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THE PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.

FIRST PROGRESS REPORT

FROM THE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL INDUSTRIES.

(SCARCITY OF LABOUR: PETROL RATIONING:
SHORTAGE OF SUPPLIES: FLAX PRODUCTION.)

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MEMBERS OF THE COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY JOINT COMMITTEE
ON RURAL INDUSTRIES.

(Appointed 3rd July, 1941.)

The Honorable JOSIAH FRANCIS, M.P., Chairman.

Senate.

Senator WILLIAM EDWARD AYLETT.
Senator the Honorable HERBERT HAYS.
Senator EDWARD BERTRAM JOHNSTON.
Senator OLIVER UPPILL.

House of Representatives.

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ALEXANDER WILSON, Esquire, M.P.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL INDUSTRIES.

FIRST PROGRESS REPORT.

The Joint Committee on Rural Industries appointed to inquire into the effects of the war on the marketing of Australian primary produce and on the economic condition of the Australian rural industries has the honour to present the following Progress Report.

1. The agricultural war policy of the Commonwealth has dual objectives, first, to produce maximum aid to Britain on the vital food front and to supply our own Forces abroad with essential requirements, and second, to provide guarantees of security and stability to our own primary industries so that their productive capacity may be maintained.

2. The maintenance of a healthy primary industry is essential to the welfare of the Commonwealth and even though production may have to be curtailed in some directions during the war, care must be taken to ensure that the potential capacity of primary industry is not impaired.

3. The production of food is just as essential as the production of fighting equipment, and the burdens created by the dislocation of primary industry should be treated with the same consideration as shown to manufacturing industries.

4. The Committee has heard evidence in Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland on many phases of rural industry as affected by the war, and although it is not yet in a position to present a comprehensive report, certain matters have been brought under notice which, in the opinion of the Committee, are of sufficient importance to warrant a progress report being presented to Parliament on the following subjects—scarcity of labour, petrol rationing, shortage of supplies, and flax production.

SCARCITY OF LABOUR.

5. Owing to enlistments in the fighting services, the calling up of men for militia training, and the requirements of the munition works, the scarcity of labour for rural industries becomes daily more pronounced. Many farmers intimated they were only just able to carry on at present, but that the position would become more acute as time proceeds. Others were already faced with the serious problem of having to decide whether to sacrifice the harvesting of present crops and curtail production in the future.

6. The question arises whether we can afford to rob the country districts of man-power without detriment to the primary industries. Men are required for the defence services and for primary and secondary industries, and a balance must be maintained between those demands.

7. In outlining to the Committee a "national plan for agriculture", the Minister for Agriculture in Tasmania, Mr. T. D'Alton, set down three objectives of policy—

- (1) concentrating production on the commodities that are most needed;
- (2) conserving and, where possible, improving the potential productive capacity of our farms;
- (3) releasing for other war work or service with the Forces all labour not required for necessary production or for the work of conserving productive capacity.

In order that the third objective may be achieved, the witness considered it would be necessary—

to institute a survey of the available man-power in order that labour could be utilized to the best possible advantage on work directly associated with the war effort. It may be necessary to ration the labour at present employed in ordinary business firms and departmental stores, particularly where they provide a far greater facility to the public than is essential in these war times. It is considered essential that steps should be taken to maintain the farm as an effective unit of production during the war period, so as to enable it to function effectively as soon as markets are available after the cessation of hostilities.

8. The Chairman of the Primary Products Committee of the Hobart Chamber of Commerce, Mr. E. H. Thompson, summarized the labour position as follows:—

Some classes of producers are likely to be affected by a scarcity of able-bodied men to a much greater extent than others. As regards Tasmanian orchards and fruit farms, these have not been affected to any appreciable extent owing to lesser quantities of fresh fruit going overseas. The mixed-farming and stock-raising industries are far more likely to feel the effects of a labour shortage. Every farm or pastoral property requires one or more able-bodied men to perform work that girls or others not able-bodied are not adapted for. Every farm and stock property requires some one with experience and knowledge. Men with up-to-date knowledge are getting scarce owing to enlistments. If very many of the men who have had the necessary experience to make them good farmers go away, production must suffer. Farming and stock raising are becoming more and more a science and men require more and more knowledge and experience to be successful on the land. The question arises whether young men with a good knowledge of stock and farming should be allowed to enlist unless some one well qualified to carry on the farm and not eligible for the Army can be found to take their places at home. A shortage of manual labour can be more easily filled than a shortage of men with the proper experience required for management and control. Much can be done by more extensive employment of the Women's Land Army and of men unfit or too old for army service.

