure already introduced in the Legislative Assembly by the Minister for Mines. This amendment therefore must be opposed now. Paragraph (b) of Clause 3 of Mr. Baxter's Bill is consequential on Clause 2, and therefore is not opposed. Clause 4 of Mr. Baxter's Bill provides for an amendment which is also provided for in Clause 18 of the Bill before another place, and accordingly must be opposed here.

The Bill before another place is a comprehensive measure including other important amendments beyond those covered by Mr. Baxter's Bill. I put it to the hon. member and to the House that it is unwise to have two amending Bills to one Act in the same session. Seeing that Mr. Baxter's Bill is such a small measure, it would be wise for him to withdraw it and discuss the questions it raises when the Bill of another place comes up.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: What will happen if it is defeated when it comes up and this Bill is withdrawn?

The HONORARY MINISTER: Hon. members will have an opportunity to discuss the Bill, which I am certain will not be defeated on this occasion. It may be amended. The Bill has been framed to meet the wishes of this Chamber and is in accord with advice given to the Government by its experts. There is urgent need for amendment of the Act to meet the conditions of present-day industry. I put it to Mr. Baxter that it would be better for him to wait, and therefore I ask him to withdraw his Bill.

HON. J. CORNELL (South) [5.46]: There seems to be very little difference between the Minister and Mr. Baxter, with the exception of one slight amendment. I agree with the Minister that the better procedure would be to embody all the proposed amendments in one Bill; but I do not agree that Mr. Baxter ought to withdraw his Bill.

I suggest that it be allowed to remain on the notice paper; and, when the other Bill comes forward, he may move amendments to it. If his amendments are defeated, that would mean the defeat of his Bill on the second reading. That is the better course; Mr. Baxter should not withdraw his Bill.

On motion by Hon. G. W. Miles, debate adjourned.

BILL—PROFITEERING PREVENTION ACT AMENDMENT.

Second Reading.

Debate resumed from the 28th August.

THE CHIEF SECRETARY (Hon. W. H. Kitson—West) [5.47]: I oppose the second reading of the Bill. In the first place, it does not require me to remind the House that the reason for the introduction of the Act which the Bill seeks to amend was that during the last war a tremendous amount of profiteering took place. Experience on that occasion showed the necessity for introducing the Act very early in the present war, so as to prevent, if possible, some of the happenings that occurred during the last war. This Government is not alone in its intention to do all it can to prevent the exploitation of the war situation in the interests of private gain. The Commonwealth Government brought down regulations very early in the piece, and appointed a Deputy Price Fixing Commissioner to deal with matters coming under the Commonwealth regulations. We have appointed a Price Fixing Commissioner under our State Act. We must provide every possible protection for the consumer. When I refer to the consumer, I do not mean merely the consumer in the towns, but the consumer no matter where he might be situated in the State. Primary producers are consumers just as the ordinary workman is a consumer. We contend that under the present Act provision is made for adequate protection of all sections of the community.

The reason given for the introduction of the Bill is that primary products, or some primary products, should be exempt from the operation of the Act except under certain conditions. It is suggested, for instance, that livestock and anything else which is the subject of auction sales should not be covered by the Act. As a matter of fact, there has been no interference whatever with

auction sales of any kind; in particular, there has been no interference with auction sales of livestock or chaff, both of which are included in the Bill. I realise that anything I might say in that direction will not convince the hon. member who introduced the Bill that the action of the Price Fixing Commissioner with respect to prices of meat has not interfered with the prices of livestock.

Hon. L. Craig: Why did he take action?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: So I do not propose to speak at great length on that point, other than to refer to the fact that so far the Price Fixing Commissioner has not fixed even the price of meat, let alone the price of livestock. Mr. Holmes interjected while Mr. Wood was introducing the Bill. He said it would be impossible to fix a price for livestock, because one animal varies from another in some way or other. In my opinion, the hon. member is right. Mr. Wood agrees with that point of view, too; yet he provides in the Bill that in the fixation of prices of meat the price at which each animal is sold at auction shall be taken into consideration. He says the Price Fixing Commissioner, when dealing with meat prices, shall have regard to the price paid for the animal and then shall fix the price on a percentage basis on the cost of the animal. That, in effect, is what the hon. member desires to do under this Bill. I say that is impracticable. We all know what happens at livestock sales; one line will fetch a certain price, while another line of similar stock will fetch another price. The variation may be wide at any one sale; and to expect a wholesale butcher to say, "This sheep cost me 10s. and therefore the price of mutton from it is to be a certain amount; another sheep cost me so much and therefore the price of mutton from it is to be so much," to me savours of the ridiculous. It would create an impossible position.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: If you fix a retail price the other will work itself out.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: That may be so. The argument I put forward is this: Having appointed a Price Fixing Commissioner to deal with these matters, we should leave it to him to determine the method he shall adopt in order to protect the public so far as prices are concerned. On the facts of the case, as they are presented to him, he should determine what action he ought to take and the method by which the prices

to be fixed by him are to be arrived at. If we have confidence in our Price Fixing Commissioner, then in my opinion we should leave the price fixation entirely to him. On many occasions I have heard not one member, but several members of this Chamber, speak in the highest terms of our Price Fixing Commissioner. Even the criticism by some members of his action in consulting wholesale and retail butchers and getting them to agree to an arrangement respecting the price of meat, was excused by one or two members on the ground that he had made a mistake. Unfortunately, one member went a little further and used an expression which in ordinary times he would not use.

Hon. J. Cornell: It did not fit the Price Fixing Commissioner. He is not stupid by any stretch of the imagination.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: It was never intended that the expression should be reported. Knowing the hon. member as I do, that is my assumption. In matters of this kind we should not select one or two or three items, as the case may be, and say to the Commissioner, "You shall adopt this particular method in fixing the prices of these commodities, but with respect to other commodities you shall have a free hand." We should have sufficient confidence in him to leave it to him to determine to what extent he will go and what methods he will use. Mr. Wood said there was interference by the Price Fixing Commissioner with the stock market. He went a little further and suggested that the Commissioner must have been acting under instructions from the Minister. When I gave the hon. member an assurance that there was no truth in that assertion—

Hon. G. B. Wood: Why rake it up?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: —he said, "Well, if that is not so he must have acted under the instructions or at the request of the wholesale butchers." That is not true either; it is far from being true. For the hon. member's information, I shall read a letter from the West Australian Livestock Buyers' Association. The letter is addressed to the Commissioner of Prices, is dated the 29th August last, and reads as follows:—

My association would be glad if you would take steps to refute Mr. Wood's statement reported to have been made by him in the Legislative Council yesterday; namely, that the wholesale butchers approached the Commissioner in regard to meat prices. Mr. Wood

might also be informed that the arrangement made with the butchers was in respect to meat only, and that full market value has been paid for stock purchased for butchering purposes. For weeks past cattle have cost more than the maximum of 5½d. per lb. wholesale charged for beef under the arrangement.

In regard to his other remarks as reported, it might also be said that it is hardly the concern of the producer what happens to the stock when they have been sold and have been paid for. That is a matter for the wholesale butchers.

Hon. G. B. Wood: I am surprised at your reading that.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: Who wrote the letter?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: It is signed by Mr. Halvorsen, Secretary of the West Australian Livestock Buyers' Association. Mr. Wood is surprised that I should read the letter.

Hon. G. B. Wood: Surely you do not believe it?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: In fairness to these people and in view of the very argument used by the hon. member himself when introducing the Bill, it is only right that the letter should be read.

Hon. G. B. Wood: A reply to that letter will be in the "West Australian" to-morrow.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: The hon. member said that the producers of beef and mutton should not be subject to the Act. My reply is that so far the Act has not been used against the producers of beef or mutton or against any other producer. Certainly it has been used in connection with potatoes but it cannot be said that the Act has been used against the producer or grower of potatoes.

