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1901-07-19

Senate.

The President took the chair at 10.30 a.m., and read prayers.

SER VICE AND EXECUTION OF PROCESS BILL

Bill read a third time.

REPURCHASE OF UNUSED POSTAGE STAMPS

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Senator KEATING(Tasmania) I move-

That the Honorable the Postmaster-General be requested to make full investigations for the purpose of ascertaining the average annual number of unused postage stamps repurchased by each of the Postal departments of the several States of the Commonwealth from the proprietor of Tattersall's sweeps, and to place on the table of this Senate the result of such investigations.

The object I have in moving this motion is that a further investigation shall be made into the matter referred to. When the Post and Telegraph Bill was under discussion in committee, some information was supplied by the Postmaster-General which to me was of a very startling character, and I think it came to other senators in the same way. In fact, it was so surprising that it drew a very curious remark from one honorable and experienced senator. I was not in a position to question the accuracy of the information at the time, but since then I have made inquiries, with the result that I have been informed that the statement made by the Postmaster-General was a gross exaggeration. I hope the Postmaster-General will not consider that I am making any reflection upon him, but he was speaking from information supplied to him, which was apparently based on some altogether erroneous estimate. In Hansard, at page 2054, the "Postmaster-General is reported to have stated-

The PRESIDENT

- I might point out to the honorable senator' that, strictly speaking, it is not regular to refer to the report of a previous debate in the same session, but in this case I do' not see very well how it could be avoided.

Senator KEATING

- I was under the impression myself that I could not refer to a previous debate, but the whole substance of this motion is aimed at procuring a correction of what seems to be an error. The Postmaster-General said

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I may say that a very great number of postage stamps are used in the way suggested. We ascertained the other day from Tasmania, that the proprietor of Tattersalls received £10,000 or £11,000 a year in postage. When we were making inquiries with a view to, if possible, introduce a federal stamp, that information came from that State. Where a number of stamps are in that way sent out of one State into another they are sent back again into the State of origin, and we buy them back at the post-office at a small discount, under certain conditions, &e. "When I heard that, I was under the impression that the proprietor of Tattersalls sweeps, in conducting his business, would not receive stamps for the purchase of tickets, but I had no absolute knowledge that would enable me to question the statement then. One honorable senator, however, ' in referring to the remarks of the Postmaster-General, said -

The Postmaster-General has given us information which will be of value to the mercantile community of Melbourne in connexion with Tattersalls sweeps. We have often wondered what becomes of the great number of postage stamps, just about the time when money is being sent to Tattersalls. That is the very time, bear in mind, when the temptation to speculation on the part of those who have charge of postage stamps is greatest. We know that Tattersalls is the receiving office of a large number of stamps - to the extent of £10,000, I understood the Minister to say. Not only does Tattersall receive the stamps, but the post-office, by buying them back, becomes a party to the fraud.

Now, I am well aware that the remarks made on that occasion by the Postmaster-General and the senator whose words I have just quoted have created a great deal of feeling in Melbourne, especially amongst the members of that portion of the community which consists of clerks and employees in different business places, who might, under ordinary circumstances, be intrusted with the stamps belonging to their employers. I have received from the manager of " Tattersalls, 1' in Tasmania, a letter, in which is enclosed a clipping taken from one of the Melbourne morning papers, having reference to this particular matter, and the writer says -

I enclose herein a clipping from the Melbourne Argus of 6th instant, quoting a statement by Senator Drake, to the effect that "postage stamps to the value of £10,000 and £1 1,000 were sent to- Tattersalls 1 for sweep tickets every year, and were sent back from Tasmania to Victoria, where they were repurchased by the Postal department at a small discount, and reissued to the public." As so many misstatements are just now being made in reference to "Tattersalls" sweep business, to its detriment, I think such a glaring one as- this should be at price contradicted, for I am sure the Postmaster-General, Senator Drake, would not desire to trade on false information, especially after the remarks made by Senator Sir Frederick Sargood on the matter. The facts are that the total value of Victorian stamps remitted to Victoria, to an agency firm there, last year, amounted, to £29 - good stamps - and £15 - damaged ungu'mmed stamps which had been taken off addressed envelopes forwarded to us for replies. These stamps are almost certain to have been used by the firm to whom sent-, for their general, business purposes, and could not have been sent to the Post-office for repurchase. These figures would be a fair average for any year, and it is inconceivable to us how Senator Drake can make, such a statement as that which appeared in the Argus, viz., that from £10,000 to £11,000 were received from this source for repurchase -. for our prospectuses state that "stamps will not be taken in payment for tickets" ; and it is only in a very exceptional case that this regulation is ever departed from.

