

Legislative Council,

Wednesday, 20th February, 1918.

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

[For "Questions on Notice" and "Papers presented" see "Minutes of Proceedings."]

PAPER—COST OF LIVING ROYAL COMMISSION, BUTTER TRADE REPORT.

On motion by Hon. J. DUFFELL ordered: "That the progress report on the butter trade and the minority report thereon of the Commissioners appointed under the Foodstuffs Commission Act be laid on the Table of the House."

BILL—VERMIN BOARDS ACT AMENDMENT.

Second Reading.

Hon. C. F. BAXTER (Honorary Minister—East) [4.37] in moving the second reading said: The object of the Bill is to give the necessary power to check the invasion of the rabbit pest, and the measure will work in conjunction with the Rabbit Act Amendment Bill, which also appears on the Notice Paper. Whilst the Act in the past may not have been rigidly enforced, it is recognised that many amendments are required in it to enable us to successfully cope with the pest in the near future. The necessity for the amendments was recognised as far back as 1910, but these amendments have been continually held back until it is now admitted that it is of vital importance that they should receive attention. There have been a lot of extravagant statements made in regard to the invasion by rabbits and these statements are causing alarm amongst settlers in the State. Not only are they doing that but, at the same time, they will go a long way towards affecting the security of holdings. I do not say that the rabbit pest is not serious; it is very serious indeed, but I will say it has not reached the stage for such loud clamouring as to cause alarm not only to the settlers but to the heads of financial institutions upon whom the farmers are dependent to carry them through hard seasons. It is stated that the Rabbit Department have done practically nothing during the past few years to cope with the pest. That statement is incorrect and misleading. The department have been working hard the whole time but, unfortunately, they have not received the co-operation of the settlers. Had this co-operation been forthcoming, we would not at the present time be facing the difficulty which is before us. In 1916, when the people of the State were forced to realise that the rabbit pest was becoming dangerous, some began to wake up, but it was only a small minority who did so. The then Minister for Agriculture (Mr. Lefroy) agreed to supply poison at cost price and freight free. This poison was prepared

in Perth and distributed to the farming areas, but the results were not satisfactory, because the Railway Department in the first place, would not carry the poison except per medium of the dangerous goods train, and consequently there was a lot of delay. Then a great quantity of the poison was bad before it reached the settlers.

Hon. C. Sommers: Could they not have found that out before mixing it?

Hon. C. F. BAXTER: But they had no idea that there would be any objection on the part of the Railway Department to carry it. There was, after all, only a small percentage of poison in the material.

Hon. J. A. Greig: What poison was it?

Hon. C. F. BAXTER: Phosphorus; and it was said no danger could arise from its transit in the train. The Minister then recommended that there should be a place erected in the centre of the worst infected district, namely, Wyalkatchem. There the poison was made and distributed. It was hoped that the local governing bodies, such as vermin boards, roads boards, progress committees, or settlers associations, would take the distribution into their own hands and see that proper use was made of the poison. The centre of distribution was at Wyalkatchem and the poison was made there. Then the farmers complained that it was too far for them to go to that centre in order to get the poison. Recognising the seriousness of the position, the Minister sent a motor car to Wyalkatchem so that there might be quick despatch to those people who were living outside a radius of six miles from that centre. Then we found that, in some cases, the poison was accepted while in others it was not. In one case a man who was delivering the poison was told to get off the property where he was about to deliver it, and that if he did not get off quickly he would be kicked off. Free distribution went along for a few days and the next thing we find is that a petition is sent to the Minister asking that a man should be sent up to lay the poison, because the farmers were too busy to do so. At a later date an inspection was made of the district by the chief inspector of rabbits and it was found that in a number of cases the poison which had been sent out was still undisturbed and was wasting, and rotting. In one instance there were three four-gallon tins which had never been touched. The roads boards in those areas were written to and asked to co-operate in the distribution of the poison. A few did so, some never replied to the communications and some refused point blank to assist in any way. When we find local governing bodies taking that stand when they are faced with a serious position of this sort, and when the Government are going so far as they are, further than any Government in the Eastern States are going, there is drastic need for an amendment to the Act, so that if the boards will not take it upon themselves the Government will be in a position to do the work and charge it up against them. For the past 14 years the Rabbit Department have urged settlers to fence in their holdings. Of course the present price of netting is ridiculous. Twelve months after the war broke

out there was plenty of netting available. Farmers had an opportunity of getting it from the Government, and having 20 years, at a low rate of interest, in which to pay for it. There was no excuse then for farmers not to fence in their holdings. Very few settlers took advantage of that provision. The Act provided for it and the Government found the netting. The great majority of settlers in the State are of opinion that rabbits would not become a pest. It is only now at the eleventh hour that they wake up and shriek out "Why do not the Government do this or that." The Government are here to carry out the Act, and it is for the settlers themselves to exterminate the rabbits. We find, too, that it is repeatedly said that rabbits will never do any harm. Others say the rabbit is a good thing, and that they will have some fresh meat. Do they intend to grow wheat and graze sheep, or is it their desire to breed rabbits? I am strongly opposed to anything in the nature of starting an industry as applied to rabbits for food. What we want to do is to exterminate them because they are a pest. We do not want rabbits, but something that will produce revenue. At a later date, the Minister approved of a supply of poison carts being sent to the farmers adjacent to the lake districts, or other places where rabbits had established themselves. These carts were sent out, I understand. The settlers were to find the horses and the men for these carts and the Government, both the carts and the poison. The farmers were to take turn about and poison the country around the lakes where the warrens were established. The settlers took delivery of the carts and in some cases used them, but in these latter cases they only used the carts on their own holdings and not on the Government land at all. As a consequence the department was put to the expense of sending out their own horses and men to poison the lands upon which the warrens were established. In addition there were only three farmers who accepted the carts on these terms, and even these people worked the carts to suit their own ends. Two years ago the Chief Inspector of Rabbits found that the rabbits were on the west side of the No. 2 fence, that was near Cunderdin. I remember the case myself. He sent out one of his inspectors to go right through the district. This inspector found that the rabbits were only established on eight of the holdings. He immediately served notices upon the land owners concerned to commence poisoning for the destruction of the rabbits. He went back later, and found that out of the eight only two had made any attempt whatever to fulfil the order. In the meantime, he had made a report to the Chief Inspector that nothing had been done to accede to the request, with the result that the Chief Inspector took proceedings. Such a storm of indignation arose and so many deputations waited on the Minister that he gave way and did not continue to enforce the penal clauses of the Act. I intend, without fear or favour, to enforce these penal clauses and I want even more power given in this Bill. The result of this inaction on the part of the settlers is that the rabbits are not only in the vicinity of Cunderdin now, but can be traced to Northam and Toodyay, and it is going to be

