

THE DEBATE ON THE NATIONAL TRANSCONTINENTAL.

AFTER eight days of debate on the report of Messrs Gutelius and Lynch-Staunton, the National Transcontinental Railway Investigating Commission, Hon. George P. Graham's resolution of censure on the Government for inspiring accepting and endorsing the report was defeated in the Commons on April 2nd on a straight party division by vote of 105 to 67, a Government majority of 38. Mr. Graham's resolution, which contains the kernel of the Liberal attack, was as follows:

That the report of the commissioners appointed by the Government to inquire into the construction of the Transcontinental railway is so wilfully partisan and misleading as to be wholly unreliable; that the manifest object of the said commissioners as to misrepresent for party purposes rather than to investigate in the public interest, without regard to the serious consequences to the country or this great national undertaking; and that for the appointment of such commissioners, and for accepting and endorsing their report, the Government deserves the severe censure of this House.

The Government forces, impelled by political opportunism, naturally could not formally repudiate the report. The result of the vote was a foregone conclusion. The choice of the investigators—the one as a former C. P. R. employee unfavourable to the project of the National Transcontinental and the Grand Trunk Pacific from the first, and the other as a strong party man prejudiced and publicly committed over and over again against the Liberal policy from its inception—made it apparent that the Government wanted and intended to secure not an impartial but a partisan report and were prepared to endorse it. Party discipline, political opportunism, past policies and assertions, and the C. P. R. alliance all demanded that the outward semblance at least be given of believing and endorsing the Commission's findings.

But though a formal endorsement was thus given to the report by the Government majority, the debate itself, the listless character of the Government defence, the absolutely unanswered and unanswerable criticisms of Mr. Graham and of the other Liberal speakers, and the evident reluctance of the Government speakers to continue the debate or to discuss the report in detail were all significant of the real situation. The report intended as the chief weapon of attack by the Conservatives against the Liberal party was turned on its own authors. The "big gun" backfired.

Hon. George P. Graham in opening the Liberal attack gave a complete and compelling analysis of every phase of the report. Not a single charge made by the Commissioners remained unanswered or unrefuted. The Government was immediately placed on the defensive.

The Conservative speakers by shifting their ground from a discussion of the details of the findings to general assertions of the correctness of those findings; by falling back on the old argument that the road should never have been constructed in the first place; by countering the attack on Messrs. Gutelius and Lynch-Staunton with general denunciation of the former National Transcontinental Commissioners and by magnifying the difference between the original and the final estimates of cost, tacitly admitted that the forty millions "waste" charge could not be justified either in fact or in theory.

General assertions that the road cost too much and could have been built more cheaply if original plans as to gradients, curves and permanent structures had not

been adhered to may be dismissed with Hon. Frank Oliver's phrase—"A Government and a party are being condemned for having done a work too well; it is the first time I have ever heard criticism advanced from that standpoint." Incidentally Mr. Oliver also called attention to the fact that while nearly one hundred million dollars had been spent by the late Government upon the road without a single dollar having gone to party funds or improper private gain there had been under the Conservative administration, \$26,000 of the public funds diverted to private gain or party campaign funds out of a total expenditure of \$100,000 on the thirteen miles of the Southamptton Railway in New Brunswick.

The Conservative argument that the road should never have been built in the first place is but an echo of the Conservative stand when the project was first brought down by Sir Wil-

frid Laurier. The people of Canada gave the answer to that in 1904 and in 1908; and from 1908 until now the Conservatives never questioned the overwhelming verdict of the electors.

To the Conservative criticisms that Hon. S. N. Parent and the former N. T. R. Commissioners were not expert railway men and knew nothing of railway building the Liberal reply was that executive ability and business acumen were the essentials of the office rather than railway engineering experience. As Hon. Mr. Graham pointed out, the man now at the head of the railway department is a doctor from Prescott and practically every great railway or big industrial corporation on the continent has as its head a man chosen for his executive ability rather than for his technical experience. When the C. P. R. was built its Board of Directors did not include a single railway expert.

THE TWO RESPONSIBILITIES.

"I have been told again and again that I am to be held responsible for the construction of this railway. If this statement, charge, accusation, whatever it may be, is intended as a reproach or a stigma, I accept it as an honor. I hold myself largely responsible for conceiving and trying to carry out the idea of the Transcontinental railway on Canadian soil, the best and the shortest of all railways across the American continent. The reasons which impelled me to this course are as strong in me now as they were then.

"We sought to construct the best road 'that science could devise or money could build.' I use these words for a far nobler purpose than that for which they were used before—our intent was to build that railroad for the development of the higher civilization. We applied ourselves to the task; we fell before the task was completed. And now we find that the men responsible for the completion of the road are trying to degrade it and to reduce this ideal transcontinental railway to a mere local branch road. On this side we have the responsibility of building; on that side they have the responsibility of destroying. Our responsibility we gladly accept; theirs they cannot evade."

Sir Wilfrid Laurier in the Commons, April 2nd.