Hon. A. Thomson: The results of its operation may have an adverse effect.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I think that at the previous sitting I read a letter which indicated that the representatives of the potato growers were very eulogistic of the manner in which the Price Fixing Commissioner had dealt with that commodity.

Hon. J. Cornell: Assuming the Bill becomes law, could not the Commonwealth Government give the Commissioner power to-morrow?

Hon. G. B. Wood: It would not do so.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

The CHIEF SECRETARY: The arguments used in support of the Bill seem very futile. At one stage the hon. member declared that the Commissioner might have said to motor car manufacturers, "The maximum price of every motor car shall be

£400." Of course he could have said that, but if a motor car was not worth the maximum figure of £400, the manufacturer or distributor would not receive that amount.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: I think Mr. Wood's chief cause for complaint was that the producers were not consulted.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: That was one of his complaints. I am pointing out, as I did once before that there was no need for the Commissioner to consult the producers regarding the price of meat. Suppose, for instance, that a wholesale butcher said, "Next week I am going to give my meat away free." Is there any reason why he should not do so? Is not the wholesale butcher in full control of the commodity he has bought? Has he to go to the producer to obtain permission to sell what he has already bought at a particular price? Meat is one of the essential commodities which, in the interests of all consumers, should be subject to the Act, and not to the restrictions set out in the Bill. If the wholesale butcher says, "I am going to average my prices for the next two or three months," and can satisfy the Price Fixing Commissioner that that is equitable, there is no reason why he should not be allowed to do it; and if he knows that by having to increase the price to such an extent that the consumption is reduced materially, but that by averaging the price over a period he will maintain the consumption of that commodity, he is doing the only reasonable thing, provided he can satisfy the Price Fixing Commissioner of his bona fides in that direction. It is a fact that at the time the Price Fixing Commissioner interviewed the wholesale and retail butchers, meat prices in the metropolitan area had risen to such an extent that quite a number of retail men were finding it exceedingly hard to quit their stocks. Of course there is a very great difference between the conditions under which different butchers have to operate. A man in Barrack-street with a big trade, 95 per cent. of whose customers buy from the shop, can afford to sell his meat at a lower price than a suburban butcher who, perhaps, sells 75 per cent. of his meat by delivery in the suburb in which he is operating. Many factors have to be taken into consideration. If, as a result of the hon. member's method of adding a percentage to the cost of the livestock the price was so high that the community could not afford to buy, that would re-act

not only against the butcher, but also against the producer himself. The contention that the stock markets will rectify themselves is perfectly sound. There can be no argument against it. Time after time it has been shown that there are periods of the year when live-stock is high in value and other periods when values are low and it is recognised that some growers try to cater for that period of the year when the stock market is high.

Hon. J. Cornell: Seventy per cent. of the eastern goldfields purchases of beef come from South Australia.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: That is admitted; but the number of growers who can take advantage of that is strictly limited.

Hon. L. B. Bolton: It is more costly for growers to produce at that time of the year.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: Of course.

Hon. L. B. Bolton: They are entitled to more money.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: They should get it through the stock market and nothing has been done to prevent them from getting whatever they are entitled to.

Members: Nonsense!

The CHIEF SECRETARY: As I have previously remarked, no matter what argument was advanced, no matter how sound or logical such argument might be, it would be impossible to convince the hon. member who introduced the Bill and one or two of his supporters that it had any strength at all.

Hon. G. B. Wood: The hon. member who introduced the Bill does not stand alone in his contention.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: The Chief Secretary understands most subjects, but I do not think he understands this one.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: That comes with ill-grace from the hon. member. I thought I was putting up a very good argument.

Hon. J. Cornell: So far I think you have had the best of it.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I thought that my argument was quite in accordance with the sentiments of the hon. member as expressed by interjection in this House and in conversation elsewhere. I say very definitely that there has been no interference with the livestock markets. The reports of each of the stock markets will show that the Price Fixing Commissioner is correct when he says that his action in making an arrangement or in getting the wholesale and retail butchers to agree to an arrangement has not

affected the stock markets. I go further—having admitted that stock markets will always adjust themselves according to the season and the demand and so on—and say that so far as the sale of meat is concerned, once stock has left the stock market—in other words, once it has been purchased—the price at which that commodity is to be sold is not the business of the man who produced the stock in the first place. Let us now get down to the question of meat.

Hon. L. B. Bolton: Down to the bone!

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I am afraid some of us have already got right down to the bone. There can be no question that a week or two ago thousands of people in the metropolitan area were compelled to get right down to the bone. They could not afford to pay the prices at which meat was marketed. The experience was that those who had been in the habit of buying the best joints had to be satisfied with inferior joints.

Hon. L. Craig: That was reflected in the market almost at once.

Hon. L. B. Bolton: Growers are selling to-day for less than it cost them to produce the commodity.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I am not arguing about that at all. I know that in some instances to keep stock alive—never mind about keeping them in fat condition for the butcher—has cost the growers twice as much as would be realised at the sale of the stock at Midland Junction.

Hon. J. Cornell: That applies to a bushel of wheat.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: But that does not affect this particular matter of price fixing. It is absolutely necessary that the Price Fixing Commissioner should have the power to deal with this matter in accordance with the facts of the case at the time he is dealing with it. He should not be tied down to any particular method in arriving at the price to be fixed if and when he decides that a price should be fixed. Up to date that has not been done. The hon. member went further than dealing with meat; he referred also to chaff. In that connection there can be no question that in the very near future, or the not far distant future, unless there is a very material and quick alteration in the season, the price of chaff will be very high.

Hon. J. Cornell: It will be prohibitive.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: The method provided in the Bill for fixing the price of chaff is not satisfactory. What would happen if one individual or one firm was in a position to corner all the chaff in this State and the hon. member's method was applied.

Hon. G. B. Wood: You know that is not correct. Provision is made in the Bill to restrict that.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: The hon. member's provision is to provide for a percentage increase on the cost.

Hon. G. B. Wood: A percentage of the profit.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: On the cost.

Hon. G. B. Wood: What is wrong with that?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I contend that it should be left to the Commissioner to determine what method he should use to arrive at the price to be paid. Only within the last week a consignment of chaff arrived at Kalgoorlie at a cost of £8 per ton.

Sitting suspended from 6.15 to 7.30 p.m.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I have little more to add. It appears as though there will be a big increase in the price of chaff, and the indications are that some control will have to be exercised. Here again I suggest it is undesirable to tie the hands of the Price Fixing Commissioner to any particular methods. Information we have received during the last week or two indicates that already very high prices, much higher than usual, have been paid in some instances, and it has been reported that one consignment of chaff has reached Kalgoorlie at a cost of £8 per ton. The chaff position is also being looked into by the Commonwealth authorities. They have communicated with the Price Fixing Commissioner here, and asked him to watch the position very closely with a view to establishing, if necessary, a parity price at some port, say Melbourne, to check any unduly high price that may be asked. He has also been asked to view the position from the aspect of ensuring that no State would be denuded of stocks required for home consumption because of high prices elsewhere. As members will realise, there is danger in that direction. To sum up my objections to the Bill, they are, in the first place, that we should not exempt any particular commodity from the opera-

tions of the Act; secondly, that we should be prepared to leave to the Commissioner the right to decide how far he should go and what method he should adopt, having regard at all times for the facts of the case and the bona fides of those who are making the application.

Hon. H. V. Piesse: He should call the producer to give evidence.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I have no doubt the Commissioner will consult the producers.

Hon. G. B. Wood: At last!

The CHIEF SECRETARY: He will consult them in any matter in which they are affected. That brings us back to the contention of the Commissioner that in his recent action he has not interfered with the stock markets, and that it cannot be said to have been the cause of the reduction in prices at Midland Junction at the period mentioned. I agree with that contention.