very difficult to get rid of them in these places. To attempt to fence off the water is impossible, and in rocky country it is very easy for the rabbits to establish themselves firmly. It is indeed very difficult to get rid of rabbits in hilly country and far more expensive than it is on the plain country. In New South Wales, in places, the rabbits have become such a scourge that they have killed all the scrub and trees. When a dry season comes along there is no herbage or water left for them and the result is that they are poisoned in thousands at those times. So far as the fences are concerned, I have had reports finding fault with the condition of these fences. I have, however, travelled hundreds of miles along the fences, and can say nothing but good as to the manner in which they are kept. The fence is being well maintained and is absolutely rabbit-proof except where damage has been done to it by storms and fires, when it is repaired as soon as possible. What is the use of having a fence if we are going to let rabbits through in other ways and if we are not to get the assistance of the general public. In some cases the gates have not only been left open but actually propped open. Some six years ago I found three gates in succession propped open. They had been held open by pieces of wood. Two carters who went through the fence recently and left a gate open are now being prosecuted, and I hope that this step will be a lesson to other people. What is the good of all this money being spent when gates are being left open? One gate left open for one night in a thickly infested area will let enough rabbits through to stock the whole of the country in two years. We have also had indirect reports that numbers of live rabbits have been brought down from the rabbit areas in dog boxes of the guards' vans, and subsequently liberated. This is a very serious thing, and it behoves every member of the public, if anyone sees a case of that sort, to report it at once to the Rabbit Department so that steps may be taken immediately in regard to it. Cases have been reported in which rabbits must have been confined in crates for as long as three or four days, and then liberated. Some people wonder how it is that the rabbits are found all over the districts. Time and again motor cars have been seen carrying rabbits, and the occupants have been seen letting them go. This was not known at the time, and was only discovered when it was too late and the parties could not be identified. If we could only catch a few cases of this kind this practice would soon be stopped. There is also the case of a spring cart which was seen bringing in rabbits, but it could not be traced either. There is one case in particular to which I desire to refer. That is a case in which rabbits were brought down in a dog box on the guard's van. We have the statement of an ex-member of this Chamber, a Mr. Warren Marwick, who says that it has come to his knowledge that rabbits have been brought down in a dog box in the guard's

van. He does not inform the Rabbit Department or even the Police Department, and if he had informed even the police the matter would have reached the Rabbit Department. He waits for a whole month, and then coolly tells the public through the Press that this has occurred. It was his duty to get into touch with the department at once. If I had been in his place I would have given the man in charge, and have taken the responsibility on my own shoulders. Possibly, when he and others realise what a terrible pest we are faced with and what it will cost to protect their property from the rabbits, and when they find that there is not even grass enough upon which to run an ordinary hack, let alone sheep, they will begin to realise their foolishness in the past. Several people have told me that they have seen rabbits brought in and know the people concerned, but when I spoke about prosecuting they told me that they refuse to go to court, and the result is that the cases fall to the ground. One can do nothing in matters of that sort. There is no doubt that the fences have been doing a great deal of good, and I trust they will be left there to continue in their good work. They are checking the waves of rabbits which are coming through from the Southern portion of the State, making west. It would be utter foolishness to attempt to lift the No. 1 fence. Six hundred miles of the No. 1 fence have been made dog-proof, and many thousands of dingoes have been kept back from our agricultural areas by this means. I venture to say, as a stock owner, that had it not been for that fence the people outside of it would have had to yard their sheep every night, or there would have been no sheep left to yard. We do not want to remove a fence like that. A Surveyor General from the Eastern States recently visited this State, and made an inspection of part of our rabbit-proof fencing. He said that in no other place in the Eastern States did he know of a Government or private fence which was kept as well as ours. I say this in contradiction of the many statements that we hear regarding the condition of the fence. I also wish to draw members' attention to the good which is being done in the matter of poisoning. No doubt that is our best means of getting rid of the pest from our midst. That is one direction in which we desire to amend the Act, because we cannot enforce poisoning at present. I should like to take, as an illustration, what is being done in the Lake Grace district. The people there have half a dozen carts working, and these carts have been going continuously for 12 months. Numbers of people are saying that one needs to poison only for a few months in the summer. I agree that the rabbits do not take the bait so well during the time when the grass is green, but one must keep on poisoning all the time. Even if one only gets half a dozen does in the week, it is a great consideration. A pair of rabbits will produce in 12 months 2,500 rabbits. Therefore, what is the result of destroying even one doe, when viewed over a period of 12 months? The Lake Grace people kept at the poisoning continu-