I think it well, that statement having gone forth to the world, and in view of the fact that the management of this particular institution make, a statement which is so much- at variance with that of the Postmaster-General, that there should be a fuller investigation into this matter. There is no doubt these sweeps are engaging the attention of the community of Australia to a very great extent, and statements of the character that something like £10,000 or £11,000 has been received in stamps by Tattersall for the purchase of tickets, or in connexion with the purchase of tickets, will give a great deal of colour to the comment made by Senator Sir Frederick Sargood.

Senator Sir Frederick Sargood

- Hear, hear.

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Senator KEATING

- I feel perfectly convinced that if Senator Sir Frederick Sargood, on further investigation by the Postmaster-General, finds that the amount stated was erroneous, he will be the very first man to withdraw the reflection, if I may call it a reflection, that was made in connexion with this particular matter. I am perfectly sure Senator Sargood will treat the whole matter fairly, and acknowledge that his comment was really based on what seems to me, at this particular stage, information which is erroneous. It is simply to draw attention to these circumstances, so that the public, now that the matter has been mentioned, may get the correct facts of the case that I submit the motion.

General

Senator DRAKE

. - I am happy to be able to inform Senator Keating that I am already taking steps to get all the information I can on this subject. That is to say, I have already caused instructions to be sent to the heads of the Postal department in each State to furnish full the information on the subject that is available.

Senator McGregor

- Was the Postmaster-General's statement based only on guesswork ?

Senator DRAKE

- No. I will explain Again, and I think this is the second time I have made a statement in regard to this matter in the Senate. The foundation of the matter was that before federation there was a conference of permanent heads which sat to consider a Postal Bill. One of the recommendations of that conference was that as soon as federation was accomplished, the stamps of each State should be interchangeable throughout the Commonwealth, and should be over-printed with the letters "A. C." or "C. A." "When the proposition came before me, I suggested that if it were adopted we could not give effect to the book-keeping clause of the Constitution, because stamps purchased in one State would be used in another. I made inquiries as to what the effect would be, from a monetary point of view, of adopting the suggestion of the conference. At first it was thought it would only be a matter of a few pounds one way or the other - that it might be an advantage of a few pounds in favour of one State, or a few pounds in favour of another. But after more careful inquiries were made, I was informed that it would make a difference of

between £10,000 and £11,000 to Tasmania, solely on account of the institution in that State known as "Tattersall's." That was the foundation of the statement I made to the Senate, and I am very anxious to see whether it can be absolutely borne out. That was the information given to me on which I decided at once that it would be impossible- to make the stamps of the States interchangeable. The report that has been quoted by Senator Keating is substantially correct. It will be noticed that I do not state there that "Tattersall " has sent all the stamps to the Postal department. In committee on the Postal and Telegraph Bill, I said -

We ascertained the other day from Tasmania that the proprietor of ' "Tattersall's" sweeps received from £.10,000 or £1.1,000 a year in postage stamps.

At all events that was the information supplied to me, on the strength of which I decided at once that we could not make the stamps interchangeable. I continued on -

When we were making inquiries with the view to, if possible, introduce a federal stamp, that information came from the State. Where a number of stamps are in that way sent out of one State into another, they are sent back into the State of origin-

I take that to be absolutely clear, because stamps can only be used in the States of origin, and therefore must be sent back. Further I said -

And we buy them back at the Post-office at a small discount under certain conditions ; for instance, they must be in one strip, and not disconnected stamps.

These are the facts within my knowledge at the present time, and as to which, as I said before, I am trying to get more detailed information. In regard to the form of the motion, I do not think we shall be able to get information that will satisfy the inquiry of Senator Keating. In the first place, the motion will have to be altered by the insertion of the word " value," so as to provide for information as to the value of the stamps as well as to the number. If only the number of stamps repurchased be ascertained, the senator will certainly not get the information he wants, because there is nothing in the number to show whether the stamps are .penny stamps, twopenny stamps,. .or what the denomination is.