Hon. H. Tuckey: He could not fix the price if he did not know the cost.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: I do not desire to repeat myself. No prices have been fixed. There was an arrangement whereby a maximum price was agreed upon between the wholesale and retail butchers. The arrangement then made has been carried out very satisfactorily, I believe. I am advised that in recent weeks the wholesale butchers have been paying more on the hoof for their stock than the maximum price they are allowed to charge. Anything more I might say would be to repeat the arguments I have already advanced. I think those arguments are valid. If there is anything in our price fixing legislation, particularly in the capacity of the Commissioner to deal with matters under that legislation, we should be content to leave to that officer not only the extent to which he can go in the fixing of prices, but the methods he shall adopt.

Hon. J. Nicholson: Would you say that the maximum price fixed by the Commissioner for beef or mutton was a fair price for the best quality?

The CHIEF SECRETARY: The Commissioner's argument is that he fixed the maximum price for the best quality, and that prices have to come down for the lower quality. Most of us realise the great difficulty involved in fixing prices for individual joints.

Hon. J. Nicholson: I do not mean that, but taking the average.

The CHIEF SECRETARY: The business is an intricate one, requiring careful handling. I think the Commissioner handled this position, serious as it then was, in a way that should receive commendation instead of criticism, such as he has received from the House.

HON. H. L. ROCHE (South-East) [7.37]: In supporting the Bill I think the Minister is unfortunate in having to sustain the Commissioner's attitude, by reiterating that the action that was taken or the arrangement made at the instigation of that official has not affected the producers or the price at which stock is selling on the hoof at Midland Junction. It is ridiculous to suggest that if the wholesale butcher was not permitted to reimburse himself on the price he charges to the retailer to a greater extent than 5½d. or 6d. per pound, he would be a philanthropist if he gave the producer any more for his mutton on the hoof. Although it may be agreed that something over the arranged price was given, I think that it is only natural to assume that the wholesaler is not in business to lose money. He can only afford to continue his operations on the market if he can realise a price on resales to the retailer that will cover his costs and show him a profit. The greatest weakness in the defence of the Commissioner is the contention that the action was taken on behalf of the consumers of meat. No action was taken to control the retail price of meat. So far as it went, the action offered protection to the wholesale butchers. It must have been a godsend to those who are supplying meat under contract. The contracts were made when meat was at a lower price than it was on the hoof at Midland Junction in July. Those people must have been well satisfied. Even conceding that the Commissioner did not fix the price of meat between the wholesaler and retailer, I cannot understand how the price could have been fixed for the consumer without some action being taken to police that price. I cannot see that the consumer is in any way protected unless out of the goodwill of the retail butcher or his good offices. Had the Commissioner desired to fix the price to the consumer, he would have had to set about the business in a thorough and

expert manner. That could only have been done by the calling in of people who understood the trade, and who knew all about the retail prices of the various joints. Consideration would also have to be given to reimbursing the purchaser of the stock so that he might show a margin of profit. The action taken does not seem to me to have provided any safeguards for the consumer. There has been very little reduction in the retail price of meat, whereas the action taken must have affected the price the producer received. It was taken at a most unfortunate time. Had it been deferred, the seasonal conditions being what they are, I believe the position would have automatically rectified itself.

Hon. G. B. Wood: That would not always be so.

Hon. H. L. ROCHE: This year it would certainly have been so, because of the season. Thousands of sheep are coming to Midland Junction to-day that are not of prime quality. The growers have realised that because of the season they must reduce their numbers. That procedure would have acted as a corrective of any extreme prices. The injustice of the arrangement is that the man who has provided for the off season in supplying the metropolitan markets has been sadly prejudiced by the Commissioner's action. A good wether weighing 50 lbs. in March was fetching upwards of £1 at Midland Junction. In March most of the dry feed is finished. The man who wants to hold sheep until July must hand-feed. He cannot do that under 1d. per head per day.

Hon. L. Craig: At the least.

Hon. H. L. ROCHE: If we take that over a period of four months we find that this system has put up the cost of the wether that could have been sold for over £1 in Midland Junction in March to 30s. in July. At the controlled price to-day the sheep is fetching only 30s. The grower had to hold it for three months, and was a fool not to have sold in March.

Hon. L. Craig: Skins have improved 3s.

Hon. H. L. ROCHE: Good class wether skins to-day are bringing upwards of 7s. and sheep at Midland to-day are bringing up to 30s. and 31s., taking everything into account. The Commissioner may not have fixed the price but everything goes to suggest that the machinery of the Act, as at present framed, was used to effect an arrangement that may not have amounted to definite price-fixing but, as the officer

charged with certain responsibilities under the Act, Mr. White was able to convene a conference and come to an arrangement, backed by all the powers of the Act in support of his action. I think we are merely splitting straws when we say the price was not fixed.

Hon. G. B. Wood: Of course we are.

Hon. H. L. ROCHE: It is well to admit that if the price was not fixed, then the arrangement is there—and it has the same effect. I think little enough has been obtained by the producers on many occasions at Midland Junction under the auction system, although that system should provide the greatest protection to all concerned. It should provide a fair deal. On the other hand, as the system has operated, with a number of the smaller wholesale butchers going out of business, more and more of the wholesale trade has been drifting into the hands of three or four firms. I think those firms on occasions have been able to exercise a considerable restraining influence. If one of the arguments used in the early stages of this controversy is still maintained—I presume it is—to the effect that wholesalers will pay a little too much this week and too little next week, thus adjusting matters, I claim that method simply helps the wholesalers because they are the only people financially strong enough to stand the strain. The smaller people will have to go out of business. The auction system affords ample protection. If there is an absolute dearth of meat, naturally prices will have to increase, or Perth consumers will have to content themselves with second-grade meat. For various reasons we all wish a good downpour of rain. I want it for two reasons. Not only do I look for a good downpour because of farming conditions generally, but because if we had two or three inches of rain, there would not be sufficient fat sheep to supply the metropolitan market. Sheep to-day are too scarce in the country districts.

HON. H. V. PIESSE (South-East) [7.49]: I support the second reading of the Bill. I do not think its introduction would have been necessary if the Price Fixing Commissioner, Mr. White, had called producers into conference before embarking upon the action that he took. On occasions the price of stock has receded considerably. I was ill during July and during my indisposition I had an opportunity to study sheep prices and to read the country newspapers. I remem-

ber early in that month perusing "Elder's Weekly" and noticing that Mr. Parker, of Kulin, had been receiving high prices for his wethers and ewes and that Sim Bros., of Yealering, had also had a similar experience. I know Mr. Parker and I wrote to him congratulating him on the prices he had received. I also wrote to Mr. S. P. Sim asking him how much it had cost him to maintain the sheep for which he had received such good prices, and requesting him to forward me full particulars. He did so. As I pointed out when I dealt with this matter during the Address-in-reply debate, his figures showed that it cost him 3s. per head to hand feed all his sheep. He later on sent another consignment of sheep and again received good prices. I wrote to Mr. Sim a second time and sent him a copy of the letter I had written to Mr. Parker. To-night I received a letter from Mr. Sim and his remarks refute the statement made by the Chief Secretary that the price arrangement had not interfered with the return that farmers received. Referring to the price of sheep, Mr. Sims wrote—

It is still in an inclusive state and if price-fixing is persisted in, it will cause those who cater for the market, even in a small way like myself, to think very hard if it is going to be worth their while to do so another year. There is no wonderful profit in it in an ordinary year, and in one like the present, where the feeding costs are so high, even high prices do not make for a much higher profit.