ously. They purchased a poison cart of their own, and kept it constantly at work. The result has been that that district has had better results than any other district similarly situated. One settler, Mr. Stewart, got an average of 18 bushels. Such results could not have been achieved if the Lake Grace people had sat down like others and done nothing. The talk of having a "rabbit day," when everybody should poison, is absurd. What is the use of such a proposal? The destruction must go on all the year round. We do not want people to refrain from poisoning until a "rabbit day" comes along. The time to start is this very hour for anyone who has rabbits on his property. People may ask, "How are we to start? We have nothing to poison with." There is not much in that excuse, when free poison is being distributed. From time to time I have heard strong comments as to the alleged failure of the Government to carry out the recommendations of the Agricultural Commission. It is asserted that the recommendations have not been carried out. If any inquiry were made, however, it would be found that all the recommendations which could possibly be carried out were carried out some considerable time ago. It has even been said in public that the failure of the Government to carry out the Agricultural Commission's recommendations was the principal reason why there should be a select committee to inquire into the rabbit question. The Royal Commission suggested free poison. Free poison has been sent out to the whole of the infested districts—every ounce that the Government could buy, beg, or borrow. We are, in fact, short of poison now; but as soon as we get hold of further supplies we shall go on distributing. The department have even gone to the expense of bringing over a parcel of poison by the Transcontinental Railway, steamer space being unavailable. So much as regards the carrying out of recommendation No. 1. Recommendation No. 2 was that Government dams should be made rabbit-proof. With one or two exceptions, they have been made rabbit-proof. We went on with that work as soon as we could get the necessary netting. There may have been a little delay while there was a shortage of netting, for a week or two. If to-day there are one or two dams still unfenced it is only a small matter, which will be remedied. The department have done their utmost with the netting available to fence in the whole of the dams. The third recommendation of the Royal Commission was that wire-netting should be made available for fencing private holdings and dams. But wire-netting is unprocureable. The department were fortunate enough to secure five miles of netting about six weeks ago, and that netting has been sent out to two vermin boards in the worst infested districts for the purpose of fencing in water supplies. Probably the wire is in the hands of the boards at the present time, and they are moving ahead. These boards are taking the matter up seriously. The netting has been supplied to them on extended terms. The boards take the netting and are responsible to the Government, and they in turn distribute the netting to the settlers requiring it. One of the proposed amendments under this

Bill is that vermin boards shall have the power to see that the netting is properly erected, and also power to recover the cost of the netting from the settler. Now, wire-netting has been available for 14 years; and what has occurred? The rabbit was not viewed with any serious alarm, and the settlers would not take any steps to wire-net their properties. But now, at the eleventh hour, it is urged that the Government should make wire-netting available. I will take No. 4 and No. 5 recommendations together. No. 4 asks for the erection of a cross fence from Mt. Marshall, and No. 5 suggests that the railway fences should be made rabbit proof—I presume this means the whole of our railway fences. The Royal Commission did not come into existence until some time after the outbreak of war, when it was absolutely impossible to purchase wire-netting except at exorbitant prices and in very small lots. Thus the Royal Commission had asked the Government to do an impossibility. It is not practicable to get netting for putting up the cross fence; at the same time I do not say that it would be advisable. Neither is it possible to fence the whole of our railway lines with wire-netting, if, again, that were advisable. Wire-netting today cannot be bought under £80 per mile; and who would think of fencing at such a price? The country could not stand such exorbitant expense. A few words now regarding what the occupiers of land could and should have done. There were very few rabbits in these districts three or four years ago. If the settlers had taken the matter up seriously then, when asked to do so by the department, we should not have had this trouble. The occupiers were not forced by the department to do anything, but the position was put before them clearly. The expense then would have been very slight indeed. But no. The occupiers waited until this eleventh hour, when they are overrun with rabbits. The absurd idea was propagated that the rabbit could not live in a country like this. Why, the rabbit will live where nothing else can live. Another idea was that our poison plants would keep the rabbit down. But people who believe that have a very poor conception of the prolific nature of the rabbit. The rabbits would clear this country of poison, and after that they would still keep on going. Our landholders should have kept up the poisoning continuously. Two gentlemen interviewed me on this matter recently, and asked what the Government were going to do. I asked them, "What have you done?" They said they had laid poison. I asked, how? They replied that they had laid down poison a couple of times at the beginning of the season. Fancy their saying that when they ought to have been laying poison three days per week continuously, carrying the thing right through! We are only playing with the rabbit by putting down poison occasionally. We must put it down continuously. A few weeks ago I was in the Emu Hill district, and saw the effects of poisoning on Mr. Hedges' farm. This was on a Sunday. Poison had been laid for a distance of 12 miles on the preceding Friday afternoon, and, wherever I could see, the rabbits were lying dead. I must mention, too, that I could see for only half a chain, and

therefore goodness knows how many rabbit may have been lying dead in the bush. The poison cart, I say, had been sent out on the Friday afternoon, and this was the result of the Sunday. With three days' poisoning per week, we can check the pest until normal conditions return, when we shall be able to purchase netting to fence in the holdings. Fencing in is the only way of keeping the rabbit down; but they can be checked by fencing. And that is what the occupiers of land have never done. Another feature of the case is the ridicule the officers of the department. The settlers have never taken the rabbit question seriously. It is only now, when they are overrun with rabbits, that they do take it seriously. Even now, however, they do not take it upon themselves, but ask what are the Government going to do? It is just about time the people became more self-reliant. They cannot lean on the Government for everything. The settlers must take their share of the burden of exterminating the rabbit. If there were a large amount of money to be expended by the department in exterminating the rabbit, we might still go on in the old way; but if such an amount were put in the Estimates it would never be passed in this Chamber. Certain people have gone a little further in leaving gates open. In some cases they have actually sneaked out after dark for the purpose of opening rabbit-proof gates and propping them open. A watchman has been kept, but, strange to say, while the watchman was there the gates were not left open. Immediately he was withdrawn, however, the gates were left open again. These are people who know the circumstances of these cases, and say they have a good idea of who is responsible, but they will not even give the department a hint as to who it is. What chance have the department of combating that sort of thing along such a length of fence? A number of dams have been fenced with rabbit-proof netting; but where do we find? The very settlers for whom benefit the dams have been fenced are too lazy to put a water trough over the fence for their stock, but leave the gate open so that the stock can walk in and out at any time. Of course the rabbits also walk in and out at any time. What is the use of fencing water supplies under those conditions—fencing them for the benefit of a class of people who will not even attempt to protect themselves? In that respect, again, the Act needs amendment. Vermin boards must be empowered to see that enclosures which have been fenced at the expense of the Government shall be cared for and looked after. Vermin boards must also have power to ensure that gates are not left open indiscriminately and maliciously, as has occurred. Only a fortnight ago one of the department's inspectors found the gates on three dams in the Lake Grace district left open. It seems very hard indeed that after the Government have gone to all that expense and trouble, the very people whom they try to protect should leave the gates open, so that the rabbits can get water and increase tenfold. Again, there is the silence on the part