9. To ensure that the full extent of Tasmania's rural resources would be available during the war period, a sub-committee on Primary Production and Rural Labour was appointed. This body is a sub-committee of the War Emergency Committee set up by the Government of Tasmania in June, 1940. The organization set up by the sub-committee consists of municipal committees throughout the State and the functions of these committees are to ensure—

- (1) Co-operation in the local re-adjustments of agricultural practice due to war conditions.
- (2) The adjustment of labour requirements, as far as possible, from sources available within the municipality.
- (3) Organization of assistance to farmers during peak periods by group pooling of labour and farm plant.
- (4) Arrangements for the management of farms, the owners of which have enlisted, and for the supervision of operations on farms left in the charge of an overseer or foreman.
- (5) That the district man-power authorities can obtain accurate information on matters relating to the labour position in the municipality and may obtain particulars relative to enlistments of working proprietors and farm workers.
- (6) That anticipated shortage of labour will be reported to the sub-committee in time to enable remedial measures to be taken.
- (7) Co-operation with the local representatives of women's organizations set up to alleviate shortage of labour on farms.

Many and varied suggestions were tendered by the secretary to the sub-committee, Mr. J. T. Gemmell, to overcome the labour shortage. It was proposed that at harvest time employees of flax mills be released for farm work, that orchard labour be transferred to farms, that men in non-essential industries be transferred to farms, that the employment of farm labour be subsidized by the Government, that teams of agricultural workers be organized from military camps, and that prices for primary products be fixed at such a level as will enable the farmer to compete with the basic wage. Large numbers of women, who were the wives and daughters of farmers, were taking an active part in farm work, and were helping to relieve the shortage of man-power. Useful work could be performed on the land by teachers on vacation, university students and senior students at high schools. Last year the Girl Guides had a camp near Hobart and picked many tons of small fruit, and but for their services the growers would have lost their crops. Employees in Hobart stores also went out to nearby districts and picked large quantities of fruit. The Women's Land Army had done good work in Tasmania and in the near future the Department of Agriculture proposes to establish a training centre for girls at the Cressy Research Station.

10. The shortage of men in the north-west of Tasmania was mainly due to voluntary enlistments in the fighting services, but was accentuated by the establishment of new industries, such as the paper pulp works and flax mills which were giving wages the farmers could not afford to pay. Practically all the men in the Latrobe flax mill, it was claimed, had been rural workers.

11. Dr. A. E. V. Richardson, of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, in the course of his evidence impressed on the Committee that the utmost care should be taken to ensure that an adequate labour supply is maintained in the rural industries. He added—

Every effort should be made to see that rural workers are not allowed to drift into defence jobs. A great scarcity of labour exists in places like Mildura. In fact, every country centre in Victoria has been denuded of man-power by the attraction of the munition factories. The manager of the Merbein Station told me to-day that he will have the greatest difficulty in handling the dried fruits crop this year because of the shortage of labour.

12. In Queensland, the evidence as to the shortage of suitable rural labour was unanimous. The difficulty in securing suitable farm labour had been a pre-war trouble which has been accentuated by enlistments in the fighting forces and by the more attractive remunerative labour conditions offering in the industrial centres. Farmers had endeavoured to meet the position by installing machinery and other equipment but their efforts would be futile unless sufficient labour and fuel were available.

13. The Minister for Agriculture and Stock in Queensland, Mr. F. W. Bulcock, in his evidence made special reference to the effect of military operations on labour conditions and the necessity for a re-adjustment of the labour supply available in Queensland. Cotton growers had been urged to extend their crops in the national interest, but the labour available was inadequate, and many instances had come under the Minister's notice of persons being called up who were essential to the production of cotton. The Minister explained—

We wish to make the best available use of our man-power and unless we can do so it will be impracticable to increase our production very greatly. We should aim at producing 40,000 bales of cotton and that would only represent about half Australia's requirements, but the position is that unless we can increase the supply of labour we shall be able to produce only about 15,000 bales. We should relate the cotton industry to the national need.