That is the experience of one man and there are hundreds of producers in the same position. I did not hear what the Chief Secretary said on the Address-in-reply, but I notice that, in reference to some lambs I mentioned, he characterised them as "luxury meat." That is not the point. The price arrangement was reflected on the price of every class of sheep throughout the State. I feel sure that the Bill is now necessary, or, at any rate, some conditions are essential if the Commissioner is to impose an extra burden on those who produce fat sheep, particularly in view of the present price and seasonal conditions. When the price of superphosphate was fixed, as happened a little while ago in the Eastern States, the interests of every man affected were taken into consideration. Costs were taken into account; manufacturers were permitted to state their case; basic wage considerations were reviewed. In those circumstances, there was no argument when the price was fixed.

Hon. A. Thomson: That is the difference between fixing the price of a primary product and of a manufactured commodity.

Hon. H. V. PIESSE: Exactly. I wish also to refer to the Chief Secretary's remarks about the potato industry. I reiterate what I said during the course of the Address-in-reply debate. I said then that Mr. White had had a conference with the potato interests long before the growers were called together. Mr. Craig can bear me out in that statement because we discussed the position and I told him that the growers had been invited to attend a conference. I do not propose to argue that point, but I feel sure that the growers should have been called together by Mr. White before he arrived at any arrangement. The Chief Secretary impresses us with the fact that it was not a case of price fixing. There would have been no argument with the producers at all had they been consulted in the first place. Finally, I want to make the point clear that I have had a lot to do with Mr. White. I have never met a more courteous Government officer or a man who has proved himself more capable in his permanent position. Mr. White has already shown his capacity in his debt adjustment work and in other directions. Although he is careful and has carried out his duties exceedingly well on many occasions, that does not mean that this time he has not made a mistake. Nevertheless I was sorry to hear some of the remarks made about him during the course of the debate. I believe, as the Chief Secretary said, there may have been a slip of the tongue. Most people appreciate Mr. White as a very valuable officer, who has one of the most unenviable positions in the State to-day. I support the second reading of the Bill.

HON. L. CRAIG (South-West) [7.55]: I seem to have been drawn into this debate, for some reason or other, on account of a remark I made.

Hon. L. B. Bolton: You slipped!

Hon. J. J. Holmes: It was a silly remark.

Hon. L. CRAIG: It was an intentional remark, uttered more in sorrow than in anger, and, perhaps, half jocularly. I very much regret the undue publicity given to the remark by the Press. I reiterate that the action of the Price Fixing Commissioner on that occasion was stupid. I do not say Mr. White

is a stupid man, but his action on that particular occasion was stupid, and that is borne out by everyone connected with the stock-raising industry with whom I am acquainted, including all the stock firms. As a matter of fact, I have been showered with congratulations, which I do not at all appreciate. I regret exceedingly the publicity given to my remark. I did not wish to hurt Mr. White's feelings. I have a great regard for him with respect to many of his duties. That does not say that he should be exempt from criticism when he took action which, in the opinion of most people connected with the industry, was stupid.

I have not very much to say regarding the Bill. I do not agree entirely with its contents. I do not consider any commodity should be exempt from price fixing if undue profits are being made. The Commissioner was appointed to prevent profiteering, not to prevent high prices. At particular times of the year there are what might be described as specialty growers of meat. Certain qualities of meat will bring more than 6d. per lb. at any time of the year, even in the flush period. There are special buyers for that class of meat, such as the proprietors of high-class hotels where 6s. is charged for a meal. Nothing is said about fixing the price of such meals! I have sent baby beef to market for which I received nearer 8d. than 6d. per lb. Those conditions obtain to-day, if the quality meat be produced. The fluctuations of prices fix the maximum for best quality. If that is altered, specialty producers will have their interests interfered with. I do not think it will have any effect upon lower quality meat at all. For instance, yesterday's market brought 48s. 6d. for good quality, but it is not to be compared with the choice beef that comes from the southern areas. So it was a very hasty thing to do to make an arrangement with the wholesale butchers to say that they should not charge more than 5½d. per lb. for any beef. In effect it means that what you lose on good quality beef will be made up on the poorer beef, and you will probably be paying more for the lower quality beef in order to make up the loss which the butchers may make on the dearer meat. I think also that had the Minister when introducing the Profiteering Prevention Bill intimated any action such as has been taken by the Price Fixing Commissioner, in the terms the Minister expressed to-night, I doubt whether the Bill would have been passed by this House. The object

of the Bill was to prevent undue profit being made, and no member of this House approves of that. The Minister said that butchers must have the right to sell their meat at whatever price they like, that it has nothing to do with the producer. I agree with that. Once it has been purchased from the producer it is the butcher's business what he does with it; but if through Government or semi-Government interference, the butcher's price to the consumer is affected, that is a different story. Once the producer has sold his meat, that is all he has to do.

Hon. A. Thomson: Would you object to the Government fixing the price at 3d.?

Hon. L. CRAIG: I would object to the price being passed on to the producer as has been done on this occasion. Had the Commissioner allowed the matter to stand for a couple of weeks he would have found that the price would have fallen automatically. Year after year, at some period of the year, we have an extreme market. I have seen that time after time. In fact, I have experienced an extreme market myself and felt its effect very badly. That is what would have happened in this case if there had not been interference. I have no more to say except that I will support the second reading of the Bill, although I do not know how much of it I will support after that. I am not entirely in agreement with the Bill, but I do think that any commodity which is liable to be monopolised, any commodity on which a more than reasonable profit is made, should be subject to some control. A commodity like meat which varies in price from 2d. to 6d. or 7d. a lb. is a very difficult problem and no one can say that the maximum price shall be so much.

HON. J. J. HOLMES (North) [8.4]: I have only a few words to say because I do not wish to give a silent vote. If I thought that the producers of this country were profiteering I would express myself in the terms often used by Mr. Cornell and boot out the Bill, horse, foot and artillery. The primary producers have been up against it for years and to-day they are up against it even to a greater extent than ever before. The Minister in the course of his remarks missed the whole point. When the Commissioner fixed the wholesale price with the carcase butchers he fixed a price at which the producer must

sell. That is the whole point. The position as we find it to-day is not the result of the war but really the result of the awful season we have been experiencing. The primary producers have suffered in the past and are suffering now, and I have never heard of anyone going to their rescue, and therefore they do not get more for their produce than they ought to receive. Surely it is not the duty of the Government in a country like this which depends so much upon primary production to seize every opportunity to squeeze the primary producer. If we do that we must face difficulties. I have nothing further to say except that I will support the second reading, and I repeat that if I thought the primary producer was profiteering I would vote against the Bill. However, seeing that he is just struggling for an existence, and as the Bill may assist him I shall support it.

HON. E. H. H. HALL (Central) [8.8]: This Chamber passed the Profiteering Prevention Act and by doing so members gave their assent to the principle that no one should profiteer during the period of the most unfortunate struggle in which the British Empire is engaged. Members, of course, would stick to that principle that no one should be permitted unduly to profiteer in any one section at the expense of any other section. It has, however, been clearly proved to my satisfaction, after listening to the speeches delivered here that action should be taken in the direction proposed by the Bill. I do not wish to throw a bouquet at Mr. Craig, but very often that hon. member sees eye to eye with the Chief Secretary and the Honorary Minister. On this occasion he knows something about the subject matter before the House and he has repeated an accusation that he made against the Price Fixing Commissioner at a previous sitting of this House. I do not know whether his explanation has not made the matter worse, but we will let it go at that. It seems to me that in this age if Parliament or the Government appoints a man to a position such as that held by the Price Fixing Commissioner the officer holding that position should make every attempt to exercise with the greatest tact the responsibility with which he is charged, and before arriving at a decision he should avail himself of every means at his disposal so that the decision may be just to

all parties. Unfortunately in connection with what we have heard, that seems to have been the Price Fixing Commissioner's great failure. I listened to the remarks of the Chief Secretary and I wrote down some of his words. I think I heard them correctly. Anyway, he can put me right or ignore me. He said that the Price Fixing Commissioner was to be the judge or was to decide how far he should go or what methods he should adopt. If the Bill passed by the Chamber gave any public servant the power that the Minister said the Act gave the Price Fixing Commissioner I can only remark that I am sorry I supported the measure when it was before us and the soon it is altered the better. I shall support the second reading.

