

RENTS ON THE MURRAY FLAT  
LANDS.

On Friday morning a deputation, consisting of the Hon. J. Warren, M.L.C., Messrs. Homburg, Coombe, Heake, and Piffaun, M.P.'s, and settlers on the Murray Flats, was introduced to the Commissioner of Crown Lands (Hon. R. Butler) by Mr. Duncan, 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 altogether failed to understand the spirit in which Parliament passed the Act of 1901 providing that land in the drought districts should be assessed at per square mile, and the subsequent imperative instructions issued by Parliament in 1902 that the land in hundreds of light 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 insufficient rainfall, was to 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 rents were far too high, and it was impossible for the settlers to remain there unless the rents were reduced. A large number of farmers had already left the district, and if a reduction of rent enabled the people to stay there 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 the drought districts. In justice to the Surveyor-General he must point out that it was the continuation of the dry seasons which had upset all previous calculations of the value of a lot of country. In 1898 farmers were quite satisfied with the valuations of Mr. Strawbridge, but it was the dry seasons since which had necessitated the further writing down of the rents. It would be unwise to permanently reduce the rental value of all the country, because if they lowered it below 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 that showed that Mr. Strawbridge was making concessions. It was the fault of the settlers themselves that the reductions were not made, for out of 1,200 leases only 300 applications had been put in for a reduction. A concession of £2,306 had been made in the total rent for the district in question, and the average rent was now only 1½d. There were 90 applications for reductions of rent to be dealt with. The total arrears in the district was only £1,766. The yield in 1901 was from 4 to 6 bushels, but in 1902 it was not so good, but 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 reaped three to four bushels or over some rent must be paid. He had told the Surveyor-General that each case was to be judged on its merits, and the district had also to be considered. The Surveyor-General was giving effect to the Act, but in a few years time they would find that rents had been reduced in many cases below what was justified by special conditions. It was no use for any one to tell him that the question of a halfpenny difference in the rent would enable a man to live on the land. He promised that their requests would be favourably considered. He intended to visit the locality himself, and would see if the Surveyor-General could accompany him.