Senator MCGREGOR

- We want the number and value.

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Senator DRAKE

- That is what I am now suggesting should be ascertained - the number and value of the stamps repurchased by the Postal department in each of the States. And there is another difficulty. I do not speak with certainty, but I am in- formed that at the present time do note is made of the persons from whom the stamps are repurchased. We can, beyond doubt, get information as to the number and value of the stamps that are repurchased, because a small discount is charged in this transaction, except in Kew South Wales, where for some time past it has been the custom to cash stamps received, T think, in payment of duty, without any discount at all. In that State, however, there has been a recent alteration of the regulations, and it is proposed in future to charge a small commission for cashing stamps that have been received for that purpose. Beyond being able to get the number and value of the stamps repurchased, I do not think we can do anything with a view to showing where the stamps come from. We can discriminate as between stamps repurchased and used for duty purposes and other stamps, but otherwise all we can do is to give the total number and value. I do not know whether it is worth while taking notice of a peculiarity in the form of the motion, but I see I am honoured by a "request to get this information. Usually when a House of Parliament passes a motion of this kind, it makes an order for the return. However, I do not desire to raise a quibble like that, because if I am requested to get a return, I shall do -exactly the same as if I were ordered to furnish it. I think the form of the motion should be - That a return be laid ou the table of the Senate showing approximately the average annual number and value of unused postage stamps repurchased by the Postal department in each State of the Commonwealth--

Then there should be added, if Senator Keating so desires - with a view to showing as nearly as possible the number and value of such stamps repurchased from the proprietor of Tattersalls sweeps.

Senator Playford

- Why not confine the motion to Tattersalls altogether 1 What is the object of getting all this information ?

Senator DRAKE

- I presume Senator Playford has just entered the chamber. I have just been explaining that we do not take a note in the Postal department from whom stamps have been repurchased. The only exception to that rule is that we repurchase in New South Wales stamps used for the payment of duty. Otherwise no notice is taken of the person from whom stamps are repurchased, so that probably, although we shall be able to ascertain the value of the stamps repurchased, we shall not be able to satisfy the mover of the motion by securing the names of the persons from whom we obtained them. If the motion is amended in the way I have suggested I shall be happy at the earliest possible moment to give the information desired.

Senator Dobson

- Is it not clear that the information given to the Minister does not show that £10,000 worth of stamps were sent to Tattersalls as payment for tickets 1

Senator DRAKE

- I did not make inquiry as to whether the amount was sent as payment for tickets or to frank letters back in reply. The information which I have since gained is that every letter sent down to Tattersalls is required to contain a certain number of stamps to pay for the return of a ticket and for posting the results.

Senator Keating

- The stamps are not sent as payment for tickets.

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Senator DRAKE

- I shall be able, perhaps, to ascertain whether the information that previously reached me is correct or not. There "can be no doubt of the meaning of that information, because it was accepted by me as a reason why it would be absolutely impossible to make the stamps interchangeable. If that were done, Tasmania would be a loser to the' extent of £10,000 or £11,000 a year. It may perhaps have been an exaggeration, but that was the information which was given to me, and it could mean nothing else than that there were £10,000 or £11,000 worth of stamps annually sent down to Tasmania from the other States.

Senator MILLEN(New South Wales).I think that if the motion is to be amended at all it requires some further.' amendments than those suggested by the Postmaster-General. As it stands, it asks the Postmaster-General to prepare a return showing the average' number of unused stamps. Now there is nothing- more deceptive than an average. I would suggest that the return should be one setting out the number of unused stamps purchased each year. I presume that the mover of the motion desires a return showing the operations over a reasonable time. As the Postmaster-General, in order to arrive at the average annual number, will first have to ascertain the number purchased each year, I think it is more desirable that we should have complete information, and that can only be gained by the adoption of the course which I suggest. I suggest that Senator Keating should agree to strike out the word " annual " and insert after the word "sweeps" the words " each year from 1 890 to last year inclusive." That would cover a period of ten years, and enable us to see if there has been any big movement since 1890 in regard to the purchase of unused postage stamps. I think that my suggestion has a very big bearing upon the question. I do not quite remember the year in which Tattersall's .shifted to Tasmania. But assuming, for example, that he shifted there in 1895, and it is found that prior to that year a certain number of unused stamps were being sent from Tasmania to Sydney for conversion into cash, it would show that Tattersall's had exercised no influence whatever upon these stamps. As the Postmaster-General will have to obtain the returns for each year before he can give us the average annual number, I suggest that it will cost no more if he places the complete return before us. The Postmaster-General has said with reference to his statement about the £10,000 that he is not in a position to say whether that £10,000 represented stamps sent to Tattersalls for the purpose of investment in the sweeps or whether it was lost to Tasmania by reason of the ordinary postal operations to which Tattersall might give rise. I can hardly see that Tasmania would be a loser in any way, even if the stamps went there for investment.