HON. C. F. BAXTER (East) [8.13]: The storm raised by the Bill with which we are dealing has been brought about by the Price Fixing Commissioner not following the line of duty set out in the Act passed by Parliament last session. By what authority did the Price Fixing Commissioner arrange with a small body of people what should be the wholesale price of a certain commodity? The Act lays down the direction he must follow; but that was not considered. The principal people associated with this particular matter were, firstly, the producers and, secondly, the consumers, but neither section was taken into consideration; there was no reference to them at all. The Commissioner simply arranged with the wholesale people what they should pay for the meat.

The Chief Secretary: That is not true.

Hon. C. F. BAXTER: It is true. An agreement was entered into that 5½d. should be paid for beef and 6d. for mutton. Will the Chief Secretary deny that the Price Fixing Commissioner had a conference with the wholesale butchers? Is that not correct? The outcome of that conference was that the price that should be charged was set down and that price was 5½d. for beef and 6d. for mutton. The Commissioner went even further. There was a deputation representing the producers and he said, "Very well, gentlemen, I will increase the price by a halfpenny." The Commissioner had no authority to do that. He committed himself there. Not once but at least four times the Chief Secretary stated that the fact that the price arrived at established the wholesale price did not affect the livestock market.

How he arrived at that, I do not know, when the wholesale people agreed to pay a certain price and not go above it. What was the result? The stock had to be taken away unless sold at that price. While the price was too high to buy at the value agreed upon, the only prime meat sold went to the country people. Therefore the country people for once had to think of the metropolitan meat market. I cannot believe there is any member who thought that the Profit-eering Prevention Act would trespass on the auction sales of stock. That stock is sold under open competition. What control can there be when we have an officer under the Crown who people know must be obeyed? The whole question is, What is the market value? If the Commissioner had had the slightest idea of the cost of producing the stock, he would not have fallen into the trap as he did. The stock had been hand-fed for months; it was not fattened in the paddocks.

Hon. A. Thomson: There was nothing in the paddocks to fatten the stock.

Hon. C. F. BAXTER: That is so. That line of stock, to be in such good condition, had had to be hand-fed for five or six months. Since January I have been hand-feeding stock heavily at great expense, employing a man to do it, and I have not been able to market fat stock. Other producers have spent much more than I have on hand-feeding and they need a high price to show any profit at all. This Bill is only reasonable. It will not inflict the slightest hardship upon the consumers. We have to consider the producers and the consumers, not the middle-men. Many consumers are enjoying the benefit of the basic wage and are getting meat at a lower price than that which ruled when the basic wage was fixed. There has been an increase in the basic wage recently and the price of meat is lower than it was previously. Therefore, people are enjoying a higher basic wage in regard to one commodity at least. We would do wrong if we permitted interference with marketing conditions. Workers other than those on the basic wage have received increases. Public servants whose salaries do not exceed £699 a year have received £10 and so they are really getting £40 per annum extra on account of the increased basic wage. Others above £699 have been increased to the extent of £20, making their total £40 also. Those in the Federal service have been in-

creased by £23. Mr. Wood is to be commended, not only on behalf of the producers, but also of the people of the State, for having brought the measure forward. I hope the Bill will be passed without amendment, and that another place will see fit to accept it and make the Act more equitable than it is to-day.

HON. J. CORNELL (South) [8.20]: Whenever an individual or group of individuals enters upon an anti-profitteering or a price-fixing measure, it becomes reminiscent of a hedgehog. Whatever part of the legislation we touch, we find a problem bristling with difficulties. Whom was this legislation designed to protect? Essentially the consuming or using public. The law of the Commonwealth and of the State has been in operation for almost a year, and I marvel at the lack of criticism or instances or undue hardship revealed by the administration during that period. What was the genesis of this Bill? It was an allegation of action by the Commissioner in regard to the maximum price of mutton. We have been told that, because of the season of the year and the existence of drought conditions, the Commissioner should have kept out of the business and allowed the trouble to solve itself. Even if the Commissioner had stepped in—and this has been disputed—the most effective way of protecting the section of the community that the Act is designed to protect would have been to start at the source. It is of no use damming a stream when the flood is on. If the price had soared too high, that would have reflected upon the people who buy meat, and surely it is the concern of the Commissioner to deal with such matters at the source.

I would not go so far as to say that the Commissioner had been stupid. He is a gentleman we all know and respect, and I have yet to learn that he did not act with the best intentions. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule, but they are not many. Plainly a section of the community, because of a mistake on the part of the Commissioner, has suffered something that might have been obviated; but are we to legislate on that score alone? If we are going to deprive the Commissioner of the powers originally conferred upon him because difficulties arise now and then, we shall have to continue making exceptions until eventually we wipe out the whole of the Act. I ven-

ture to say there are other sections of the producing community and the manufacturing community who could probably put up a good case for receiving consideration such as the Bill proposes to give another section of the community. Like it or lump it, if we are going to ensure any degree of general satisfaction from the work of the Commissioner, instead of taking power from him, we should give him more power. As events change from day to day and from week to week, let the decision be made on the facts as they arise. But do not hamstring the Commissioner. If he has made a mistake—

Hon. A. Thomson: He does not pay for the mistake, unfortunately. The producers have to pay for it.

Hon. J. CORNELL: If the hon. member was prepared to legislate for the people who led the Commissioner to taking action, I would be with him. Some members are taking the view that a set of circumstances should prevail in regard to price-fixing for one producing section of the community that shall not apply for another. Immediately we begin to specify, we limit, and the more we limit, the greater the trouble will be.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: Is gold a primary product? Who fixes the price of gold?

Hon. J. CORNELL: Gold is not an essential commodity in the sense that meat is. The Bill does not deal with gold, but our price-fixing legislation does deal with essential commodities. I should like to know how far and to what extent the Bill would have a repercussion upon the consuming public of the eastern goldfields. If the measure is designed to help anyone, it is designed to help the man who produces sheep, cattle and pigs. As regards the beef-eating community of the goldfields, eight per cent of the supply is brought from South Australia and from as far north as Alice Springs. Fifty per cent. of the mutton eaten on the goldfields is obtained from South Australia. Therefore we have two different consuming sections in this State. Firstly, there is the metropolitan section, which obtains practically all its supplies in Western Australia. I would do everything possible to help the producers of Western Australia, and also those of Australia and the world generally, because we have this outstanding paradox of our civilisation, that the man who feeds and clothes the human race today is bank-

rupt in every country of the world. Anything I can do to help the producer, I shall most willingly do. When a set of circumstances arises compelling us to have such legislation as this on the statute-book, we must yield, just as the Parliament of the Commonwealth has yielded, to the exigencies of the case. To that Parliament has been granted every power in the legislative calendar, without any limitation, in full confidence that the Federal Parliament will use those powers from day to day, as the position may change, wisely and well. That I regard as an excellent axiom to extend to our Price Fixing Commissioner, who is placed in exactly the same position as the Commonwealth Government finds itself in, dealing with emergencies that arise from day to day. I cannot bring myself to support the second reading of the Bill, because it is a deliberate start on specifying limitation of prices.

HON. A. THOMSON (South-East [8.33]: Like other members, I feel that I cannot give a silent vote on the Bill. I was much struck with Mr. Cornell's remark that the principal Act needed above all things to be administered wisely and well. The hon. member pointed out that the measure was introduced to protect the consumer, and the consumer alone.

Hon. J. Cornell: No. "Ostensibly" I said.