14. The Cotton Board was making every effort to increase the acreage and production of cotton for the coming season, but men who were busily preparing land for cotton planting in September and October had been called up for military duties, and although application had been made for extended leave to enable them to go into camp early in 1942, the applications had been refused.

15. In the change-over in the dairying industry from butter to cheese, Queensland had been allocated 20,000 tons of cheese out of the 40,000 tons which Australia had been asked to produce. Mr. Bulcock indicated that before production could be increased facilities must be provided for handling the milk, and added—

On the labour side I earnestly request that the services of all men with cheese-making experience be retained in the factories. Only by this means shall we be able to bring our production up to the required figure. This will need the maximum effort by all our technicians and experienced workmen and it will also require the services of efficient departmental supervisors. We have the potential in Queensland, but we must be able to retain in our factories all men irrespective of age who have the required experience. I do not desire that any men shall be granted unnecessary exemption from military service, but we must have the men to be able to carry on the production of cheese.

16. The Minister emphasized that, whilst he had no desire to protect shirkers, agricultural operations were of vast importance to the country and many men called up could be employed more usefully in agriculture than in camp. If men were withdrawn from primary production for even short periods at certain seasons of the year, it was a severe handicap to the war effort. Land must be prepared at a particular time and the harvest must be reaped when it is ready.

17. Representative witnesses from the Atherton Tablelands emphasized the urgent need for labour to harvest the balance of the existing maize crop. Many instances were given of the unsuccessful efforts of growers to obtain labour or even exemptions from military service for harvesting. If crops were not harvested, besides losing the existing crop the planting of next year's harvest was jeopardized, and if cows could not be milked herds would have to be dispersed.

One witness told the Committee—

At the second time he was taken away I wrote to the area officer in Cairns, setting out the facts and asking for an exemption for him. I said that otherwise I would have to dispose of my herd. The area officer did not answer my letter. He served a lot of people the same way. I rang up three days before the man was due to go into camp, and the area officer said to me "You can carry on until he comes out of camp" My neighbour, a widow with two children, had a young man milking 70 cows. They had to sell 50 cows the week following the call-up It appears to me that men are called up in an indiscriminate fashion, regardless of the effect of the call-up on primary-producing industries. In two instances to my knowledge, men with 130 acres of maize standing ready for the harvest have been unable to harvest it The unsympathetic and unbusinesslike methods adopted in connexion with the call-up and applications for exemption have made many farmers hostile I recommend that there should be a local committee consisting of, say, the Clerk of Petty Sessions, the Land Commissioner, and an officer of the Forestry Department, to deal with these matters. Three public servants like that would act without prejudice to any farmer.

This witness was so condemnatory of the actions of the local area officer in dealing with applications for exemptions that the Committee recently submitted a copy of his evidence to the General Officer Commanding, Northern Command, for his comment.

Another witness, concerning the Atherton Tablelands, intimated that approximately 300 men had gone into the Australian Imperial Force and other fighting services, or had been affected by the militia call-up, and that he thought 86 men had gone into munition work.

Witnesses claimed that, in view of these heavy enlistments, the area officer should be more sympathetic in his consideration of applications for exemption.

18. The Queensland fruit industry was feeling the labour shortage particularly acutely as enlistment of fruit-growers, their sons and employees had been very high. Compulsory military service had caused further losses. Moreover, the industry lacked the high wage incentive of other industries. Of the very limited number of men available, few were experienced, and inexperienced labour, besides being expensive, could only be used for certain routine work. In banana-growing, where control of disease was essential, only sufficient help was available to cut and market the fruit, and no attention could be given to normal cultivation or disease control.

In the Stanthorpe district difficulty has been experienced in obtaining labour to undertake pruning which is so essential if production is to be maintained. Apart from pruning, the labour shortage could be assisted by confining the compulsory military training to the months from May to October.

19. The suggestion was also made to the Committee in Tasmania and in Queensland that the services of internees and prisoners of war might be utilized for certain work on the land if they were divided into small farming units, each under guard. In some instances, it was explained that this suggestion was made reluctantly.

20. Community labour, or co-operative use of labour-saving machinery was discussed with many witnesses, but few considered such proposals practicable. In cases of illness or other emergency neighbours already help each other.

