

Address-in-Reply, Legislative Assembly 9 August 1923

Mrs COWAN (West Perth) [4.35]: Most of the members who have spoken have referred to immigration. The same old cry that is being raised at present has been heard ever since this country was first settled. As long ago as 1829 we had a visitor to these shores who afterwards wrote a book. I do not think there are many people who have it, or have heard of it. The author was Dr Wilson. During his short visit he found that many of the wrong type of immigrants had been selected for the Swan River "including lazy, idle, hulking, insolent fellows".

Hon. P. Collier: Now we know the genesis of the six families.

Mrs COWAN: We are told that, so long ago as 1829, all the land within easy reach and transport on the Swan and Canning Rivers had been given away and was not available for closer settlement. Dr Wilson gently suggested that if grants had been limited to a maximum of one square mile, things would have been better. Evidently an enormous acreage had been allotted to single migrants and the grants were unwieldy. The settlers had grievances then and they were heavy grievances. One was most vexing; they were taxed for pilot dues, it seems that this form of taxation was somewhat premature. Again, the civil servants were aggrieved because they were not allowed candles or oil, the Home Government having decided that there were plenty of whales on the coast and, presumably, the civil servants could go out and catch one whenever oil was required for the office lamps. I often wondered why civil servants, for many years, worked till only 4.00 p.m. When we read the early history, we realise that it was probably due to this one of the Government's petty economies.

Hon. P. Collier: Due to want of light.

Mrs COWAN: We hear a lot about the hardships migrants undergo today. I know they have to face hardships that many who come here must find it painful and trying to meet in our hot climate and must have many disagreeable experiences. But these people do not have to meet real old-fashioned pioneering difficulties. I should like to quote from a letter written by my grandmother in 1841, in which she informed her father in England that the new settlers were pluckily facing plenty of difficulties. Two of these difficulties our newcomers have no longer to face. We hear an awful lot nowadays about the high cost of living. One of the difficulties mentioned in the letter was the high cost of necessaries entailed by wheat being £1 per bushel and 2s. 6d. for the grinding and other food equally dear. Transport from Fremantle to York in those days cost £25 per ton. I should like our friends of the Country Party and of the goldfields to remember that figure when they are discussing the terrible freights and fares charged on the railways today.

Mr Latham: We would readily pay them today if we could get the same price for wheat.

Mrs COWAN: The second difficulty was one which newcomers today are not called upon to face—the danger from the natives. In a letter written from “Grassdale”, near York, she said—

Mr Brown has accepted the appointment of assistant surveyor to the Governmentbut he will have a most difficult task to perform, not unattended with danger. Two soldiers will constantly attend him for protection and a civilian also to take care of baggage, instruments, etc. In case of any disturbance from the natives, a detachment of soldiers would have to be sent for from the nearest barracks to quell it.

The nearest barracks, so far as I can remember, was 60 miles away, and I cannot imagine any disturbance on the part of the natives being quelled with satisfaction to the sufferers after having to send that distance. But it indicates one of the dangers with which the early pioneers had to contend and yet we spend a tremendous amount of, I think, unnecessary sympathy on those who are coming out now, especially when we remember they are of exactly the same blood as our early pioneers, and will ultimately make good in just the same splendid way. These trials did not hurt the early pioneers or their descendants, and I do not think the lesser trials of today will hurt the newcomers, though I do wish to see everything possible done to help them and make the burden easier for the women and children. Group settlements are said to present many hardships nowadays, but those hardships can be faced and overcome. I was greatly interested the other day in a letter I received from a woman relative, who is helping her husband to found a home on one of these blocks. Speaking of the trials of a woman in a farming district, she said - “Happy the country and the woman with no history, but oh, how dull! Do collect all the news you can for me.”

Hon. P. Collier: That is a woman all over.