Hon. A. THOMSON: But the Act contains wise provisions to protect the business man and the manufacturer. If anything is to emerge from the discussions which have taken place here on the subject, I feel sure it will be an intimation to the Price Fixing Commissioner that anything appertaining to the primary producing section should be on the same footing as applies to business men. These can go to the commissioner and point out to him that, owing to increase of the basic wage and increased cost of raw materials and manufacturing, they are entitled to higher prices. They invariably obtain them. The same principle applies to manufacturers. We have no desire to see the primary producing section profiteering at the expense of consumers or any other section of our community; but we do ask that, in all fairness, the primary producer should receive the same treatment in respect of his commodities as is received by people in more fav-

ourable circumstances. Mr. Holmes put up a concise statement of the present position of the primary producing section; and, let me add, no man can speak with greater authority on that subject than Mr. Holmes. Still, I do hold that the measure before us has been introduced by Mr. Wood with the object of remedying, as Mr. Cornell has said, a mistake made with the best intentions. That mistake has cost many producers of fat stock considerable sums of money, and they have absolutely no redress. And in present seasonal circumstances they have absolutely no hope of recovering the losses sustained. While we passed the principal Act with a desire to ensure that there should be no danger of profiteering, I certainly think the Price Fixing Commissioner on this occasion did not act too wisely, having regard to all the circumstances. The primary producers claim that they had a right to be consulted before he arrived at his decision. While I feel much sympathy for the Chief Secretary in putting up a case on behalf of the Commissioner, I fear that he has not succeeded in proving to any reasonable, commonsense person that in fixing the wholesale price of meat the Commissioner did not fix the prices at which cattle and sheep were to be sold. Therefore I support the second reading of the Bill.

HON. J. NICHOLSON (Metropolitan) [8.37]: The Bill affects two classes, namely the producer on the one side and the consumer on the other. We have heard the views of hon. members representing provinces where the producer carries on his business; and so far very little has been said regarding the other section, namely the consumer. I happen to represent the latter section, and that is the section which I think should receive some consideration in connection with a Bill such as this. In order that such consideration may be extended to the consumer's interests, I would remind members of the provisions of the Act which is in force; but before doing so, I should like to express some views contrary to expressions which we have heard regarding the Price Fixing Commissioner. Various terms have been applied to that gentleman because of the action he took. He has been regarded in a light which one hon. member ventured to describe as stupid. One hon. member ventured to say that the Commissioner's action was stupid.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: So it was.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: I am sure that the hon. member in question would be the last person to regard the Price Fixing Commissioner as a stupid man.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: He said so.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: In point of fact the Commissioner is carrying out a public duty, and in carrying out that public duty he must be guided strictly by the powers conferred upon him under the Act, and must endeavour—

Hon. A. Thomson: To give justice to all sections.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: Quite so. It is with that very intention that I address myself to the present measure, to see that justice is extended to all parties. I quite agree that we do not wish to see the producer, on the one hand, injured; for the producer deserves to be encouraged, especially in the light of circumstances under which to the knowledge of all of us the producer is suffering. But there is the other view, that we must also consider the interests of the consumer. It was suggested by Mr. Baxter that the Price Fixing Commissioner had actually exceeded the powers conferred upon him by the Act—at least the hon. member indicated that. I hold such a view to be wrong, because in Section 11 of the Profiteering Prevention Act passed last session it is stated clearly that the Commissioner may at his own discretion or at the request of any member of the public upon good cause shown, and shall when required so to do by the Minister, investigate, and report to the Minister upon, all or any of the following matters—and here is set out a full list of the various matters to which the Act refers. For instance, the price of any commodity in this State or in any part thereof and at any time or times.

Hon. G. B. Wood: Why do you not read the whole of that section?

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: I will do so if the hon. member wishes it.

Hon. G. B. Wood: I will read the whole section presently.

Hon. J. Cornell: When the hon. member is here a little while longer, he will not want that.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: I was passing on to the next subsection, which is the one the Bill proposes to amend, namely Subsection 6. The subsection deals with the quantity, the

situation, and the local supply or position, of any commodity in this State or any part thereof. Another subsection refers to cost of supply and transfer of any commodity.

Hon. G. B. Wood: That is just what the Commissioner did not do.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: May I point out to the hon. member that in fixing his maximum price the Commissioner must have taken all those matters into consideration.

Several members interjected.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: The Price Fixing Commissioner in fixing a price must fix one price. He would not fix a separate price for transport, a separate price for the auctioneer's cost of selling and commission, and so on. He certainly would not do that.

Hon. L. Craig: He would fix the price.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: He may have fixed the price. He could not possibly have done otherwise; nor could he otherwise have declared, as he must have declared, a certain price for the particular commodity.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: You would not argue that he made full inquiries of the producers?

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: I am not arguing as to that. He simply fixed the price. In fixing a price—that is what I wish to emphasise—

Hon. L. Craig: He said he did not fix a price.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: That is so.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: I understand from the Minister that a price was fixed. It must have been had the Commissioner discharged his duty. It would be essential for him to take all these various matters into consideration in arriving at and determining the price. He could not do it otherwise.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: He did not.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: If he failed to do so, undoubtedly one must acknowledge that he failed in his duty.

Hon. L. Craig: That is what we are complaining about.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: But I do not admit that he failed in his duty. In any event, the point is that the price was determined by some means or other, because we have before us the acknowledged fact—the admitted fact—that every member who has spoken on the Bill has said that a certain price, 5½d. or 6d., was fixed. It is that price which was fixed as the maximum.

Member: Without a conference with the producers.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: I admit that, but there is nothing whatever in the Act requiring the Commissioner to confer with the producers. The simple point is this: In a time of emergency such as we are now passing through Parliament realised that it was essential in the public interest to appoint a commissioner who should be given power to fix prices and prevent profiteering. No member can question that point. The producers feel they have been hard hit, and I feel sure it is not the desire of the consumers that the producers should be unjustly treated. I therefore suggest to the hon. member who introduced the Bill that he will find in the Act the means whereby to fix varying prices for varying qualities of meat. It has been said that various classes of animals were offered at sales. I think Mr. Craig mentioned that he was fortunate enough actually to secure more than the maximum price. If that be so, then certainly he was lucky, although strictly speaking he was probably guilty of a breach of the Act. It was a candid admission on the part of the hon. member.

Hon. H. V. Piesse: The butcher might have bought the animal purposely.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: The trouble between the producer and the consumer seems to be that the one fixed price determines, so far as the producer is concerned, the maximum price for the meat that is offered for sale, whether it is of prime quality or inferior quality. If I am right, then the position can be overcome without passing the amending Bill now before us. Section 13 of the Act empowers the Governor from time to time, on the report and advice of the Commissioner under Section 11 of the Act, by proclamation, to fix and declare for any commodity—I am now quoting Paragraph (b) of Subsection (i)—

Different maximum prices according to differences in quality or description or in the quantity sold, or in respect of different conditions, terms, or localities of trade, commerce or sale.

Hon. A. Thomson: Would you mind reading Paragraph (g)?

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: That is an alternative. The Commissioner can also fix maximum prices on a percentage basis on landed or other cost. May I point out to Mr. Thomson that the Commissioner does not require to take all these matters into consideration? He can fix the various prices. The proposal of this Bill is to

overcome objections and difficulties which producers contend exist because of the present fixation of prices and the hardships which it is claimed producers suffer thereby. The proposal is to leave the stock to be marketed and then for the Commissioner to take up the fixation of the price with the butcher. I think that is the position. If that were done, it would certainly intensify very much the work of the Commissioner. It would be bound to do so. If the producers were to confer with the Commissioner and get these alternative prices fixed for varying qualities—

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order!

