

in the office of the Closer Settlement Board.

Mr. OMAN.—I do not think there is a member of the Government who does not think that.

Mr. BAILEY.—The Government should discourage the displacing of small farmers by soldiers.

Mr. OLD.—As one of the pioneers of the Mallee country referred to by the honorable member for Port Fairy, I can say, without fear of successful contradiction, that notwithstanding our fear of drought the man who goes on to land in the Mallee will make better progress there than in any other part of the State, if he is capable of working, and takes an intelligent interest in his holding. For twenty-seven years I have been in the Mallee, and as I have made good there, I know what I am talking about. However, I sympathize with the returned soldier who is placed on a green Mallee block. Make no mistake about it, the honorable member struck the right note when he said that the Government attitude in inducing soldiers to go on to green Mallee land is inimical to the best interests of settlement. It would be possible to buy improved country at a lower price than it would cost to improve it now.

Mr. HOGAN.—How is that possible?

Mr. OLD.—If you take into consideration the cost of rolling the country, constructing homesteads with the present high prices of building material, arranging for water conservation, and so on, I will guarantee that you can buy improved country as a going concern for less than it would cost now to take up and improve green Mallee country.

Mr. J. CAMERON (*Gippsland East*).—That is not much encouragement for your case.

Mr. OLD.—Well, it has the saving grace of being true.

Mr. CAEN.—If that is true, the Mallee has not been the success that you claim. It is not true of any other part of the State.

Mr. OLD.—It is absolutely true. I ask honorable members whether they know any places in Victoria where the pioneers made good. With few exceptions it is the pioneer who does the work who goes out. The desire in my electorate is that the man who enlisted from

there should be repatriated there. The soldier is satisfied to come back, and we want to settle him among his friends and relatives where he can be given assistance. There has been really heart-breaking delay in regard to soldier settlement. I regard this Bill as an honest endeavour on the part of the Government to meet the situation, and, therefore, I intend to support it, but if we desire to successfully settle a returned soldier we should not put him to actual pioneering work, but provide him with a business-like proposition. Place him on improved country which is available at a reasonable value. Plenty of it can be obtained in our district. Outside the soldiers there are numbers of men who are willing to go into the new Mallee country and improve it, and who, no doubt, will make good settlers. I can say that from my own personal experience. One thing which militates against the expedition of soldier settlement is the provision in regard to local councillors reporting on land under offer. The shire of Swan Hill is about 70 miles across, and to visit and report on a property might mean a 30-mile drive. There is no recompense for the work. It is unfair to expect a councillor to leave his business and waste his time, and it is only right that he should be paid his out-of-pocket expenses.

Mr. McDONALD.—This Bill provides for that.

Mr. OLD.—I am glad to hear it. I approve of the proposition of the honorable member for Gippsland North to put more members on the Board. What we want is to get our returned men producing right away. We should try to bring that about at the earliest possible opportunity. In his second-reading speech the Minister said that the valuations of officers appointed by the Department were sometimes 20 per cent. lower than those of the local valuers.

Mr. MACKINNON.—Those are what are called the Ministerial officers.

Mr. OLD.—Of course, if a Crown lands bailiff at Geelong were sent up to Swan Hill he would know as much about land values there as I would if I went down to Geelong. However, that sort of thing has resulted in many a good proposition being turned down. In my own district of Swan Hill I regret to say that

many agents will not take a soldier out to show him a block of land.

Mr. HANNAH.—Returned soldiers?

Mr. OLD.—Yes. In the past they have run them out and shown them blocks only to find the propositions turned down. In that way the soldiers have lost four or five months, while the owners of the land, not knowing whether it was to be taken or not, have not been fallowing and carrying on. That has militated against production in Victoria. I am supporting the Bill in the hope that it will expedite soldier settlement, and bring about better conditions than have hitherto prevailed.

Mr. McDONALD.—This clause provides for additional members of the Board, and I intend to give it my hearty support. A great deal of delay has been caused because the members of the Board have been overworked. All honorable members who have had dealings with the Board must have sympathized with them. In my district there is a large area of land suitable for soldier settlement, and a fair amount has been made available. To some extent that has been brought about as the result of the local committee which was formed to wait on the large land-owners and see what area could be made available for soldier settlement. That committee did valuable work. I understand that further powers are to be given to local committees, and I hope that they will take on that phase of the work. In many cases the committees merely report on the properties which are offered. Other committees take the initiative, and wait on the owners of suitable land. In that way I think a larger area is made available. In my electorate owners are offering land which has been in their families for generations without change. The soldier becomes disheartened when there is so much delay in settling him on the land. When the Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act was before the House many restrictions were inserted as safeguards. One was adopted at the instance of the Minister of Agriculture in regard to referees. That provision is now to be modified, and I understand referees will be only called in when an estate is over £25,000 in value. I realize that the whole object of this Bill is to expedite soldier settlement. As far as the Board is concerned, I think it would

be wise to have sufficient members to enable three sections to be sitting at the same time in the Western District, the North-Eastern District, and the Southern District. That would expedite settlement. Another phase of the question is the advisability of giving returned soldiers preference in the district from which they enlisted. There are many advantages in that, because they would be settling amongst friends from whom they would obtain a great deal of assistance. They also know what the land in the district is capable of, and that enhances their prospects of success. I trust the Board will keep that in view. All things being equal, preference should be given to local men. Many complaints have been made regarding the delay that has taken place in the settlement of our returned soldiers. I have had a good deal to do with the Closer Settlement Board, and I must say that no Board could have worked harder. Much of the delay is due to the restrictions that were placed in the former Bill that was passed by this House. Many of those restrictions will be removed by the passing of the measure now before us. I trust that the Bill will be passed without delay, because many men are waiting most anxiously for land. Honorable members are being worried greatly in connexion with this matter. I regret that so much has been said about the withholding of land. If a proper return of the lands offering were placed before us, we should probably find that the land is not being withheld. A great deal of land is being offered, and I think that the Honorary Minister was probably well within the mark when, in his second-reading speech, he expressed the hope that within a few months sufficient land would be available for the settlement of all our returned soldiers. We have to admit that our soldiers have returned sooner than we expected. Of course, we are thankful to have them back, and by the end of the year they will be all back. We thought it would take three years to bring them all home again. It means that a great deal of work has devolved on the Closer Settlement Board, and that there is a congestion in the Department, which, perhaps, could hardly have been avoided. The object of the present Bill is to expedite soldier settlement, and it has my hearty support.