COMMITTEE'S OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

21. From the evidence submitted, it will be seen that primary production is being seriously affected by war conditions. The position due to the shortage of labour is becoming acute and it may be impossible to harvest some crops. Wool, wheat, and other rural industries are being seriously affected. This means actual and economic loss. Australia has undertaken to supply increasing quantities of essential food-stuffs to Great Britain and to the Forces overseas. Local Service and civilian demands must also be met. The position must not be allowed to drift; a comprehensive policy must be inaugurated and immediate steps taken to organize, in co-operation with the States and local authorities, all available labour. Systematic surveys from time to time would help to anticipate all real needs. Action should be taken to ensure fuller co-operation amongst farmers in the use of labour and labour-saving machinery and greater use should be made of all labour, such as students and others, not ordinarily fully utilized. Facilities should be made available to transfer labour to places where it is needed most and men should be released from work which can be done by women.

22. In New Zealand the action being taken concerning the replacement of men withdrawn from the primary industries was explained in a statement by the Minister for Man-power as follows:—

One of the problems the Central Advisory Labour Council was called upon to consider was the maintenance of primary production, as this constituted an essential part of the dominion's war effort. After a very careful study of the position the Government decided to proceed as follows:—

- (1) An immediate survey to be made of all public works, forestry, and other governmental works to ascertain the number of experienced farm workers thereon, and the number willing to accept farm work; also the number of men who have had no experience on farms but who are prepared to take up such employment if suitable vacancies are available.
- (2) The increasing of the subsidy paid to farmers under the Labour Department's Scheme No. 4F on the wages of untrained workers. The existing scheme has been extended to all men twenty years of age or over, whether registered as unemployed or not, and the rate of subsidy increased from 20s. per week for the first six months only, to 30s. per week for the first six months and 15s. per week for the second six months.
- (3) To meet cases where the employment of a married farm worker is necessary under war conditions but where the farm does not justify, on economic grounds, the expenditure necessary for the erection of permanent married accommodation, temporary married accommodation will be provided. Arrangements have also been made to pay a house allowance at the rate of 12s. 6d. a week to married farm workers for whose families accommodation cannot be provided on the farms, and, in addition, temporary accommodation at a low rental for both married and single farm workers.
- (4) The utilization of the facilities at Massey College, Ruckura State Farm, and other selected institutions wherever possible for the purpose of training men in the rudiments of farm work. This training will be entirely free, and the house allowance of 12s. 6d. per week will be paid in addition to the ruling rate of pay.
- (5) The popularising of the facilities of the Rural Housing Act under which loans are available to farmers through the local bodies at the rate of 3½ per cent. for the building of small but suitable houses for married men and their families. These loans are repayable on table mortgages of 25 years maximum tenure. As yet there is no pronounced shortage of building materials or labour, and opposition by mortgagees is not expected. Consequently there appears to be no reason why farmers who are hampered in the employment of labour by lack of married men's accommodation should not take advantage of the scheme. A pamphlet setting out the advantages of the Act will be forwarded to all farmers at an early date.

The problems connected with the proper utilization of New Zealand's man-power resources so as to maintain and increase production, and to provide adequately for defence in the dominion and overseas, will become increasingly important and urgent as time goes on. It is believed that the decisions already arrived at, and the deliberations of the Man-power Council, together with the active co-operation of both farmers and workers, will meet any eventualities that may arise.

23. Following the lead given by the women of Great Britain in the 1914-18 War and again during the present crisis, the Committee is of opinion that much greater use can be made of the services of women and girls. Many activities on the farm, particularly in dairying, poultry farming, fruit and flax growing, and in the care of livestock, could well be undertaken by women, but their proper training is essential. Best results, it is considered, could be achieved by the establishment of practical training schools in centres around which the women are likely to be employed and, whilst in training, their services could be made available to farmers in the surrounding district for casual work. A Women's Land Army has already been initiated on a voluntary basis in some States and it is considered that such an organization could readily form the nucleus of a Government subsidized or controlled scheme to assist in meeting the problem of depleted labour in many rural industries.

24. In Great Britain, the Women Land Workers are under the control of the Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries and enrolments are limited to those prepared to give full time service in any part of the country. Since the outbreak of war, the Committee was informed, only about 2,000 volunteers had been placed in regular employment, but a far larger demand was expected in the spring because some 2,000,000 acres were to be put under the plough and some 80,000 tractors would be in use.