and owners when there is an outbreak of rabbits. The first duty of a land owner in such circumstances is to notify the department. On several occasions the department have been notified, with the result that Inspector Crawford or one of his assistants proceeded to the locality of the outbreak and, by poisoning, succeeded in destroying the rabbits. In every instance, so far as I know, where Mr. Crawford or his assistants have visited a place which has been the scene of a small outbreak—due, no doubt, to the fact that the rabbits had been brought there—they have been successful in getting rid of the pest. One outbreak at York was reported by the police. The York people waited for the police to make a report, and that report had to go through all the official channels until it reached the Agricultural Department. Mr. Crawford put in a week at York, with the result that no rabbits have since been found in the neighbourhood. Had those rabbits been left to themselves around Mt. Brown for a couple of months, what would have occurred? They would have catered, and it would have been impossible to get rid of them. For all the residents are, however, the rabbits would have been left there to spread. Under the amending bill roads board districts can be formed into vermin boards, and have power vested in them to compel owners and occupiers of land to keep the rabbits down. Sufficient power for that purpose does not exist to-day. As a fact, in some districts the roads boards have absolutely refused to do anything at all towards coping with the rabbit pest. We want power to compel them to do it. If they refuse it will be for the Government to do it and charge them with the cost. We cannot allow a body of men in any one part of the State to say, "No, let the other people cope with the pest; we will not do anything." We must have the necessary power to deal with such people, if we are to check the rabbit pest. We have a striking example of what can be done in combating the rabbits, provided by the Ninghan vermin board. That body has gone into the question thoroughly. They have six poison carts at work, and they write down almost daily to the department. They have the whole-hearted support of the department, for they have taken up the matter seriously. The city is that other boards have not followed. Still, it must be admitted that others are now coming forward. The Ninghan board has led the way and is doing splendid work. The Government are out to do all in their power to assist in the handling of this question. But the rabbit department is not an exterminating department; it is merely a governing department, although quite ready to assist to the full extent of its power. In fact, we have gone further than the departments in any of the Eastern States. No other State has ever given free poison or sent out poison carts on to its own lands. In the Eastern States the vermin boards have to maintain large staffs of inspectors. Some of the people here claim that the Government should provide all the inspectors. The largest number of inspectors employed by

any State Government in the East is four. We, who are only starting, have four. As a matter of fact in New South Wales 80 inspectors are appointed by the Government, but paid by the vermin boards; and, more than that, three per cent. of the vermin rates collected in New South Wales are paid to the rabbit department to defray departmental expenses. Contrast that with what the people here want at the hands of the Government. The Government here are providing poison carts at cost. Some small carts are coming on to the market at a cost of from £6 to £12 10s., but the carts made at the State Implement Works cost £20, and are being supplied at cost for cash, or on three years' terms to vermin boards who will sell them out to individual landowners. With these facilities it is of no use any man saying that he is not in a position to destroy rabbits on his holding. The Government are determined that all landholders shall do their share in the destruction of rabbits. More particularly does this apply to the districts west of the No. 2 fence, where rabbits abound. While we require to enforce the Act in all parts of the State, we are going to more rigorously enforce it on the west side of the No. 2 fence. In the Eastern States men are fined up to £50 for the neglect of precautions and of restrictive measures. In one case recently a landowner refused to destroy rabbits on his property, whereupon the Government stepped in and destroyed the rabbits at a cost of £600, which was debited against the owner, who was given to understand that if he did not pay up, his land would be sold. In respect of the supplying of wire netting to settlers, I find that from 1904 to 1918 some £10,365 worth of netting was distributed amongst the settlers. Had the settlers generally taken up the matter seriously the sum would have been much larger. Settlers must understand that it is necessary to poison continuously. I know of the case of a boy of ten years old who, with the aid of a poison cart, regularly poisoned along five miles of country twice a week, with the result that he kept down the rabbits, not only on his father's property, but on the adjoining property of other settlers who would not do anything in the matter. After the Vermin Act of 1909 was passed it was found to be unworkable in many respects, and it was soon realised that it would have to be amended. The first and most important amendment is in respect of the incidence of the rates. The original Act was drafted to meet the requirements of the pastoral areas alone, but now that the agricultural areas have come in, it is a different proposition. The existing methods of rating would not bring in £100 per annum, and we must have power to alter the system of rating, because the vermin boards cannot impose a reasonable rate, and so cannot keep down the pest. Also, the powers of the vermin board are not sufficient to deal with the rabbit pest, and so greater powers are required in this direction. I mentioned a little while ago that power was not given to vermin boards to compel people to fence in their land. That power also is necessary. Another important thing is that roads boards should automatically become vermin boards, in order to save expense

in the way of elections. The amendment provides that where a roads board is willing it may automatically become a vermin board and thus do away with the necessity for special elections. In any case where the board will not voluntarily form itself into a vermin board the Minister should have power to appoint a vermin board and this power it is proposed to provide. I am inclined to think that some of these vermin boards will not put the necessary vigour into their work.