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: I am making a suggestion. If different prices were fixed for varying qualities of meat—

Hon. L. Craig: There might be 50 qualities.

Hon. J. NICHOLSON: Then let them be fixed at different prices. I can quite understand that there is ground for objection on the part of the producer to the fixation of one price. But there is a provision in the Act, which is not without a remedy. If it were, then I would probably be saying something more in support of the producer. But there seems to me to be no need for this Bill. If the hon. members who are interested on behalf of the producers would interview the Commissioner and endeavour to secure the fixation of varying prices, I believe that the whole difficulty would be overcome. The producer of prime quality meat would be able to get his price without in any way offending against the Act. I hope the hon. member in charge of the Bill will reconsider the matter in that light. In the meantime I must certainly vote against the second reading.

HON. G. B. WOOD (East—in reply) [8.55]: Rather than obtain an adjournment of the debate, I shall briefly traverse the objections raised by the Chief Secretary and Messrs. Cornell and Nicholson. At the outset, I thank the producer representatives in this Chamber who have so ably supported me to-night. I also thank Mr. Nicholson for his support which, though unintentional, was considerable indeed. Mr. Nicholson was the last speaker and he quoted from the Act the section giving certain powers to the Commissioner. He did not carry his quotation

quite far enough. The Act also provides—Section 11—that the Commissioner must investigate the means or sufficiency and cost of the supply or transport of any commodity. There are other subsections to Section 11 which I do not propose to quote. I intend to dwell on the one I have read. The Commissioner did not take into consideration at all the cost of supply and the cost of the commodity. Mr. Nicholson, I think, did the Commissioner unintentional harm by quoting the portion of the Act he did. Mr. Cornell said that we should not legislate to protect people against mistakes. I differ from that. The Commissioner did make a mistake; as I said in my speech on the Address-in-reply, he made an honest mistake. I personally have not said anything against the Commissioner; but, as Mr. Baxter said, these mistakes are costly.

Hon. J. Cornell: Was anyone bound by his mistake?

Hon. G. B. WOOD: Yes, definitely. I think it is our duty to protect people against mistakes. The Commissioner may not make that mistake again; but he may not always be in the position of Commissioner. A flaw exists in the parent Act which I seek to amend by the Bill. Mr. Hall said that he was glad that other than Country Party members were supporting the Bill. I point out, however, that the Bill has nothing to do with the Country Party; that party has not seen it. It was framed by the Parliamentary draftsman, a lawyer member of the Country Party and myself. It was not discussed by the Country Party at all.

Hon. J. Cornell: Was the Commissioner's price proclaimed?

Hon. G. B. WOOD: No.

Hon. J. Cornell: How were they bound by it?

Hon. G. B. WOOD: Who were bound by it?

Hon. J. Cornell: The wholesale butchers.

Hon. G. B. WOOD: This is what the Commissioner said to them: "If you do not fix a maximum price to the retailers, I will use the Act and gazette a price." I made that statement in my speech on the Address-in-reply, and it has not been challenged.

I did not know I would have to reply to so many points raised by the Chief Secretary, but I deem it my duty to do so as briefly as possible. I compliment him on making an excellent speech on a rotten case. In fact,

he had no case at all. It was not his case; it was put up to him by the Price Fixing Commissioner, there is no doubt about that. He spoke about profiteering in the last war. I also mentioned that subject. I also said the Act was a good one, and so it is. I think it has had excellent results and have already said so in this Chamber; but that is not to say it is perfect. There is a definite flaw in it which the Bill seeks to remedy. We know the Act was designed to prevent people from creating monopolies and despoiling the public. How can farmers come under a profiteering measure when their produce is sold at auction? Mr. Holmes said that if he thought farmers were profiteering he would vote against the Bill. I would go further and say that I would not have introduced it had I thought the producers were exploiting the public. Farmers send their meat to Midland Junction, and have to accept whatever the wholesale butchers like to give them. There is no control. The producer cannot in any sense be called a profiteer, and should not be brought under the Act. The price of meat has nothing to do with the war, and should not be made a subject for legislation that has anything to do with the war. Meat is purely a local article. The Chief Secretary said that the Commonwealth Government had brought down legislation. I admit that. Professor Copland, however, did not fix the price of meat or make any arrangement with the butchers about it.

Hon. H. V. Piesse: Nor did he fix the price of potatoes.

Hon. G. B. WOOD: Someone brought the matter before him, and he said, "No; let meat find its own level in the open market." That is the reason for our quarrel with the Price Fixing Commissioner in this State to-day. He did not consult the producers, and he did not allow things to go on as they have gone on in other years, and find their own level. Mr. Nicholson said that the Commissioner fixed the price. I do not think he did, but he definitely influenced it. Nothing the Chief Secretary can say, nor anything Mr. White can say, will influence me to the contrary. I let me tell members what the agents said. I have been in contact with many producers recently. Producers in the Avon district have sent their meat to Midland Junction and they are of opinion that the price of meat there has been affected. I have here

an extract from the "West Australian," this being a comment by stock salesmen—

Stock salesmen, commenting on the declining prices at Midland Junction yesterday, said, that buyers knew that agents could not withhold from sale the sheep sent for auction. Protected by the price agreement, buyers had forced them to accept the poorer prices offered. As a result of the day's sharp fall it was possible that growers would not send in their sheep, and thereby add to the existing shortage.

On account of the season growers had to send their sheep to market. This shows the extent to which producers have profiteered."

The recent high prices were due to the unusual seasonal conditions, and the larger yarding this week was an indication that growers had desired to quit their sheep at a reasonable price rather than risk carrying them.

That goes to prove that the auction system, the public demand, and the carrying capacity of the farm will right the position without interference. It is impossible to show in black and white whether the Price Fixing Commissioner was right or wrong. I have, however, the opinion of dozens of producers, who say it was not right, and in that the agents agree. I have three interesting graphs that I will lay on the Table of the House. Let me take 1939. In that year the price started off at 17s. for the best wether mutton, with the best skins. The price floated round at about £1, and in September and October went up to 25s. I quote these figures to show that people in the city were getting cheap meat so far as the producers were concerned. In 1932 prices did not go beyond 19s., and fell as low as 14s. for the best mutton in the wool. These facts have been given to me by agents.

Hon. L. B. Bolton: The sheep were in full wool at that time.

Hon. G. B. WOOD: Yes. Another graph is interesting. It shows a fairly sharp decline on the 3rd September, Waterloo day. The price was brought down by the action of the Commissioner. In my opinion, he was instrumental in the price coming down as it did; and I am sure, after consultation with the producers, that his action meant a reduction in the price of sheep on the hoof at Midland Junction of 6s. or 7s. a head. The Chief Secretary quoted Mr. Halvorsen, and I have been taken to task for making a statement which was not altogether correct. I said that the wholesale butchers had waited on the Price Fixing Commissioner, whereas I should have said the master butchers had

done so. I have written a letter to the "West Australian" that will appear in to-morrow's issue. The letter is as follows:—

The Editor, "West Australian," Perth. In a paragraph in Friday's issue of the "West Australian," Mr. Halvorsen, the secretary of the Wholesale Butchers' Association, refutes my statement in the Legislative Council that the Wholesale Butchers went to the Commissioner of Prices. Actually it was the Master Butchers' Association I desired to refer to, and I accept correction. The latter association submitted to Mr. White, a list of prices of which he approved—vide "West Australian" of 11th July.

I will now quote the butchers' list as approved and published in the "West Australian" on the 11th July—

A list of maximum retail (cash and carry) beef prices was submitted yesterday by the Master Butchers' Association to the Deputy Prices Commissioner (Mr. W. A. White), and approved.