During the 1914-18 War, similar problems arose, and in "Effects of the Great War upon Agriculture in the United States of America and Great Britain" by Benjamin H. Hibbard, New York, 1919, regarding Great Britain it is stated—

The first question which presented itself was the labour supply. This had become more acute than in 1916, and strong methods were needed in order to secure labour enough for farm work. The first step taken was to get labour for spring work. This was accomplished by the use of prisoners, interned enemy aliens, soldiers, women and boys. Lord Milner stated in the House of Lords, "that 70,000 to 80,000 men had been made available for agricultural work. These consisted of prisoners of war, interned enemy aliens, and English soldiers. Over 120,000 women were at work on the farms with 20,000 to 30,000 in sight."

As a further means of remedying the existing labour situation the Board of Agriculture made plans for the more extensive use of farm machinery. Labour-saving machinery of all kinds was furnished by the Government to farmers to assist them with their work. Tractors were bought by the Government and rented to groups of farmers to perform farm work—particularly for ploughing and cultivating. It is estimated that over 500 tractors were provided by the Government in 1917.

In a Report of the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry, published in Commons Papers 1919, the following paragraph appears:—

The number of women employed as permanent labour in agriculture in Great Britain increased from 80,000 (57,000 in England and Wales and 23,000 in Scotland) in July, 1914, to 113,000 in July, 1918, or by 33,000 women, and the number in casual labour in Great Britain from 50,000 to 65,000, or by 15,000, while in permanent and casual labour in Ireland the number is estimated by the Board of Trade to have declined from 60,000 to 50,000. The figures are difficult to estimate and the Board of Agriculture believe that a considerably larger number of women than the 228,000 to which the above figures for July, 1918, total, were in agriculture at the end of the war.

25. Whilst recognizing the paramount call of the fighting services for men and the necessity for having all personnel, unless exempt, adequately trained, the Committee considers that genuine appeals made to area officers to exempt key men in rural industries from compulsory military service during harvesting and other peak periods should be sympathetically considered, and as far as possible training camps should be held at those periods of the year when rural labour is in least demand.

PETROL RATIONING.

26. Throughout the Committee's inquiry complaints concerning the rationing of petrol and its adverse effect on rural industries by causing a lessening of production were emphatic and universal.

27. A leading pastoralist in Tasmania placed his views before the Committee thus—

Motor power and transport on farms have become of major importance and it is quite impossible to revert to horse traction in a short time. It is obvious that restriction in the use of petrol and oils beyond certain limits must, inevitably, curtail production. Apparently the Liquid Fuel Authorities overlooked the seasonal nature of the farmers' work. When restrictions were first imposed, most people stated their requirements with a full knowledge of this seasonal or fluctuating aspect, and, therefore, averaged their requirements over the whole year in anticipation of being able to save enough from the monthly ration during slack periods to see them through the busy times. The Board's action in now cancelling all tickets not used by a given date, and, at the same time, preventing the reasonable accumulation of stocks, which they describe as hoarding, is certain to make it very difficult, if not impossible, for the farmer to work his farm properly. And this at a time when quick mechanical transport and power are more than ever necessary to compensate for the acute shortage of man-power,

28. It can be fairly claimed that no excessive over use of fuel would result if a more tolerant and flexible attitude were adopted, because, apart from all else, the high price ensured economy.

The periods when farmers use their motor vehicles to the greatest extent are seasonal and spasmodic. A grazier uses most petrol when carting his wool and bringing back supplies of superphosphate. He also uses much petrol during harvesting operations and when top-dressing his pastures. A neighbouring farmer, however, may use his motor vehicles at different periods, and therefore it is difficult to prescribe particular months during which an extra supply of petrol should be made available. The pastoralist and the agriculturalist are in a different position from men who can calculate their monthly consumption of petrol. It was considered that the man on the land should be given a six months allowance, as a minimum, to be used as seasonal requirements demand.

Many settlers live from 15 to 20 or more miles from a railway or town, and have no means of transport except by means of a car or truck, and it is considered such men should have a reasonable allowance of petrol to provide them with ordinary travelling facilities. The man on the land is in a different category from the city dwellers, who have at their disposal other means of conveyance.