Hon. J. J. Holmes: Do you propose to make a man act on a board whether he will or not?

Hon. C. F. BAXTER (Honorary Minister): Certainly not, but it is necessary that we should have power to appoint such boards. Here and there we may find a board refuse to act, but the great majority of the roads boards are now falling into line and forming themselves into vermin boards. Only one or two of the boards are dodging the responsibility. The following roads boards have already formed themselves into vermin boards:—Yalgoo and district, Augusta, Dandarragan, Warren, Plantagenet, Lake Grace, Mullewa, Merredin, Dowerin, Kellerberrin, Black Range, Shark Bay, Upper Gascoyne, Gascoyne, Roebourne and Tableland, Williams, Ninghan, Ashburton, Moora, Gingin, York, Northam, Beverley, and Victoria Plains. Regarding the amendments, we have one in Section 2 which deals with reserves vested in trustees or bodies incorporated. This has been inserted by the Crown Law Department as they thought it desirable to prevent trouble which might arise in future where it might be necessary to clear these reserves of vermin. In respect to the forming of vermin boards, we have the substitution of new sections for the existing Sections 9 and 10, in order to simplify elections. This is intended to operate where a roads board does not act and consequently where it is necessary to appoint a board. Then we have an amendment of Section 22. The principal Act provided for the appointment of only a clerk, and not for inspectors. It is necessary that the power to appoint an inspector or inspectors should exist. We have an amendment of Section 34. This provides for the carrying on of the business of the board if it should be found necessary to abolish it at any time or if the board refuse to act. Another amendment of the same section gives power to the Minister to act as a board where a district will not form one. It has been found necessary to have this power also, in view of the attitude taken up by certain districts. Section 35 vested all property, rights, etc., in the Minister where the board was suspended or abolished. The Crown Law Department consider that further additions to the Act are necessary when this has been done, and also to settle any disputes which might arise where one vermin board has been split into two or more, or portion of its districts allotted to another board, or portion of another board's boundaries included in its. In such cases it might be necessary to re-allot expenditure. Then we have an amendment of Section 39. The Crown Law Department consider the amendment of this section necessary, as the existing Act does not make the liability of

adjoining owners clear. This is intended to apply where a vermin board has fences and is not ordered to adjust boundaries. This has been found necessary in connection with the decision given in a case where the Gascoyne vermin board sued certain pastoralists to recover interest on the cost of the fence to which they were joined. Clause 11 deals with the amendment of Section 43. Thirty days' notice is too long. A rabbit might have two litters before action can be taken under the old section. It is thought that seven days' notice is quite sufficient to allow a start to be made. Take the position at the present time. If 30 days' notice has to be given, this being the end of February, rabbits could have two litters by the end of March. Next month about the best time for poisoning. It is more effective then, and if seven days' notice can be given there would be three weeks in which poisoning could be carried out. Clause 1 deals with the amendment of Section 46. The addition of the words "except rabbits" is necessary. In the Eastern States bonuses for rabbit scalps were found to give bad results and this method of reward was subsequently prohibited under our Rabbit Act. It is, therefore, necessary to bring the Vermin Act into line with it.

Hon. W. Kingsmill: What sort of trapping do you allude to?

Hon. C. F. BAXTER (Honorary Minister): For consumption.

Hon. W. Kingsmill: But what sort of traps?

Hon. C. F. BAXTER (Honorary Minister): There are a dozen kinds of traps. There is the netting trap and the underground trap. The amendment of Section 46a sets out the duties of vermin boards. At the present time there is no duty laid down. The amendment of Section 46b extends the powers of vermin boards wishing to enforce the Act in the district. The amendment to Section 56b is very important. It makes it compulsory for vermin or roads boards to keep the rabbit proof fences around public dams in good order. This has not been done in the past and in some cases the expenditure by the Government in netting these dams was wasted. In other cases it was found that the gates were continuously and deliberately left open and it is impossible for the Government to exercise control over dams scattered all over the agricultural areas. This is a duty which naturally falls on the vermin boards. The amendment to Section 47 alters the incidence of taxation. When the original Act was passed, it was evidently not thought that the farming districts would come in and the method of raising rates on pastoral property is not suitable for farming districts, as various boards in the agricultural districts have requested that the method of rating be altered, so that they can obtain the necessary rates to satisfactorily carry out the Act, which they could not do now. The present amendment retains the original method for pastoral leases and raises the maximum rate to 2s. per 100 acres as it was in the Act originally on all other properties. The rates are not to exceed the roads board rate on the unimproved value of the land. The ratio between the two methods

f rating is to be the same. If the roads board rate is 4d. in the pound and the vermin board rate 1d. in the pound, the rate on the pastoral lands would be one-fourth the maximum, that is 2s. per 100 acres or 6d. per 100 acres. This amendment has been asked for by a number of boards in whose district the pest is becoming a serious menace. Taking the rate of the Gascoyne board, through the reduction of the rate to 1s. last year the Government have to face a loss of £3,800. This is rather a large amount for the Government to lose annually. I do not know that I need deal further with his Bill; I think I have explained clearly to the Chamber what is required. I move—

“That the Bill be now read a second time.”

