

SATURDAY AFTERNOON, April 28.

PURCHASE OF THE SELKIRK ESTATE.

Hon. Col. GRAY—It is not necessary to repeat my approval of the principle of the Land Purchase Bill, and my objections to the mode in which it has been worked. It is now for the House to consider the propriety of the Government entertaining the proposition of the Earl of Selkirk, and of putting them in a position to accept it by enlarging the positions of the Bill. I regret that my hon. colleague, Mr. Douse, is not present, as it would be desirable to have the benefit of his intimate knowledge of the Estate, in the management of which he has been long engaged.

Mr. COOPER—Lord Selkirk gave in his adhesion to the Commission to which the proposal should be referred. The Imperial Government knows that it has done wrong, and they should bear a portion of the cost of repairing the injury.

Hon. Mr. HAVILAND—Does the hon. member imagine that the Commissioners would recommend terms as liberal as those offered by Lord Selkirk? It would be ridiculous to reject such a proposal. If we allow the present golden opportunity to pass unimproved, the Mail which leaves here on Monday next will take home offers from private individuals, and middlemen will step between the Government and the settlers, as in the case of the Worrell Estate. Supposing that the Commission should declare the lands forfeited to the Crown, they would not be given to the people gratis, but would form a source of Revenue.

Mr. COOPER—We are asked to pay about £8,000, when there is a prospect of receiving money from the British Government, whose suggestion of the Commission was an admission that they had done wrong. The management of the property, the surveys, and watching of the timber, &c., would double the price to the tenant.

Hon. Mr. WIGHTMAN—Are we justified in declining their offer, and allowing others to become the purchasers for 3s. 6d. currency per acre? My opinion is, that we should embrace the opportunity, and thus avoid one of the causes which enhanced the cost of the Worrell Estate. Lot 31 might have been purchased by the late Government, had not the agent interfered, and, representing the Government as unable to purchase it, bought it himself at 4s. 4d. sterling per acre, and, I am informed, now asks 40 shillings an acre. Had the Government purchased that Lot, the tenants would have had more advantageous terms, and in the case of the Selkirk property, it is idle to expect a more liberal proposal. When the arrears of rent are remitted the people will be encouraged to buy the freeholds, and the property will be settled.

Hon. Mr. YEO—The offer is so low that no one can expect more advantageous terms. The Government can get the property for less than half what the Worrell Estate cost.

Several members spoke very briefly, recommending the acceptance of Lord Selkirk's offer, and Hon. Col. Gray having submitted a resolution for increasing the amount at present limited for the operation of the Land Purchase Bill by £10,000.

Hon. Mr. COLES—The Government now proposes to purchase 48,000 acres of land, in addition to the Worrell Estate, and to enable them to effect that object they are about to increase the scope of the Land Purchase Bill. They are thus adopting the policy of the late Government; and had not they and their friends used their influence to prevent the Loan Bill becoming law, money sufficient to buy up all the proprietary titles could have been obtained at probably less than 4 per cent, whereas the people will have to pay 6 under present circumstances. A great difference of opinion had taken place in the minds of the Government and their supporters since the time when they denounced the idea of imposing a tax for the purpose of converting the leasehold into a freehold tenure. Now, it seems that they have no such objection. As to the management of the Worrell Estate and the amount realized from it, up to the present time, I do not anticipate that the settlers on the Selkirk property will be willing to pay very highly for their lands. In fact the most valuable are already held in freehold. The threatened interposition of private speculators unless the offer be accepted before Monday, is not entitled to much consideration, as an argument for the House hastily closing with this offer, which has been prompted more by regard to the ques-

tion of Quit Rents than anything else. The Government should refer the offer to the Commission, to which it would be a guide in estimating the value to be put upon other properties; and they might possibly get the guarantee of a loan for a general purchase, which would save a large amount of interest. I am opposed to the extension of the Land Purchase Bill, until the Imperial Guarantee shall have been obtained for a loan, before which it will be found that £30,000 bearing six per cent interest is as much as the country can afford for this particular object.

Hon. Col. GRAY—I have not altered my opinion on the subject of the Loan Bill, which, if granted, would have had a disastrous effect upon the Colony; for if the results of the limited operations connected with the purchase and disposal of the Worrell Estate have been so unsatisfactory, the control and management of £100,000 sterling would have been far more prejudicial in their consequences.

Mr. COOPER, having asked if the titles were to be subject to investigation, and the terms on which Government would settle the tenants,

Hon. Mr. LONGWORTH—I am not surprised at the persistency of the hon. member. The wonder would be, that he should swerve from the path he has trodden so long. When he says that it is wrong to assume any debt on account of the purchase of this property, and that the offer should be referred to the Commission, does he expect that better terms will be obtained by waiting? The fact is, I believe, he would not accept the free transfer of the land, if its acceptance involved the loss of his occupation of agitating the question of Escheat. If that were granted, and if the lands were declared forfeited, they could not be afforded to the people for much less than the price at which they are now offered. I deny that the majority are justly chargeable with inconsistency in advocating the acceptance of this offer. Our objection was not to the principle, but to the working of the Land Purchase Bill, with reference to the Worrell Estate. Had the price given for it not been so high, and the classification of the best lands so very low, that property might have been self-sustaining. I do not wonder at the opposition of the hon. member, Mr. Coles, it is natural that he should not be pleased at the prospect of such a property as the Selkirk Estate passing into the hands of the present Government, at a price so low that they can settle the people in freehold without imposing burdens on the general public, for if ordinary prudence be observed, the whole amount of principal, interest and cost of management will be realized in eight or ten years.

Hon. Mr. COLES, having briefly recapitulated his objections to the proposed action of the House, and submitted an amendment expressive of his views, was followed by the

Hon. Mr. POPE—The hon. member opposes the purchase for fear that the Government may obtain credit for the benefits they will confer upon the people. His assertion that the majority opposed his taxation for the purpose of converting tenants into freeholders, is true, and the affairs of the Worrell Estate justify the opposition, while had the late Government succeeded in obtaining the loan they tried for, I believe the Colony would have been ruined. Such an opinion is but a legitimate inference from their management of the Worrell Estate. The present Government is in a position very different from that of their predecessors; they do not intend to send parties to report upon the desirability of effecting a purchase, on the completion of which depend the livings of the very parties employed to examine and report upon the property. There is nothing to prevent the Selkirk property being self-sustaining, for while the rents amount to upwards of £1400, the interest on the first cost will be only £400 annually. The Hon. Leader of the Opposition said last night that it would be a good bargain, and should be accepted as a compensation for the Worrell Estate, but now opposes it, and refers the offer to the Commission, on the deliberations of which I believe the offer of Lord Selkirk will have a good effect. I am happy to bear testimony to the fact that the hon. member, Col. Gray, is entitled to the whole credit of the offer having been made; and the people of Belfast have cause to be grateful for his exertions in their behalf.