

The Bell Telephone Enquiry

The application of the Bell Telephone Company to the Board of Railway Commissioners for permission to raise its rates has met with strong opposition from individuals and public bodies—Boards of Trade, etc.—but principally from the municipal councils through their unions. The company, to meet this opposition, has not waited for the hearing which will take place on September 21 to state its case, but has, through its vice-president and other of its principal officers, as well as through advertisements in the daily press, not only placed its cards on the table but has apparently left them for the public to read. This action has certainly modified much of the opposition, which at first was against any increase whatsoever, but which now would seem to have toned down to “show the reason for any increase.” This is practically the position that was taken at a meeting of municipal representatives who recently met in Montreal on the invitation of the Union of Canadian Municipalities. At this meeting a special committee, made up of one delegate each from the cities of Montreal, Toronto, Quebec, Ottawa and Hamilton, was appointed under the chairmanship of Commissioner Decary of Montreal to take means to have the case of the municipalities properly presented before the Railway Board; a special fund being raised to employ counsel and experts.

Unfortunately the councils of Toronto and Hamilton not seeing eye to eye with their fellow councils in either the object or the means of the protest to the increased telephone rates, have de-

cided to oppose the Bell Telephone application independently of the committee of the Union of Canadian Municipalities. The stand that both Toronto and Hamilton take is that if the system was publicly owned the people would get a cheaper and better service, and consequently the Bell Telephone Company is not entitled to any increase at all on its present rates.

There is no doubt that the public ownership of its hydro development has been a splendid success in Ontario, notwithstanding the criticisms that have been made against it, and there is no doubt also that sooner or later all public utilities will be publicly owned not only in Ontario but throughout Canada, for the principle is not only good and sound but practicable under good administration. But is the present moment the right time to experiment in public ownership so far as the telephone systems of Ontario and Quebec are concerned? We think not. Both the capital values and the cost of administration of public utilities are at their high peak just now, making it practically prohibitory to buy out any existing telephone system, so that it comes right down to the question of whether or not it is in the public interest to give the present owners—the Bell Telephone Company—the means to give an efficient service? Common sense says yes, otherwise you get a poor service. The Company says the means necessary are increased rates. How are the rates to be adjusted to satisfy both the users and the company. This is the task before the Railway Board, and it to help solve the problem with the bias towards the public that the municipal committee under Commissioner Decary will be on the spot when the public hearing opens.

THE EDUCATION OF RURAL SECRETARY-TREASURERS

The annual report of the Alberta Department of Municipal Affairs just published by Mr. J. H. Lamb, the new Deputy Minister, contained the item that throughout the province special meetings had been held at which information relating to the municipal law was given to the secretary-treasurers of the rural districts. This is surely a step in the right direction not only in the fact that the provincial authorities of Alberta are demonstrating their desire to help their more humble colleagues, but that all but four out of 168 rural district secretaries attended the meetings. If the other provinces would but follow the example of Alberta not only would much legal expense be saved but the municipal officials would be better fitted for their responsible duties. The average municipal secretary-treasurer in Canada is a much better informed man than his predecessors, though we think sometimes his council is not aware of the fact, as is evidenced in the tendency to treat him as a book-keeper and nothing more. This is not conducive to a man giving of his best. The secretary-treasurer of the community should have every opportunity to augment his knowledge, and his council should seek his advice more.

MOB LAW

Mob law was almost successful in the little community of Thorold, Ont., when a man accused of murdering a little girl was nearly lynched by an infuriated crowd. As it was the building in which the accused man was incarcerated was badly damaged by stones and fire that had been started by some of the bolder spirits maddened by the refusal of the police to turn the man over to their tender mercies. Fortunately someone was able to stop just in time what would have been a travesty of British fair play and Canada was saved the disgrace of a lynching. But the fact that it was a “near thing” must give food for thought to those who have the administration of the laws. Had the lynching taken place it would have been the first breakdown of our institutional laws—the basis of which is that every man is innocent until proven guilty by his peers. Self constituted judges—which was exactly what the crowd were—are repugnant to the British sense of justice, and however bitter the feeling against the accused man such demonstrations as that at Thorold, cannot be too strongly condemned.