

MARLBOROUGH

REPORT from C. W. ADAMS, Esq., Commissioner of Crown Lands, Blenheim.

Department of Lands and Survey,

District Office, Blenheim, 14th July, 1903.

Circular re the Ballot System.

I PRESUME that I am expected to give my real opinion on the ballot system as it is used in the disposal of Crown lands, and in doing so I trust that I may be excused if I depart somewhat from the usual formal official style of expression.

In the first place, I do not approve of the ballot system at all, except as a last resort, when it is difficult or impossible otherwise to decide who is the most suitable applicant. Before you pass judgment on this expression of opinion, may I ask this question: Would you or I dispose of our own land in this manner? Certainly not. Even if the land were not your own, if it had belonged to a deceased friend who had made you his trustee, and you felt it would be the best way to lease the land until the children were old enough to manage it themselves, would you in this case select the tenants by drawing lots or a dip in the "lucky-bag"? Certainly not. No man in his proper senses would dispose of his property or select his tenants in this haphazard manner. Then, if this method of disposal is not suitable for our own land or that of our friends, by what process of reasoning can we make it out to be suitable for the disposal of lands belonging to the State?

Our present method of ballot was originally designed to meet the case of two or more *bonâ fide* applicants applying for the same section; but as at present worked it becomes a gigantic lottery. Also, in "The Land for Settlements Amendment Act, 1901," in order to prevent speculation, the transfer of a lease is prohibited for a period of five years. But in the case of an incompetent or unsuitable tenant this is only an exchange of evils, as the sooner a tenant who cannot work the land to advantage is got rid of the better. When a great public duty is placed upon us, involving in its execution our best skill, judgment, and faithful administration, are we going to shirk our responsibilities and let blind chance decide? Is this reasonable? Certainly not. Then why was it adopted? To avoid the evils of the auction system. But now the ballot system has had several years' trial I think it will be admitted that its evils are far worse than those of the auction system, and the ballot system fails altogether in selecting the most suitable applicant for the land; while, on the other hand, the auction system generally results in the best man getting it.

Of course, this does not suppose that any one can compete at auction, make your restrictions as stringent as you like, so as to exclude all those who may be considered undesirable, and then, if you like, allow the Land Board to weed out any applicants they deem unsuitable or undesirable, and then put the land up to auction amongst the remainder. But in using the word "auction" where leases are concerned, I do not mean the usual method, but what I might term a modified auction, which avoids most of the evils of the present system of auction, and which should be applied to pastoral leases as well as other leases. Thus the annual rent should be fixed by the Land Board at a fair rate, and the goodwill only put up to auction. Thus the successful applicant would only have to pay down a cash bonus, and not be saddled for twenty-one years, or longer, with a rack rent that he was induced to bid for in a moment of excitement. Thus the chief evil of the old or present system of auction disappears. The applicant only commits himself to a present payment of a cash bonus, and then for the rest of the term has the land at a fair rent. If this system is objected to, I have only to say that it is a common practice nowadays, under the present system, for a tenant after he has held land for a certain term to transfer his holding for a considerable cash bonus to the applicant who is willing to give him the highest price. Now, I maintain that the State, and not the land speculator, should get this bonus.

If, however, it is decided that the ballot shall be retained in some cases, then it might be simplified as follows: Instead of balloting for each section there should only be one ballot for each class of land offered at any one time or place. Thus, if land on the optional system, small grazing-runs, pastoral runs, &c., be offered, then there should be one ballot only for the land on the optional system, one ballot for small grazing-runs, one ballot for town sections, &c. But instead of balloting for sections the balloting would decide the priority of choice of the applicants. Thus every applicant is numbered, and all the balls put in the box. The first ball drawn entitles the applicant whose ball it is to take his choice of any section in the block. Then another ball is drawn, and the applicant has second choice, that is, he chooses any section of those not already selected, and so on. This makes possible the selection of the identical section that the applicant prefers in a great many cases, and he is only barred from those sections that have been already selected, while he has the free right of choice over all the others. If there are a hundred sections of one class to be disposed of, this system substitutes one ballot for one hundred ballots. It saves a vast amount of time and trouble, and prevents any complication or deadlock occurring. Every applicant is free to act as he pleases. He can withdraw at any time. If other applicants preceding him have chosen the sections he preferred, he is not compelled to choose one he does not care for. If two or three brothers or other relations wish to select adjoining sections they have a good chance of doing so under this system, but almost none at all under the present system. Also, as I proposed to modify the auction system, so I would modify the ballot system, by first of all giving each Land Board the power of veto, by which they could reject those applicants they considered least eligible, retaining only those they considered eligible. Judging by the qualifications of the applicants that usually present themselves under the present ballot system, the Land Board would probably be justified in rejecting 80 or 90 per cent., the remaining 10 or 20 per cent. being applicants well qualified to succeed as practical farmers. Even where the modified auction system was adopted, I should first of all reject all unsuitable applicants, including those disqualified by already possessing a sufficient quantity of land.