Hon. C. SOMMERS (Metropolitan 5.35): I believe that this Bill is necessary and I am glad that the Government have made a serious start. People are very negligent indeed and it is the duty of the Government, knowing how negligent people are in doing their duty, to see that something is done by them. This is a Bill which is really on all fours with the amendment of the Health Act. I know what a menace the rabbits are to this country. I come from Victoria and I can recollect the introduction of the first pair of rabbits in the Winchelsea district. I am sure the person who introduced them did not know what he was leading the country into. I know that when we had a rabbit given to us we had to be very secret over it. On the Barwon Estate I had been invited on many occasions to a shooting party and I can remember with what pleasure we used to engage in shooting rabbits. A few years afterwards there was a great hullabaloo from one end of the country to the other, and all those who had kangaroo dogs, or any kind of dogs, used to take them out on hunting excursions. Reference has been made by the Minister to the rabbit-proof fence, and from my knowledge of the No. 2 fence, it is in good order. I know what the intentions of the Government were during my term of office to keep the No. 1 fence in good order from the time it was erected in 1901. It was a mistake that the Government did not commence the erection of these fences earlier. This Bill deals with various pests, therefore I can refer to the foxes which have become a great menace to the pastoralists, especially during the lambing season. I may give a little anecdote illustrating how careless people are in introducing vermin into this country. I remember in 1901 picking up a newspaper and reading a paragraph stating that the “young bloods” of Kalgoorlie were introducing a parcel of live foxes from Victoria. I took it upon myself to interview the Under Secretary for Agriculture on this question, and we discovered that foxes were not on the prohibited list. Still, the people who intended to introduce these foxes in Kalgoorlie were notified that they could not introduce them, and there is no doubt that it was a benefit to the country in preventing the introduction of foxes at that stage. The

Minister would make one believe that everything possible is being done to help the settlers in dealing with the rabbits, but I must contradict him there. On one of my properties I had reason to suspect that rabbits were to be found. I came to Perth and saw the officers of the Rabbit Department. I said, “I believe there are rabbits on my property; an early start should be made to cope with the pest.” The officers impressed on me the necessity for destroying them. I told the officers that I had come to report it and that I intended to destroy them, but that I wanted assistance and advice. This is only 15 months ago and it is known what great strides this rabbit pest has made since that time. On another occasion on one of my properties it was thought rabbits had made their appearance. I visited the department and asked if they could lend me an exterminator. I was told that they had not got one. However, after some conversation I discovered they had an exterminator but that it was on the Murchison. The officers of the department told me that they did not know where the inspector was, so I asked if they had any traps; they said, no. I asked them if they had any poison; they told me no. I asked if they could tell me where I could get any traps but they could not. They could only tell me that I must destroy the rabbits. I have a property at Moora and one day when I was driving out there I met the inspector. He said, “I am going to your place to see the rabbits.” I said, “There are no rabbits there.” He told me that there were. We went out and spent two or three days but could not find any. I am in sympathy with the Government in introducing this Bill and I think, with some slight alterations, the measure should be allowed to pass. I should like to say a word about the kangaroos. They have become a real pest, yet nothing is being done.

Hon. Sir E. H. Wittenoom: And the emus.

Hon. C. SOMMERS: Yes, they are a pest, too. On one estate on the Blackwood River of 5,000 acres I was told that there were 250 kangaroos all the year round. They do not confine themselves to the paddock they are put in but they eat the best grass and go from paddock to paddock. I venture to say that these kangaroos will eat more grass than sheep do. If there were 200 sheep on this property they would return a profit of £1 per head. I asked the owner of the estate, “Why do you not shoot the kangaroos?” He replied, “I went to the clerk of courts and asked for permission, but I was refused; I was given a permit to shoot brush kangaroos and wallabies, but there was neither of these there.” The owner of the estate took the law into his own hands and engaged a man to shoot the kangaroos. The news soon got around and the police were communicated with and the man was prosecuted and fined £15. In this State it is utterly impossible to exterminate the kangaroos. People will say that the kangaroo is protected because it provides food for the settler. That is all a mistake. First of all the food is poor in quality, and secondly any settler who wastes his time chasing kangaroos for food is only looking for trouble, because he could

earn far more by working on a farm. Then we must remember that there is a world's demand for kangaroo leather just now, and the skins have been quoted up to 4s. 9d. a lb. One of my neighbours sent a skin to Perth the other day and it returned him 15s. net. Is it therefore not a splendid industry which should be encouraged? It should be immensely profitable as the whole country is alive with kangaroos. There are many returned soldiers and most of them are pretty good shots and a number could be employed in shooting kangaroos. The world is in need of kangaroo skins, so why place a bar on the establishment of an industry which is at our doors. Then with regard to my own case, I could carry hundreds more sheep if I could get rid of the kangaroos. I assure the House that it is quite impossible to exterminate them. In an old settled district like Brunswick Junction they have been shot for a considerable time past, and there does not appear to be any chance of exterminating them, and if there is no chance of doing that at Brunswick Junction, what chance is there of exterminating them in the immense areas of Western Australia where they abound? We worry about the blackboy and the grass tree and here we have an industry calling out to be taken up. I have taken the opportunity of getting an expression of opinion from settlers on the question and they all say that the kangaroo is a pest and the sooner it is lessened the better it will be for everybody. I believe Mr. Kingsmill will advise that the kangaroo is a valuable asset, and should not be destroyed, but to my mind the only place where the kangaroo should be permitted to exist is the Zoological gardens. With regard to dingoes the Scaddan Government abolished the reward of 5s. which was paid for scalps, but for every 5s. which has been saved to the State the settlers have lost 50s. It is a common thing for a dingo to get into a flock of sheep and kill any number between 50 and 100 in a single night. I am speaking with some practical knowledge of the settled districts and I know that kangaroos and dingoes, as well as sparrows, foxes, and rabbits, are pests. We must do all we can to make the people realise their duty and to assist the Government. Above all, however, the Government must also do their duty. I shall support the Bill.

