

Statement by Mr. Sandford Fleming.

The following Statement was prepared by request, with the view of submitting it to the Pacific Cable Conference when it met in London on July 8th, 1896. As the Committee adjourned until October 26th, 1896, the Canadian representatives transmitted the statement to the Chairman, the Right Honourable the Earl of Selborne, Under Secretary of State for the Colonies.

Before expressing my views generally on the Pacific cable, I am asked to relate to the Committee the circumstances which led to the proposal to span the Pacific Ocean by telegraph. I comply with the request with some hesitation as I am obliged to allude to my personal connexion with the matter. In referring to this part of the subject I shall confine my remarks to a very few brief sentences.

The projected submarine electric cable across the Pacific from the western seaboard of Canada has been before the public for many years. The proposal to extend a telegraph to Asia and Australia naturally followed the establishment of a trans-continental telegraph through the Dominion. So far back as 1863 the overland telegraph was projected in conjunction with the trans-continental railway. In that year the explorations for the eastern section of the railway, between Halifax and Quebec, were undertaken by the Imperial and Provincial Governments, and in 1871 the surveys westerly to the Pacific Ocean were commenced by the Government of the New Dominion. A few years after these dates the construction of the telegraph was proceeded with on each respective section. The Hon. Alexander Mackenzie, Premier and Minister of Public Works, was one of the first to take an active interest in the matter. Under his administration the policy was adopted of extending the telegraph from the waters of the St. Lawrence to the Pacific coast; and in 1874 the Government entered into contracts for constructing the telegraph in advance of the railway over nearly 2,000 miles of territory.

Occupying the position of engineer in chief of the whole line of railway from Halifax on the Atlantic to Vancouver on the Pacific, the establishment of the overland telegraph came under my official charge, and in connexion with my duties my attention was directed to the extension of the electric wire across the Pacific. It became plain to me that the national line of communication on which Canada was then expending so much would be incomplete without a connexion with the telegraph systems of the countries beyond the Pacific Ocean, and it became equally clear that the spanning of the Pacific by an electric cable would prove of the highest importance to the whole Empire.

In the year 1879 I was called upon to visit London on public business with the then Premier, Sir John Macdonald. I had prepared a telegraph map of the world with the projected line across the Pacific, and its various eastern and western connexions, laid down thereon. I pointed out that by spanning the Pacific it would be possible to open up a new means of communication to be employed for purposes of general commerce at much lower rates than by existing channels; that it would at once complete the electric girdle of the globe, and bring Great Britain, Canada, India, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa into unbroken telegraphic touch of each other, entirely independent of the lines which pass through foreign European countries. Sir John Macdonald submitted the map and explained the proposal to Lord Beaconsfield, and I was led to understand that both Premiers were very favourably impressed with the project, and regarded it to be of great Imperial importance. I am fully warranted in saying that the Canadian Premier so regarded it until his death in 1892. Public attention was for the first time directed to a British Pacific Cable in my report as engineer in chief of the Canadian Pacific Railway, which was laid before Parliament in 1880. In this report the map referred to is reproduced on a reduced scale.

Much correspondence followed, to which it is not now necessary to allude. I will only remark that the route first projected was a northern one; this was owing to the absence of information respecting the Southern Pacific Ocean, and the impression which prevailed that physical difficulties existed which offered insuperable obstacles to the laying of a cable on a direct route between Canada to Australasia. In consequence of this impression it was designed to lay the cable from Vancouver to Japan, touching at islands in the Aleutian and Kurile groups as mid-ocean stations. From Japan the connexion with Australasia would be obtained by means of the telegraph to Singapore and the Eastern Extension Company's lines of telegraph.

Through the intervention of the Home Government, negotiations were opened with the view of securing one of the Kurile islands. Japan was asked to transfer to the British Crown one of these islands in order that the telegraph station should be under British protection. The cession of an island was not obtained, but permission to land at any suitable point in Yesso was granted, the landing to remain in charge of and under the protection of Japan. (See letter December 14th, 1880, from Sir Harry Parkes and December 23rd from Sir A. T. Galt.)

An agent was sent to Washington who, after some difficulty, obtained conditional landing privileges on one of the Aleutian islands.

On March 1st, 1881, the Government of Canada introduced certain resolutions in Parliament with the view of promoting the establishment of the cable. After discussion the resolutions were withdrawn and an Act passed incorporating a company to lay the cable. This company proved abortive, and when its charter expired, further information having meanwhile been obtained respecting the Southern Pacific, it was represented to the Canadian Government that the physical features of the Southern Ocean would admit of a cable being laid on a direct route from Canada to Australia, and that the long detour by the Aleutian Islands and Japan could be avoided. (See my letter of October 20th, 1885.)