29. In the contemplated change over from the manufacture of butter to a greatly increased production of cheese, the Committee was informed that amongst other things, much more cartage would be entailed. Whereas for the manufacture of butter, cream might be delivered at the factory three times a week, in the case of cheese manufacture milk must be delivered daily, and it was estimated that nearly ten times the cartage would be required. It would be quite impossible to rely on horse teams and a greater quantity of petrol would be needed. The necessity for adequate petrol supplies for the delivery of milk to the cheese factories was emphasized by the Minister for Agriculture and Stock in Queensland "it is essential that we shall have made available to us immediately sufficient petrol to get the milk to the factory, not only daily, but in some cases, where it is possible to work the factories two shifts, twice a day". Mr. Bulcock considered it would be wiser to request the factories to give an indication of the quantity of petrol their various suppliers would require to meet their needs. He added "To crystallize the matter, I would say that it is essential to try to co-ordinate factory requirements with petrol availability".

COMMITTEE'S OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

30. It appeared to the Committee that much of the friction and irritation caused by the rationing of petrol arose, not so much from the principle, but from anomalies in administration and distribution. Consumers must be dealt with fairly and equitably. Essential industries and transport must go on uninterruptedly, at the same time every effort must be made to eliminate waste by preventing unnecessary overlapping and running. Petrol ration tickets should be available to primary producers for at least a period of six months to enable them to meet seasonal conditions. The annual ration need not necessarily be exceeded, but the availability of ration tickets for a longer period would enable the rural industries better to meet their requirements. Suggestions for the conservation of petrol can best come from the people engaged in the industry. The use of producer gas units, increased production of power alcohol, and the greater development of the shale oil industry are all means to conserve Australia's petrol supplies.

A complete review of the original basis of rationing should be undertaken. When the original returns of petrol consumption were called for, many users from patriotic motives reduced their requirements to a minimum whilst others undoubtedly indicated mileage much in excess of their actual needs; consequently as each further restriction has been applied, consumers have suffered in proportion to their original declarations, irrespective of their real requirements, and accordingly many petrol users in rural areas find themselves with petrol allowances hopelessly inadequate and placed at a serious disadvantage because of their patriotic action at the initiation of rationing. To enable a just assessment of users' requirements to be made it is recommended that representative district committees, preferably with the local police officer as a member, be set up to determine local needs, to investigate individual cases of hardship and to make recommendations direct to the Liquid Fuel Control Board.

SHORTAGE OF SUPPLIES.

31. Shortage in supplies of certain materials essential in the rural industries was predominantly brought before the Committee during its inquiries, and many lines of goods which were becoming increasingly difficult to obtain were enumerated.

32. Associated with the efforts to increase the production of cotton in Queensland is the need for fencing material, and in his evidence the Minister for Agriculture and Stock emphasized that the maximum expansion of the industry depended upon the proper co-relation of labour, petrol, and supplies of wire netting, fencing wire and piping.

33. Other witnesses also stressed the fact that shortages of fencing wire and piping were hindering primary production.

34. In the change over from butter to cheese it was anticipated that some difficulty would be experienced in obtaining additional boilers.

35. To treat the timber used in the manufacture of butter boxes, quantities of formaldehyde were required, but it was brought under the notice of the Committee that supplies might shortly be unobtainable. As this product was urgently needed in Great Britain its export from the United Kingdom had been prohibited, and consequently that source of supply was closed.

36. Shortage of supplies and rising prices of fertilizers were the basis of many complaints to the Committee. Whilst the Committee was hearing evidence on this subject, the Minister for Commerce announced that the Commonwealth Government had decided to provide a subsidy of 25s. per ton on superphosphate and at the same time indicated that, owing to the difficulty in obtaining the usual supplies of rock phosphate, the production of superphosphate in Australia this year would be considerably below normal, and would necessitate some form of rationing to consumers. Such rationing, it was added, would be on the basis of discrimination between industries, but would have regard to the need for the stimulation or curtailment of production according to the demands for essential commodities.