On motion by Hon. Sir E. H. Wittenoom debate adjourned.

MESSAGE—RABBIT PEST SELECT COMMITTEE.

Request for member to give evidence.

Message from the Assembly received requesting the Council to give leave to Hon. Sir E. H. Wittenoom to attend and give evidence before the select committee appointed by the Assembly to inquire into the system adopted for combating the rabbit pest.

The COLONIAL SECRETARY (Hon. H. P. Colebatch—East) [5.54]: I move—

“That leave be granted in accordance with the request as contained in the Legislative Assembly's message.”

I understand the Hon. Sir E. H. Wittenoom is quite agreeable to give evidence and that it

will suit his convenience to give evidence to-morrow.

Question put and passed.

BILL—PUBLIC EDUCATION ACT AMENDMENT.

Second Reading.

Debate resumed from the 7th February.

Hon. J. DUFFELL (Metropolitan-Suburban) [5.55]: I listened with some degree of interest and curiosity to the remarks of the leader of the House when he introduced this Bill. At a time like the present when we are faced with extreme difficulties from a financial point of view, it seems to be rather curious that the Colonial Secretary should introduce a Bill which will involve further expenditure. The leader of the House mentioned that the object of the Bill was for the benefit of those who were blind, deaf and dumb, the desire being to educate these people, I have no doubt, compulsorily. At a time like this, why should the Colonial Secretary ask permission to increase expenditure in this direction? I realise the need for instruction to these unfortunate people, but the question arises as to how many there are in the State who are so afflicted and who are not being educated. The leader of the House did not tell us how many would be affected by the Bill. We have to consider what would be the extra expenditure which would be involved by placing this measure on the Statute book. We have in existence the Victoria Institute for the Blind, which has been in existence for some 20 years. It is supported by public subscriptions and by assistance from the Government, and according to the leader of the House this institute has never been known to refuse admission to any blind child. It is edifying to know that under the provisions of the measure before us we shall have to consider the number of children who will come under the influence of the Bill as a result of free education. We have also further to consider what extra expense will be incurred by the State taking over the control of the blind, deaf and dumb who are now being educated at the expense of their own parents. I cannot realise that the parents who are now paying for the education of their afflicted children will willingly consent to continue payments when other children in the State, if the Bill be passed, will be receiving their education free of charge. The Minister mentioned the fact that afflicted children living in remote parts of the State would not be able to go to their homes at week ends, but would have to become permanent boarders. This will mean that board and residence as well as education will have to be provided for these children. The leader of the House told us he realised that some expense would be incurred by the State in these places. He also instanced the fact that Western Australia was considered behind the times as compared with other parts of the world. He mentioned Scotland, where, I believe, he stated there had been compulsory education since the year 1890. He also

went on to tell us that this was in force in England and Wales, and also New Zealand, Tasmania, and South Australia, where the respective Governments had already inculcated the principles that were defined in this Bill. It is, of course, necessary that these unfortunates should be educated, but I fail to realise the necessity for the leader of the House bringing forward a measure of this nature entailing further expense, at a time when we are experiencing the worst financial difficulties the State has ever gone through. A few nights ago I was enabled to listen to the doleful tale told by the Colonial Treasurer regarding the finances. In every sense of the word that hon. gentleman's speech was one under which could be written the words "God help us," as nothing short of a miracle could save us. We have reached a point when we cannot help ourselves. He talked of further taxation, and appealed to every hon. member present in that Chamber as co-directors in this State concern, for assistance. Bearing all this in mind I am astonished to think that the Colonial Secretary could bring forward this measure at the present juncture, in view of the fact that during all the years of plenty and normal times it has never been considered necessary to introduce it. It is very questionable whether there are any children at all who are not being cared for. If there are such children, it is strange that at a time like the present, when we are faced with extra taxation and super-taxation, when the Government have considered it advisable to suspend the Sinking Fund in order to endeavour to make both ends meet, and when the Colonial Treasurer is making every effort to rehabilitate the State financially, and when we have a deficit on the present year's transactions of no less a sum than £900,000, the leader of the House should deem it advisable to ask us to take this measure into consideration. I have wondered whether the leader of the House had any reasonable ground for bringing this matter forward now. I wondered, too, whether he had effected any saving in his department, particularly in regard to education. I find on looking up the Estimates for 1915-16 that provision was made for an expenditure in the Education Department vote of £322,941, whereas during that year the actual amount expended was £317,656. Passing on, I found that, under the management of the leader of the House, the Education Department on the Estimates for 1916-17 asked for no less a sum than £330,756, an increase of £16,100 over the expenditure of the previous year. The actual expenditure was a little over that. He was, therefore, unable to conduct this department within the amount actually applied for in the votes for 1915-16 and 1916-17. His actual expenditure was not £330,756, the amount asked for, but £334,132. I have glanced casually over the Estimates of the department for the year 1917-18, and I am astonished to find that the Colonial Secretary is asking for no less a sum than £360,048 for education alone, or an increase over the previous year of £25,916. This, added to the previous £16,100, makes a total increase in the