The butchers went along with the prices, and, as I said before, the Commissioner fell for them. I stand by that, but desire to make the correction that I should have referred to the master butchers and not the wholesale butchers. Those people then went on to say that they were giving what they considered to be a fair thing. My letter to the "West Australian" continues—

The point which concerns the producer is, not whether Mr. White went to the wholesalers, or whether the wholesalers went to Mr. White, but the fact of holding a conference without any reference at all to the people who produced the goods. Nobody who is conversant with the fat stock market thinks for a moment that the Commissioner's act did not influence the market at Midland Junction. Mr. Halvorsen's statement that it is not the concern of the producers what happens to the stock after payment is amazing. Naturally, if the buyer is subject to a resale maximum price it must influence his bidding at auction. Mr. Halvorsen cleverly quotes cattle prices to bolster up his case. In submitting the amending Bill in the Legislative Council my remarks have almost entirely hinged on sheep prices at Midland Junction. If as contended by Mr. White natural conditions brought down the price, why then did he interfere in fixing a maximum? The amending Bill gives power to fix a percentage of profit to the butchers, which must be the fairer method of protecting the consumer. If the Commissioner is genuine in his contentions there should be little or no opposition by the Government to the amending Bill.

I hold to that letter. If it is claimed that there is no desire to interfere with the producers and that there is an equal desire to protect the consumer, the Government ought to welcome the Bill. The measure seeks to

leave prices alone at Midland Junction. The Commissioner claims he has not interfered with them. The Chief Secretary said it was impossible to fix a fair margin of profit. Provision is made for that in the Bill, which says—

In fixing and declaring any maximum margin of profit, the proclamation may do so relatively to such standards of measurement, weight, capacity, or otherwise howsoever as the Governor deems proper; also that such margin of profit shall vary in accordance with a standard or time or other circumstance, or shall vary with dividends or wages.

It will be seen that provision is made to cope with all the objections.

The Chief Secretary: I did not say exactly what you have attributed to me.

Hon. G. B. WOOD: Then I stand corrected.

The Chief Secretary: I said there was great difficulty in fixing a price that would cover individual interests.

Hon. G. B. WOOD: Is there not greater injustice in fixing a maximum price?

The Chief Secretary: There are difficulties all round. It is a matter of arrangement according to circumstances.

Hon. G. B. WOOD: The Chief Secretary asks why I should pick on two or three commodities. There is a good answer to that, namely, that the commodities mentioned in the schedule are the subject of auction prices. I do not desire to fix prices in any respect where they can be fixed fairly. It is almost impossible to fix the price of meat fairly and justly, for the reason that conditions vary to such an extent. The stock is not the same from any two places, and the conditions on the farms are all different. How can the cost of production on the Murchison be compared with the cost of production on my farm? The varying conditions make that impossible, but provision is made in the Bill to meet such a case. The Commissioner is left to control the butchers on the basis of a percentage of profits, according to what the costs may be. Nothing could be fairer than that. Not only did the Commissioner tell the meat interests what he would do, but he made the same remark to the chaff merchants. He said that if a certain person did not sell his hay for so much, the price would be fixed. The Chief Secretary said a difficult position would be set up with regard to chaff. I agree a difficult position will arise because of the drought.

The Chief Secretary: The producers will be the biggest purchasers of that commodity.

Hon. G. B. WOOD: Yes, and the Bill will protect them. Under that measure chaff can go to the railway saleyards, be put up for auction, and be subject to auction prices. When it reaches the hands of the merchants it will come under the control of the Commissioner, who will fix the price and the margin of profit. We know that chaff has soared up to £3 per ton. The merchant may pay £4 or £5 for it, but the Commissioner will be able to determine that £1 per ton profit is enough for the merchant to get, or whatever margin of profit he thinks fit according to circumstances.

Hon. H. S. W. Parker: Would not the position be fixed at the auction?

Hon. G. B. WOOD: No. If a merchant paid £2 or £3 a ton for chaff at auction his profit would remain the same, provided the Commissioner said it must be calculated on five per cent. or 10 per cent. of the purchase price.

Hon. J. Cornell: What about chaff bought privately by one retailer from another?

Hon. G. B. WOOD: That would be governed by the prices at auction.

The Chief Secretary: Only a small proportion of the chaff of this State is sold at auction.

Hon. G. B. WOOD: I am not sure. It does not matter whether it is meat or chaff or anything else that is sold privately, the price is always governed by that which is paid at the railway saleyards or Midland Junction, or elsewhere where auctions are conducted. One farmer may ask 25s. a head for a lot of wethers, and the would-be purchaser, would quote the last Midland Junction price as being 19s. for similar sheep, and declare that is all he will pay. These prices are all governed by what is paid at public auctions.

Hon. J. Cornell: The schedule could include rabbits.

Hon. G. B. WOOD: Yes; as much as is desired to insert in it. Reference is made to the possibility of retail butchers having to close their establishments. Already there are too many of them in business, just as there are too many bakers in Perth. Many butchers are trying to operate on a few carcasses of mutton and a few bodies of beef per week. On the trade they do they are endeavouring

to run motor cars and racehorses. That is the position of retail butchers. There are too many in operation. I think the Honorary Minister suggested that bakers should be licensed. There are too many bakers, as well as too many butchers.

Hon. C. F. Baxter: Recently I saw the balance sheet of a small butcher showing a profit of a thousand in this year, this bad year when everybody is going broke!

Member: Some butchers do not make a thousand pence a year!

Hon. G. B. WOOD: There are two or three other points which have been stressed by my friends who support the Bill. However, it has been said that wholesale butchers have paid more than the maximum price for beef. Suppose we accept that statement. Probably the difference is being made up on mutton.

Hon. L. Craig: I did not say I received a higher price since the price of meat was fixed.

Hon. G. B. WOOD: I am not referring to Mr. Craig at all. A man from the North-West who was here the other day told me that for years he had made a loss, but that recently at Robb's Jetty he thought he was going to recoup himself by selling his bullocks at £16 a head. However, he said, he was shot by the Price Fixing Commissioner. That is what I want to stress. Most producers have made losses. All sheep did not go up on the 3rd July last. Only 40 per cent. of the sheep in the yard on that day went 30s. Somebody wrote to the Commissioner complaining about the price of meat, and the Commissioner called into consultation the wholesale butchers, without doing what the Act implies he ought to do. He did not go into the cost of getting the stock to the yard—freight and other costs.

The Chief Secretary: The hon. member admits that the Commissioner has nothing to do with stock after it has been sold?

Hon. G. B. WOOD: Yes. Mr. Craig raised that point. That is provided the meat has had a fair go at auction, without interference by the Price Fixing Commissioner. But if the Commissioner says there must be a price from the wholesaler to the retailer, that is bound to influence prices at Midland Junction. I said in moving the second reading of the Bill that I had not desire to go into that aspect too much, but as the Minister raised that particular question I have had to go further than I originally intended. If the second reading is passed, I shall be

prepared to agree to reasonable amendments in Committee. I may agree to exclude hay. If Mr. Cornell has anything to add to the Bill, I shall be quite willing to consider it.

Question put and passed.

Bill read a second time.

House adjourned at 9.20 p.m.

Legislative Assembly.

Tuesday, 3rd September, 1940.

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The DEPUTY SPEAKER took the Chair at 4.30 p.m., and read prayers.

QUESTION—ELECTRICITY SUPPLY.

Copper Requirements.

Mr. SAMPSON asked the Minister for Railways: In view of the statements made in the Press that shipments of copper from overseas are expected in Sydney within the next few weeks, and that Australian copper mines and smelters are increasing their output, is it possible to give the House any information regarding electricity extensions now held up because of the need of copper?

The MINISTER FOR RAILWAYS replied: Orders were placed in May last for requirements. Action has been taken through the Department of Supply for early delivery but up to the present no deliveries have been made.

BILL—KALGOORLIE HEALTH AUTHORITY LOAN.

Introduced by the Minister for Health and read a first time.