

lower down and which is not irrigated land. If this were not done, there is no way in which these people could normally be flooded. They are suffering a severe injustice, and I request the Government to take action to overcome the problems associated with drainage in country areas.

Mr. STIRLING (Williamstown).— I welcome the opportunity of speaking during the Budget debate and I shall confine my remarks to one topic because I know that the honorable member for Melbourne is eager to speak tonight.

In our community there is a relatively small group of people who are endeavouring to improve their lot. I refer to those people employed in the workshops at the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind. These people, through their own organization, the Blind Workers Union, have over the past twelve months sought assistance from a number of larger unions and have even suggested that there should be some sort of amalgamation with a view to improving wages and conditions at the workshops.

The institute is incorporated under the Hospitals and Charities Act and I read with interest in that section of the Budget relating to health services and hospitals a reference to the fact that there has been an increase in the grant to the Hospitals and Charities Commission this year. One of the objectives of the institute is to train adult blind persons for occupations and another is to provide opportunities for employment for them in the workshop at the institute or elsewhere. As a means of providing employment for these blind workers the industrial department of the institute accepts contracts on behalf of the institute for work to be performed by workers in the workshops of the institute. These contracts are mainly for the packaging of goods. Generally speaking, the policy of the institute has been to find employment for blind workers outside the institute's workshop, except for those blind workers who

have an additional physical or mental disability. Although the institute respects the wishes of those blind workers who wish to remain in the workshop, at a plebescite conducted about twelve months ago the blind workers voted with a majority of five to one in favour of remaining at the workshop, provided that conditions were on a par with those applying in outside industry.

Other unions have made efforts to assist the blind workers. A union with which I was connected has tried to assist the blind workers but so far its efforts have not been successful. The institute claims that at present it can give blind workers only the minimum advantage under the 1973 national wage case. The institute also contends that the invalid pension which is paid to a blind person free of a means test must be taken into account when determining the wage paid. In my view this is an untenable concept because obviously the blind person receives a pension for the disability he suffers and the additional costs that he incurs because he is blind. Therefore, the pension he receives should not be assessed as part of his total wage.

At present there is no legal obligation on the institute to pay certain rates because the employees of the institute do not work under a Federal award or a State determination. This means that this is a difficult field to work in. The work force at the institute consists of 130 blind and semi-blind workers who are supervised by twenty sighted women. Rates of pay are determined by grades and vary from grade H to grade A. Grade H is the lowest scale and the appropriate male rate is \$28.30 a week and the female rate \$18.30 a week. Movement up the scale from grade H to grade A can be achieved but it is difficult. Promotion is determined by the observations of the industrial manager and the workers advisory panel, which consists of the secretary and the

assistant secretary of the institute. I understand there is only one grade A worker at the institute.

It appears that there is no difference in the ability of a blind worker inside the institute and a sighted worker. The blind worker can perform the duties carried out at the institute as well as a sighted person. The institute argues that it cannot afford to pay higher rates and obtains its contracts only because it can do the job more cheaply. Much of the work of the institute is performed on inefficient and time-wasting machinery. The same machinery is used for many different operations. I understand that some of the machinery was designed initially for filling bags with free flowing grain. These machines are now being used for packaging nails and dog food. It would be of tremendous assistance to the institute if the Government could provide more sophisticated machinery which could be utilized by the blind workers. If this machinery were available the blind workers could perform a wider variety of jobs and this would improve the financial structure of the institute.

I have sat in on a number of discussions with officials of the Blind Workers Union in an effort to improve their position and they literally begged other unions to absorb them. The other unions are reluctant to do this because if they did so they would lose much of their status. I do not know what the answer is. One suggestion I have made is that new machinery be provided for the institute and also a new workshop and this would go a long way towards providing more suitable employment for the blind workers and would improve their lot considerably.

Mr. McINNES (Gippsland South).— I am sure all members representing country electorates were pleasantly surprised to hear the Premier and Treasurer say in his Budget speech that 2,075 houses were to be built in country areas this year and 1,659 in the metropolitan area. That is 56 per cent to the country and 44 per cent

to the metropolitan area. However, after further inquiries and particularly in answer to a question it was discovered that only 48 per cent of the houses are to be built in the country and 52 per cent in the metropolitan area. These figures were arrived at by defining the metropolitan area as an area within a 30-mile radius of Melbourne and not as the Port Phillip district, and I am sure all honorable members would be sensible enough to accept that definition. Certainly the spiralling land prices in the area are equivalent to prices in the metropolitan area.

I refer to housing particularly because in the country if an area is to be developed houses must be available ahead of demand. They must not lag behind demand or be coincidental with it. In the country areas that are not growing fast, and particularly in some of the smaller shires that I represent, the standard of houses built by the Housing Commission is lower than one would expect. They are usually fibro structures and on inquiry we are told that the reason for this is that it is not possible to build brick veneer houses in the areas because contractors cannot be attracted to build them at a reasonable price. This may be a valid reason, but it is certainly a disappointment to country municipalities. It is certainly a disappointment to the people of Yarram and Foster. Of the few houses that are to be built in the country only five are to be built at Yarram this year and they will be of a type of construction that is less than desirable. I know of no reason why there should not be a mixture of brick veneer, timber and fibro houses in the area. It is certainly undesirable that the only houses built by the Housing Commission in the area should be of the base standard.

Mr. GINIFER.—The brick veneer houses being built by the Housing Commission in West Sunshine are better than the houses constructed by speculative builders in the eastern suburbs.