education vote of £42,000. In the face of this, the Colonial Secretary brings forward a measure clothed with all that appeal to any ordinary man in the way of sympathy for poor unfortunates, and he brings it forward at a time when we cannot afford to spend the money and do not know where we are to find the money; and notwithstanding the fact that the Colonial Treasurer tells us that it is impossible to live within our means by something like £900,000, he asks us to pass it. I would not like to say what I feel in the matter, but to my mind it savours of something that is on the verge of recklessness. That is the mildest way that I can put it. To bring forward any measure at this period, which is going to increase the cost to the country, when we are not advised by the leader of the House as to how many children are to be educated, is to my mind most extraordinary. Had the Colonial Secretary told us how few the numbers were, it is quite possible that some means could have been adopted of dealing with the question, and that some charitable institution or charitable vote could have been made use of, which would have rendered it possible to educate these few children without having any further increase in expenditure such as that proposed by the Colonial Secretary. I am sorry to have to raise my voice in protest in anything that would affect even a few of the people of the State. The force of circumstances is such, however, that I feel I would not be doing my duty if I did not raise my voice in this way. I may say something drastic on the question when the Estimates reach this Chamber. When we take into consideration what the Education Department has spent, we cannot help but reason thus: "Are we getting real value and a just return for the amount of money which education is costing the State?" I find on looking through the Estimates for a period of some years that this State has been paying no less than £13,500 annually to the University. It is questionable whether we are justified, in these times, in continuing to pay this money, and whether we are getting a quid pro quo for what we are paying. It is, of course, a very debatable question and there are arguments on both sides. It is a very fine boast to be able to say that we have free education in this State, from the kindergarten to the University. It is a boast of which we ought to be proud, and I myself have been exceedingly proud to live in a State where such a condition of things prevails. But whether this is justified now I am not prepared to say. It is worthy of some consideration, seeing that we are faced with these financial difficulties, seeing that all the avenues of revenue have been tested; and further seeing that we are faced with increased taxation and super-taxation, and that all sections of the community are willing to do a fair thing. I question, however, whether we, as representatives of the people, are justified in consenting to a further increase in taxation under these circumstances, and whether we should agree to the methods propounded by the leader of the House on this Bill being put into operation. For that reason I shall oppose the second reading of the Bill.

On motion by Hon. R. G. Ardagh, the debate adjourned.

House adjourned at 6.12 p.m.

Legislative Assembly,

Wednesday, 20th February, 1918.

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

For "Questions on notice" and "Papers presented" see "Votes and Proceedings."

RABBIT PEST SELECT COMMITTEE.

Request for member to give evidence.

On motion by Mr. SMITH ordered—"That a message be transmitted to the Council requesting leave to the Hon. Sir E. H. Wittenoom to attend and give evidence before the select committee appointed by the Assembly to inquire into the system adopted for combating the rabbit pest."

PAPERS—SUSPENSION OF A. C. KESSELL.

Motion by Mr. Draper read—"That all papers dealing with the suspension of the services of Mr. A. Colenso Kessell from the Government service be laid upon the Table of the House."

Mr. SMITH (North Perth) [4.44]: On behalf of Mr. Draper, I propose to move that this motion be deferred until later in the evening. Mr. Draper has found it impossible to be in his place at this hour, but he will certainly put in an appearance a little later.

Mr. SPEAKER: I think it would be a bad precedent to establish. It is against the Standing Orders. The simplest plan would be to allow the motion to lapse, and to give notice of it again to-morrow.

Mr. SMITH: Could it not be placed lower down on the Notice Paper?

Mr. SPEAKER: I could not allow that. The member for West Perth can give fresh notice for to-morrow.

MOTION—WATER METER RENTS, EASTERN GOLDFIELDS.

Mr. GREEN (Kalgoorlie) [4.46]: I move—

"That in the opinion of this House, the rents charged for water meters on the household water supply services of the Eastern Goldfields is vexatious and unjust, and should be abolished."

I may preface my remarks by stating that water meter rents on the Eastern Goldfields have been a source of friction and dissatis-

faction since January, 1903, or shortly after the goldfields service was established. By the very nature of things a centre that is far removed from the central government is likely to have its claims as far as its requirements are concerned, overlooked, but when we also find the position that that centre has an imposition placed upon it, that it has no parallel in the metropolitan area where the seat of government exists, the friction is intensified. The scheme I say is a national one reticulating an area of 16,000 square miles, which is one-fifth the size of Victoria. From being a purely goldfields water scheme it has so grown that at the present time there are no less than 12,361 services. Not only are places like Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, Boulder, Westonia, and from Southern Cross upwards—all the mining centres—supplied, but it is responsible for the water supplies of Northam, York, Beverley, Toodyay, Goomalling, and other small farming centres. A perusal of the output of the Goldfields Water Supply displays a remarkable state of things. Whilst Kalgoorlie and Boulder on their general services average a supply of at least 261 million odd gallons for the last two years, we find the metropolitan area has been supplied with an average of 202,000,000 gallons, nearly 203,000,000 gallons, as against a supply of 261,000,000 gallons for Kalgoorlie and Boulder. The revenue from the general services of Kalgoorlie and Boulder for two years average £48,000, whereas the metropolis has taken nearly as much as the general service of Kalgoorlie and Boulder, with a peppercorn rental of £2,500 irrespective of how much water is consumed. Whether they take, as we find in 1916-17 167 million gallons, or whether they take as in 1915-16, 238 million gallons they pay, shall we call it, a peppercorn rental of £2,500. For almost similar services Kalgoorlie and Boulder are debited with an amount of £48,000. I am not finding fault with the amount that is paid at Kalgoorlie for the service, but we are told that the reason why these small irritating water rents cannot be abolished on the Goldfields is because the service does not pay. I should like to direct the attention of the Government to the fact that in the metropolitan area practically no income is received, but that is not justified by general usage. Throughout the whole of the metropolitan area as far as the general services are concerned, no water rent whatever is charged, and when we come to Guildford, Midland Junction, and East Guildford, a strange anomaly exists. These are centres supplied direct from the Mundaring scheme and yet there no meter rent is charged. I appeal particularly to the members on the cross benches—the members of the Country party—because there are several centres that also pay meter rent for a small supply of water. The gain in revenue as far as the goldfields people's pockets are concerned, is not great because the number of meter services is not large. The amount paid in Kalgoorlie, Boulder, Coolgardie, and Kanowna is £2,850 per annum, a comparatively small charge, but it is the irritating nature of the