Senator O'KEEFE

- There seems to be a little misapprehension on the part of senators - perhaps because of their anti-gambling prejudices - with regard to this matter. There are no senators, except myself of course, who have ever been guilty of taking tickets in Tattersalls consultations. The procedure, so far as I can remember, is that stamps are not taken as the value of the tickets. Senator Sir Frederick Sargood in speaking upon this subject seemed to think that speculations have been going on, on the part of office

employees, for the purpose of getting stamps to send to Tattersalls to purchase tickets. If that were his idea, he is wrong, because Tattersall clearly lays it down that he will not accept stamps for tickets. The procedure is to send two stamps, one for a reply, and the other for the results. The payment must be made by post-office order or postal note. It is only to shed a little light on this subject, for the assistance of those who have nothing to do with Tattersall's that I make the suggestion.

The PRESIDENT

- I would point out that no amendment has been moved.

Senator KEATING(Tasmania), in.reply. - So far as the suggested amendments of the motion are concerned, I am perfectly willing to accept any that will achieve" the result of securing a return which - will give to the Senate - and through the Senate to the public - the greatest possible amount of valuable information on this particular matter. I am perfectly prepared to accept the amendment suggested by the Postmaster-General, and if he distrusts himself, and thinks that possibly he may not darts this motion requests unless he in commanded to do so, I am quite ready to have tho motion amended so as to provide for that. I am quite prepared to accept Senator Millen's suggestion that the return should show the number of stamps repurchased by each of the Postal departments during the last ten years. As the Postmaster-General has pointed out, the result of the investigation can only be to give an approximate idea of the number of stamps received by the Postal department, from this particular source, for conversion into cash. In order to meet the wishes of honorable senators, I desire, with the permission of the Senate to amend my motion so that it will read as follows : -

That a return be laid on the table of the Senate showing tho average annual number and value of unused postage stamps repurchased by the Postal department of each State of the Commonwealth, for the purpose of ascertaining as nearly as possible the number and value of stamps repurchased from the proprietor of Tattersall's sweeps.

The PRESIDENT

- The honorable and learned senator can ask leave to amend his motion.

Senator Sir Johs Downer

- On a point of order, Mr. President, I venture to submit that the honorable and learned senator cannot amend his motion when speaking in reply.

The PRESIDENT

- Tho honorable and learned senator cannot move to amend his own motion. During the debate various suggestions were made by honorable senators, but no one moved an amendment. Then the honorable and learned senator replied, and asked leave to amend his motion. I think he can do that.

Senator Sir John Downer

-I respect fully submit that he can not.

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The PRESIDENT

- No doubt it would have been more regular if some honorable senator had moved an amendment instead of making suggestions.

Senator Millen

- I. suppose I have lost my right to move an amendment now?

The PRESIDENT

- Yes. However, as this has been a somewhat irregular procedure, I think that when I put the motion in its amended form it will be advisable, if any honorable senator wishes to speak, to allow another debate to take place. Strictly speaking, the honorable and learned senator should have asked leave to amend his motion before he replied.

Senator MILLEN

- The word " average " still remains in the motion in its amended form, and therefore the return will not give the particular information that I desire. I therefore move -

That the word "average"be omitted, and that after the word "repurchased," line 3, the words " in each year from 1800 to 1900 inclusive" be inserted.

Amendment agreed to.

Question, as amended, resolved in the affirmative.

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11:10:00

Senate adjourned at 11.10 a.m.