37. Concern was expressed throughout Tasmania at the serious effects likely to follow any limitation in the supply of superphosphate. The position in that State was well expressed by the Chairman of the Primary Products Committee of the Hobart Chamber of Commerce, Mr. E. H. Thompson, as follows :—

The shortage of superphosphate and the increase of the price are serious matters. In this State, generally speaking, it is next to useless to sow crops without superphosphate, whereas there are districts on the mainland where superphosphate is never used. Nor can pastoralists safely ease up to any great degree on top-dressing. It takes several years to establish a first-class pasture and bring it to full production. Neglect or failure to top-dress may reduce the value of improved pastures pounds an acre, and it might be expensive to bring them back to full production later. When plenty of superphosphate is available a good motto for good pastures is "top-dress every year a little and regularly". In some directions the system of rationing may cause great difficulty, as for instance with hops, for which fertilizer must all go on now.

38. The Minister for Agriculture and Stock in Queensland stated that supplies of fertilizer had been rationed in that State for the past two years, and had been made available under satisfactory conditions. Mr. Bulcock explained—

Because of the prospective shortage in fertilizers we undertook a rationalization scheme here some time ago. I foresaw two years ago that there would probably be difficulty and I took steps to determine the essential needs of industries. I do not think it would be practicable to ration fertilizers without a great deal of close inquiry. The British list of priorities excludes wheat, and we could not deny the farmer fertilizers for wheat-growing. In any rationalization, consideration would have to be given not only to the British priorities but also to our home requirements. A great deal of our wheat country in Australia would be rendered practically useless without fertilizers, and we must consider not only our war effort but our national and economic needs in this regard. Take cotton : Great Britain does not want cotton, but Australia wants it. We must therefore have regard to the principle of self-sufficiency in our rural industries. Take the tobacco industry : for the purpose of conserving dollar exchange we must stimulate tobacco-growing. Pasture improvement with the use of fertilizers is practised in parts of Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales, as well as in South Australia, but it is not practised, except to a minor degree, in Queensland.

39. The Committee is of opinion that further inquiry into this subject is desirable and proposes to continue its investigations concerning the supply and price of fertilizers, as a question having a definite economic effect on rural industries.

FLAX PRODUCTION.

40. Concurrently with its general inquiry relating to rural industries the Committee has been investigating the question of flax production in Australia, not only so far as such production is concerned with meeting the war demands of Great Britain and Australia, but as a post war industry. The Committee has not yet concluded its work on this investigation, but, having regard to the greatly increased acreage of flax which is being grown this season—approximately 60,000 acres as compared with 21,000 acres last season—the Committee is concerned as to whether adequate receiving and storage facilities will be ready to handle what promises to be a record crop. The scarcity of labour in the building and allied trades and the difficulty likely to be experienced in obtaining building material render it imperative that early action be taken to ensure that buildings are available when the approaching crop is harvested. The Committee recommends that, in view of the importance of the question, immediate and urgent action be taken to ensure that all facilities necessary to receive the crop will be ready when harvesting begins.

Regarding the buildings to be erected at the Commonwealth flax mills, the Committee has seen some of the structures recently built and considers them to be of a heavier and costlier type than required for their purpose. Considerable saving could be effected by the adoption of modified specifications consistent with ordinary safety, and in the designing of future buildings the Committee recommends that attention be directed to this matter.

JOS. FRANCIS, Chairman.

Parliament House,
Canberra.

17th September, 1941.

DISSENT.

I desire to dissent entirely from paragraph 23, which contemplates the formation of a Women's Land Army and the establishment of training schools at various centres to train women in certain agricultural activities, as I consider that any such scheme would involve the Commonwealth Government in considerable unnecessary expense in view of the fact that evidence submitted to the Committee tends to show that there is already in Australia a serious shortage of female domestic labour. No evidence was received to show where any more female labour could be obtained to perform work in rural industry.

I agree that the shortage of rural labour might be relieved in some small measure by the formation of a Women's National Service Scheme to train women, if they were available, to perform work at present done by men in non-agricultural pursuits, and thus release those men for farm work.

Tasmania was the only State in which evidence was given concerning the actual operations of a Women's Land Army, where Miss Agnes Hodgson, Organizing Secretary of the Organization in that State, at a salary of £150 per annum, stated that after twelve months' operation and, at the time of giving evidence, only nineteen girls were employed on farms, as she had experienced difficulty in obtaining volunteers.

W. E. AYLETT.

Parliament House,
Canberra.

17th September, 1941.