Mrs. COWAN: I quite agree, but if it makes her happy, she is in a better position to make happy her man when he comes home to enjoy the good things of the table that she has prepared for him. There has been a lot of criticism of the Premier’s defiant optimism in this matter. As a descendant of one of the early pioneers, I am ready to stand by the Premier in his defiant optimism, or by any other person at the head of affairs that is desirous of carrying out a similar policy. There is no question about that policy being the right one. Even the Leader of the Opposition, I think, does not really feel all that he says, if one is to judge by the glint of his eye. I believe that if he were in the same position as the Premier, he would have a certain defiant optimism on this question of immigration, just as the Premier of Queensland has. When listening to the criticism of the member for Katanning (Mr A. Thomson) and also that of the member for Claremont (Mr J. Thomson), which were not nearly so constructive as they might have been, I thought that possibly it was a case of “Save me from my friends.” If those two hon. Members really support the immigration policy, why not help us by bringing to bear on the problem all the constructive wisdom of their command? Let the whole House join hands in an endeavour to do everything possible to make this country what it should be. I feel that we shall survive these troubles just as the settlers of 1828 and 1843 survived theirs. We reap the results today in a building where we have the lines of government and law-making laid down as those early settlers could never have imagined in their wildest dreams. Therefore I do not think we need be as pessimistic as the president of

the Primary Producers' Association sometimes seems. I have a great admiration personally for that gentleman.

Hon. P. Collier: Political admiration is all right, but personal!

Mrs. COWAN: I do not think anybody has the right to go on posing as the "guide, philosopher, and friend" of the community generally unless he is prepared to stand up to criticism, unless he is prepared to come out fairly into the open and stand for Parliament and let us know what he really does think, so giving us the opportunity, if we think it desirable, to take him as our guide, philosopher, and friend. I speak feelingly on this subject, because one of the reasons why I myself am in this House is that I perhaps have been to some extent the guide, philosopher and friend of other women. When invited to stand for this Parliament, I therefore had to stand, though I never thought of so doing, and never expected to be here. It is a much nicer role to keep in the background and pull the strings and direct other people what to do, in fact to be the power behind the throne, than to stand up here and be the target of all sections of the community. Therefore I think we ought to have a constructive policy from the president of the Primary Producers' Association. Let him come right out and enter the next Parliament and give us his views here. Perhaps I shall not be here to listen to them, but I can learn from outside what they are. Then the president of the Primary Producers' Association will learn what are the difficulties to be encountered when he tries to convince other people.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: Don't you think he would lose his power if he came here?

Mrs. COWAN: I am not going into that side of the question. That is not my business. But I know that everybody who comes here learns a good deal if he has any sense, and for one thing learns to be balanced. During the last few days we have heard a good deal about the wages given to new settlers. I have had a good many letters from various migrants, women as well as men, and have not had any complaints with regard to the wages paid. A man told me that he gave up his job deliberately, although he was quite contented and happy in it, because he wanted to do something else. This also has not been satisfactory and he is now unemployed. He was getting £3 a week and his keep. Therefore I can confirm the statements of this member for York (Mr Latham) as to wages paid to new arrivals.

Mr Corboy: You say it is all correct because of one case.

The Colonial Secretary: The member for York quoted several cases.

Mrs. COWAN: I support the Premier's policy because it is the only one before us at present. I do hope the Government will do something in the matter of an agricultural college. Such a college would afford sensible and practical training for young men who wish to gain a knowledge of agriculture in different centres, seeing that we have entirely different types of soil and even of climate to deal with in the tremendous area of this State. I hope we shall not have any opposition in this respect from other sections of the community. The *Sunday Times* puts the case for an agricultural college remarkably well—

We have colossal problems to solve, agricultural and pastoral, and yet the Agricultural Department have a smaller vote and a smaller staff than that of any other mainland State. Out of the total production of nearly 23 millions sterling, those two industries, agricultural and pastoral, yield upwards of 14 millions, while mining gives us very little more than three millions.

