DEPUTATIONS.

RENTS ON THE MURRAY FLAT LANDS.

On Friday morning a deputation, consisting of the Hon. J. Warren, M.L.C., Messrs. Homburg, Combe, Wake and Pillau, M.L.A.'s, and settlers on the Murray Flats, was introduced to the Commission of Crown Lands, and was received by Mr. Dunstan, M.P., to urge a reduction of rent.

It was pointed out that while the deputation did not desire to make any reflection on the integrity of the Surveyor-General, it was felt that he had allowed the failure of crops in the drought districts, in which Parliament passed the Act of 1891 providing that land in the drought districts should be assessed at per square mile, and the subsequent imperative instructions issued by the Government, after which no crops were raised, and in hundreds of cases when rainfall should be assessed as pastoral country. It was stated that it was impossible for the deputation to impress upon Mr. Strawbridge that Parliament intended that this land, which had in the past been used for pastoral purposes, should be treated as pastoral, and to be assessed accordingly. Instances were cited where land unfit for agriculture was rated at so much per acre. It was urged that the recent reduction of the rent to 10s. per acre was too small, and made it impossible for the settlers to remain on their holdings unless the rents were reduced.

A large number of farmers had already left the district, and if a reduction of rent enabled them to remain, it would result in a lasting benefit to the revenue. The Commissioner of Crown Lands, in reply, said he did not allow his position as Treasurer to interfere with his treatment of settlers. In reply to the Surveyor-General he must point out that it was the continuation of the drought which had upset all previous calculations of the value of a lot of country. In 1898 farmers were making good their losses with Mr. Strawbridge, but it was the droughts since then which had necessitated the further reduction of the rent. It would be unwise to permanently reduce the rental value of all the country, because if the current rental was not at the proper value it would be unjust to the general taxpayer. His time was occupied to a considerable extent in approving reductions made by the Surveyor-General, and it was not possible to go through all the applications in detail.

The Surveyor-General was informed that the reductions were not made, for out of 1,200 leases only 300 applications had been put in for a reduction. A committee was appointed to examine the total rent for the district in question, and the average rent was now only 12s. There were 90 applications for reductions of rent to be dealt with. The total arrears in the district in question were $1,750. The area had varied from 4 to 6 bushels, but in 1902 it was not so good, and the price was better. He had intimated to residents on the west coast who had not paid rent for years, that in cases where they had reapplied for bushels or over 20 years they would find that rents had been reduced in many cases below what was justified by special conditions. There was no use for anyone to tell him that the rent on any land would enable a man to live on the land. He promised that their requests would be favourably considered. He intended to see that the area was paid for, and it was hoped that the Surveyor-General could accompany him.