

PROPOSED RAILWAY TO POOWONG.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE ARGUS

Sir, — Will you kindly allow me space in your valuable columns for the insertion of the following, on behalf of the Drouin and Poowong Railway League. At a recent interview with Mr Bent, the claims of an area of 1,575 square miles of settlement, at present altogether without railway accommodation, found expression in an appeal for a line from Drouin to Poowong. It was pointed out to the Commissioner of Railways that the cost of construction of the 20 miles in question, at the maximum estimate of the Mirboo line, viz., £2,000 per mile, would be but a five or six years' purchase at most, through the revenue derivable from the settlement of the balance of the hazel forest-land at present without roads of any description, which the line would open up. This argument was based upon the fact that within five years upwards of 200,000 acres of this land, yielding more than the revenue referred to, had already been taken up under circumstances the most unfavourable. It was also shown that the authorised line to Mirboo will benefit an area of settlement of 42,245 acres only, while the line to Poowong, if authorised, will directly accommodate an area under precisely similar conditions of upwards of 200,000 acres, 87,040 acres of which are in the parish of Jeetho alone. We congratulate the people of Mirboo upon their success, but at the same time should like to know whether have we, or our parents sinned, that our claims have been ignored so long? Is it that we are not entitled to railway accommodation that the survey of the line to Poowong is not yet completed? Or is it that the mind politic does not grasp the true position of the selector as such that the obligations of the state are not recognised? Are the settlers of this portion of south Gipps Land mistaken men with a grievance? Or, can it so shown that the appropriation of the £40,000 from the incoming loan, required for the construction of the line to Poowong, would not be an economic settlement of a just claim? That the mistake does not lie with the settlers, and that the proposed expenditure is justifiable alike upon purely business principles, and in the conservation of interests not less important in deciding the relative merits of the county? It must be borne in mind that the land particularly referred to is the hazel land. This land provides for a class not necessarily farmers, but men of means. Others may take it up but these only may keep it. Elsewhere this desideratum asserts itself in land monopoly, through dummyism, and has cost the state probably much more than is now asked for the line to Poowong. To develop this land the outlay is enormous. If £3 per acre be admitted as a fair average cost, in properly laying it down under artificial pasture and removing the fallen logs it will be seen that a special outlay of nearly £1,000 per block is imposed, and certainly the most *bona fide* evidence exists that, where practicable, the outlay is going on at this rate. If, therefore, the conditions of soil, climate, and proximity to market are such as to warrant this expenditure, the claims of capital and enterprise in support of the line to Poowong will be apparent. That these conditions are so may be satisfactorily shown from the fact that there is land in the neighbourhood, without fencing or other improvements, for which 6s. per acre per annum has been paid for grazing purposes only, while upon the selection of Mr. D. McTavish, upon a clearing of 84 acres, 300 sheep have been grazed all through the winter, and the same ground is now carrying 150 lambs in addition. As the hazel land is uniform in its grazing capabilities, one instance is as good as many, while land capable of doing this requires no further comment.

The beneficence of the man who makes two blades of grass grow where only one grew before is proverbial. Is it unreasonable, then, that we, who profess to graze three sheep to the acre where not one blade grew before, should ask for 20 miles of railway at £2,000 per mile in order that that we may do so? Nor is it unreasonable that the struggling landed interests should seek, through railway legislation, a fair proportion of the funds which have hitherto been contributed to the Railway department by the annual appropriation from the revenue accruing through the alienation of Crown lands. Whatever may be the claims of the Poowong line in this respect, they stand as yet mostly to its credit, for the trunk line cannot be considered as satisfying the requirements of those who cannot get to it. In fact, with the settlers here an efficient land administration now means a liberal rail administration, and that only but at once. In the alleviation of selectors' difficulties elsewhere the case is otherwise. They, too, require railway extension; but they require also reduced mileage, the suppression of the rabbit nuisance, water conservation, &c, and in some instances a better soil and an improved climate. From this it will be seen that the line to Poowong possesses a peculiar interest, inasmuch as it reduces to a purely business issue the alleviation of interests worth upholding, when help is within the reach of the Government. This will be better understood by comparing the cost of the proposed line, as an investment of the public funds in the relief of the financial position of selectors, with the principle adopted by the state in generously reducing their rents by the introduction of the Amended Land Act, with the same end in view. In the first instance, the consideration whether the expenditure of £10,000 in railway extension will or will not enable the selectors to help themselves and carry on their enterprise is but a question of degree, but to suppose that the same object may be attained by simply reducing selectors' rents must be erroneous in principle, for it is evident that here, if the Government had reduced the rents not merely one half, but altogether, or had even advanced money to the selectors, that without roads of any description their pursuit could not be profitably carried on, or carried on at all. Mr Bent will therefore recognise that in deciding whether the line from Drouin to Poowong shall or shall not be included in the next railway bill the bread and butter interests of a large, and, we are proud to think, deserving portion of the community are in his hands. We are told that that hon. gentleman has a thorough knowledge of south Gipps Land, and that a more practical and energetic administrator of the Railway department we have never had; and so far, we have no reason to doubt the assertion. With his perspicuity and avowed intention of administering his department upon purely business principles, in the interests of peace, progress, and prosperity, remains the question whether the line to Poowong will be *un fait accompli* - I am, &c,

CHAS. COOK, Hon. Sec.

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