We want to do a fair thing to all, and I think we should not hear quite such bitter animosity as we do from time to time, from people who seem to think that when a little money is spent in one direction it is something that another section are robbed of. It is a great pity that that spirit should come in, because logically industries that bring us in 14 millions deserve more consideration than those that bring us in the lesser amount. I am sorry that the Premier, when speaking the other day, made no mention of the splendid work which has been done by the Women's Immigration Auxiliary Council, a body that was formed a little more than 12 months ago. I know that he does appreciate their work, and that he recognises their assistance as being very valuable. I did hope that I, as the only woman here, would not have to allude to that work, or bring it forward in any way: but I have come to the conclusion that it is not altogether wise to allow the women's side of the work of this community to be always hidden, as with the light, under a bushel. It is a body comprising 100 women who are accepted by the Government as an auxiliary council. It consists of sub-committees, who meet women from Home on their arrival here, give them advice, visit them if they are in hospital, and look after them in many ways. I have here a letter which is quite interesting to quote, especially in view of what the Leader of the Opposition has said regarding the political work of the women of the community being greatly appreciated. The letter says —

On behalf of the settlers on the above group (No. 5, Manjimup), I desire to thank you and your council most sincerely for the kind thought in sending along bundles of reading matter. I can assure you that your action and interest are greatly appreciated, especially by the womenfolk, several of whom are by themselves all day, while the children are at school and husbands at work. I must thank you myself also, since the books and papers help to make the people more happy, and a happy group is a contented group and a happy, contented group is a joy to yours faithfully.

That is a great tribute to the work of the women, and all the other committees have similar testimonials. The council is also looking after the women in the home and taking them to picture shows and giving them entertainments. We are also taking them to private houses, where they are met in the right way and given the right kind of social welcome. If similar action is taken in every direction, something can be accomplished in making them feel at home. I would like to thank the Premier for sending a most delightful message to the Women's Migration Auxiliary Committee, which was given them yesterday, and which I can assure the Premier was much appreciated. He will probably see references to it in the Press later on. There is another matter I wish to touch on, and it is that the Government are considering the necessity for attending to the civil service grade increases. I am very glad to know this, and I trust that something really definite is going to be done at last. It is only a fair thing for those people who have been all these years kept in suspense by one Government and another Government,

and by one Commissioner and another Commissioner until they do not know where they are.

Mr Corboy: It is a pre-election half-promise.

Mrs. COWAN: I think it will be a very wise and right thing to grant those increases. The civil servants should be given the fair and just consideration to which they are entitled. We should remember in this House that the civil servants are a decided asset to the community in every respect. One thing to their credit is that they were the first body of people in this State to start vocational training for the soldiers and that they found means to provide for the work some considerable time before it was taken over by others. That stands greatly to their credit. Again, it was the civil servants who created the distress fund which was such a valuable organisation during the war, and the work of which was so admirable. Through the agency of the National Council of Women the most valuable assistance was rendered by them in the distress which existed on the land during the war. So that all sections of the community have a right to feel grateful for what was done by them. I always deprecate very strongly, perhaps owing to my being the wife of a civil servant who was 50 years in the service, when I hear from time to time the carping criticism cast on that body of men and women by some members of this House. The civil servants are, as regards the main body, thoroughly straightforward and able men. For that reason I hope that the tone and attitude to which I have referred will not be renewed, because such statements are not conducive to making the civil servants do their very best by the community, especially when this, the highest body in the land, never gives them a note or a word of appreciation. I noticed with pleasure that the Government propose to erect a mental detention ward, though I do not altogether agree with the site which has been chosen at Point Resolution. I am glad that the Government have realised the absolute necessity for such a ward. All those of use who are members of the Hospital Board recognise the importance of having such a ward and are glad that the Government have at least made a definite move. The women's bodies who are doing active work in various humane directions appreciate the attitude of the Colonial Secretary towards these questions. He is following admirably in the footsteps of his predecessor, the member for Beverley (Mr Broun), who displayed a very live interest in these matters. Of course it was not always his fault that he was not able to do everything that the world have desired, and we therefore cannot hold Mr Broun responsible for the fact that the mental detention ward is still where we find it day. I would however, urge on the Government to reconsider the question of site. I doubt whether Point Resolution is the best that could be chosen on which to build the ward. As a woman I deprecate strongly the taking away of valuable river sites of this description from public use. The picked positions on the river should be reserved for the benefit of the community, where the people may indulge in sports and enjoy freedom on their holidays.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: The experts recommended a river site.

Mrs. COWAN: Quite so, but there are other river sites which would not interfere with the rights of the people and which would be as suitable as that at Point Resolution. Of course I am not an expert, but while they may theoretically know what is best, they are not always infallible in such matters. We have many miles of river frontage from the Upper Swan reaches away down to Fremantle, and surely it ought to be possible to select a position on which to erect the ward without causing inconvenience to the

community and interfering with its rights. Our reserves, especially those with river frontages, should, in my opinion, be kept for the people, for all time.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: You realise that this is not to be an asylum: it is to be a detention ward.

Mrs. COWAN: I realise that, but we must not forget that in such a ward we frequently get a risky type of patient.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: Not in such a ward.

Mrs. COWAN: Oh yes. If we are to place a mental ward in the vicinity of a small settled community, our action will not be conducive to the peace of mind of the residents of the locality.

The Colonial Secretary: No person who has been certified to be insane will be received there.

Mrs. COWAN: But these people are often really insane and it is not until they have been treated at the ward and it is found they are actually mental that they are sent away. They may often be incipiently insane when received there.

Hon. W. C. Angwin: You cannot do too much for these people.

Mrs. COWAN: I agree and am glad to know that the Colonial Secretary is showing sympathetic consideration for those who are permanent inmates of the Hospital for the Insane, and especially for those who have lucid intervals. It is sad to know that these people have often been detained in the ordinary quarters at the asylum and have not been given many of those little extras which might have done much towards mitigating their difficult conditions. I hope what the Minister proposes to do will lead to good results, for we need to do more for these cases.

The Colonial Secretary: I hope members will not stop me from doing what is best.

Mr Mann: Don't be stopped.

Mrs. COWAN: I wish to say a few words on the housing question. We have been told that it is the intention of the Government to present this session a Town Planning Bill. I hope that they will not again fail in this direction and that we shall be able to do something more in connection with town planning that has been done in the past. Until we adopt a scheme of this description, as well as a different method of taxation, it will be impossible to do what the best authorities suggest. It would certainly be wise to allow the local bodies the option of taxing on the improve or unimproved value, so long as there was uniformity. In some districts taxation is levied in one way and in others in a different way. Uniformity would help considerably to establish the success of town planning proposals. We should realise how short we are of houses and attention ought to be given to what is being done in the other States. It is certainly time that we here did more than we are actually doing. I would like to see the Workers' Homes Act made to apply to the metropolitan area, and at the same time to see the Government adopt a scheme on the lines of that in force in Queensland by which it would be possible to provide houses for people earning incomes of not more than £160 to £200 per annum,

and thus enable those people to purchase their homes in from 15 to 20 years. The cost of such homes need not be more than, say, £450.

Captain Carter: What sort of houses would they be?

Mrs. COWAN: They would be constructed of wood. We know it would not be possible to build a house of brick and mortar for that price. In Queensland there is not much to be seen in the way of bricks or stone. I am glad to learn that the Minister for Railways has decided that he will endeavour to do something in the direction of reducing railway and tramway fares, and that he proposes to give consideration in this respect to married men and school children. That will mean that it will be possible to bring into being better housing schemes, and we shall no longer have the spectacle which exists today of so many people being crowded together in premises that were never intended to accommodate so many. There is far too much of that sort of thing going on today as people cannot afford to pay 30s. a week for four-roomed houses, some of which are without anything in the shape of conveniences. It is time that serious consideration was given to this problem and therefore one is glad to know the Government are serious in respect of town planning proposals. The result cannot be otherwise than good. I thank the Premier on behalf of the women of the community, and the men too for that matter — the subject is just as important for the men as it is for the women — for having granted to us the small sum of £200 with which to start baby health centres. No more important work than that can be undertaken in a community, and it has been a great surprise to us that no Government in the past has attempted to do anything in this direction. The importance of protecting child life cannot be over estimated, especially when we find that in Western Australia the death rate is 78.26 per thousand, while in Queensland it is 54.16. The reason for the comparatively low rate in Queensland, as well as the lower rate than ours in most of the other States, is that the Governments in other parts of Australia realise the need for spending money in the direction of saving child life. I have information which tells me that in Brisbane, for instance, maternity training schools for nurses are being established. They have in that city four baby clinics, while there are six in outside centres, and all are maintained entirely by the Government. Then again we find that in Sydney, Government assistance for the past three years has been given to the Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and special baby grants have been made. Towards the erection of buildings no less a sum than £5,615 has been granted. For the year ended June last the amount spent on baby clinics was £30,718, on salaries £4,138 and on contingencies £14,021. These figures are exclusive of subsidies and special grants to various institutions for the treatment and care of children and are also exclusive of the expenditure on the State Childrens' Relief Department. When Western Australia approaches the stage arrived at in New South Wales we shall be in a very much better position than we are in now. We have two associations here who have started the clinics and the Government, as I have said, have helped us with a grant of £200 a year — while the municipality gives £200 and £100 comes from each association, thus making the total amount required. We hope to see this sum of money grow yearly and it is our wish that the Government will realise the great importance of the work being undertaken, and will put on the Estimates the sum of at least £1,000 to enable us to carry on the work in other towns and in the country districts. Those who are living at the group settlements need assistance in this way. Training should be given to the mothers regarding the health of infants and how to keep them healthy. Only the other day a telegram received from the Commissioner of Health in Brisbane was to the effect that the expenditure in that State last year in

connection with baby clinics was £2,572 and in addition to that a grant was made by the Government of £1,200 for the Kindergarten Association, while no less than £5,500 was spent on buildings. This should make the Government of Western Australia realise our request is a modest one. All the same we thank the Premier for having agreed to give us this first £200 because we realise it means that we can make a start. I believe our health expenditure is actually £21,016 per annum, although the vote is £31,071. It appears that of that £31,071 no less than £8,809 goes to the sanitation of Government and public buildings. Surely this should be charged to some other vote. It hardly seems a fair deal to the Health Department that no change should be made in that respect, and that it should not be possible to allow the department that full amount of £31,071 unhampered in any way. Some further allowance ought to be made to the Health Department, because the present position is most misleading to the public. Lately I have been approached by several people on the subject of undesirable books and picture postcards — I am not referring to the cinema pictures. The books and picture cards complained of are distinctly of an immoral tone, and verge on the indecent. We have an Act (Ed. VII., No.14) under which one would imagine that everything could be done. However, I find it is extremely difficult to deal with these undesirable productions. I spoke to the Commissioner of Police and asked whether he could not take action. He admitted that these books and pictures had a very bad effect, but it seems there is very little he can do. Surely something could be done! If the Government cannot deal with the matter satisfactorily under the Act on the statute-book, I want to know why they cannot take other steps, perhaps give us a board of censors.

Mr Mann: Can it not be dealt with in the courts?

Mrs. COWAN: No, because the juries refuse to regard these books and, picture cards as being vicious. Of course, when we have already vitiated the moral tone of the people, we cannot expect them to say that a thing is harmful to the younger members of the community. Yet we know that these picture cards and books are harmful, and without being the least bit of a wowser, I cannot imagine any hon. Member thinking that nothing should have a board of censors. It would be more effective than trial by jury. I feel sure the Police Department thoroughly approve of an sympathise with my views in this respect. I should like to say a word in regard to what has been said about local manufacture of pipes for the water supply extension. I entirely agree with the remarks made by the member for Perth (Mr Mann) the other day, and hope that every possible consideration will be given to the local tenderers, and that the Government will not even attempt to put up any sort of machinery or plant with a view to having the pipes made departmentally. It is a mistake for us to go on tinkering with these things in that way. I listened to the debate in the House last year, when a good deal was said about the State Trading Concerns. I then came to the conclusion that the more we did to assist private enterprise, the better. Some Hon. Members wanted to do away with one thing, while others wished to see the last of another. None seemed to consider the question of principle, nor could Hon. Members make up their minds to trust the Government to deal with these things. However, I think we can trust the Government and therefore I am opposed to the setting up of another expensive plant in order that the Government might do this work themselves, to the detriment of private enterprise. We ought to learn a lesson from what was said in the Eastern States the other day in respect of the fruit pool. We should profit by such lessons more than we seem ready to do.