

**SIR HENRY THORNTON'S TASK.**

Sir Henry Thornton will this week formally enter upon his duties as president and chief executive of the Canadian National Railways, a system that in point of mileage is the largest in the world, embracing as it does upwards of 22,000 miles. To his task he brings high reputation, wide and varied experience in transportation, and in the discharge of that task he will receive sympathetic support and criticism unalloyed with political partisanship or personal animosity. It is not a new thing to have public ownership and operation of railways; it will be a refreshing novelty to have that operation as efficient and economical as under private control; and it may be taken for granted that Sir Henry is fully conscious of the formidable nature of his undertaking. He has told us of a pledge of the Premier to keep the railway out of politics, but he cannot be so unfamiliar with human nature, nor blind to the character of the ownership of the property, as to believe that Hon. Mr. King or any group of politicians is able "to deliver the goods." Shareholders possess a voice in the administration of their property, the shareholders of the National Railways are the people of Canada, and the people of Canada are politicians. This premise and deduction are irrefutable, as experience in Canada has abundantly shown and will in future continue to prove. The manner in which Sir Henry Thornton stands up against the pressure of politics will be the measure of the man.

The task of the new president is to remove the mountain of deficits of the railway, a work that will need all his ingenuity, talent and firmness to accomplish even by slow degrees. A new way to pay old debts has, indeed, been suggested in some quarters, and appropriately enough finds favor in the western provinces. It received the approval of Hon. Mr. Crerar in his valedictory address relinquishing the leadership of the Progressive party, when he said: "I have long advocated that the National Railways system should be re-valued, and a fair opportunity given the management to make good on a fair basis of capitalization. The time is opportune to do that now when a new board and a new management are assuming control." This course would not, we imagine, be objectionable to Sir Henry Thornton who may well consider that it is not his particular concern and that if pursued it may brighten his official path; but it is a course repugnant to honest dealing, a deliberate deception of the taxpayers, and a danger of grave consequences. When shareholders of a private corporation write down capital charges in a period of business depression they voluntarily surrender a portion of their holdings. The people of Canada, shareholders of the National Railways, are not so circumstanced. The capital securities Mr. Crerar proposes to wipe out belong to non-residents of Canada, and only by repudiation of liability can the charge of those securities be evaded. The Crerar plan is an indexterous juggling with figures, the mere transfer of an inescapable debt from one account to another, without extending the least relief to the debtor. Its purpose is plain. That purpose is to give a fictitious appearance of solvency to the National Railway in order that an agitation for lower transportation rates may be set on foot. It is a scheme not likely to deceive Sir Henry Thornton.

The new president will not be left long in ignorance of the fact that political railways have an atmosphere of their own. He will find party leaders and party newspapers demanding from him action subversive of every sound principle of economics, and the pursuance of a policy that would utterly undermine Canadian credit. Thus the Toronto Globe observes that while "desirous that the National Railways shall ultimately pay their way, the main object to be kept in view is to make the National Railways promote the prosperity of the country," and the way to promote prosperity, according to The Globe, is by service below cost. The doctrine is laid down that "we can afford to carry the deficit better than we can afford to have a discontented and unprogressive west." Has Sir Henry Thornton been made president of the National Railways in order to reduce rates of carriage? For if so, it was hardly worth while going outside Canada for a new president, since that end could be accomplished by a stroke of the pen. No! Sir Henry was selected to make the property pay, not to make it more burdensome to taxpayers, and his success will be measured mainly by the economies he can effect and the rise in net revenue he can bring about. That there is room for economy is generally believed, particularly by elimination of parallel lines and contraction of wasteful services; and while maintaining efficiency it is expected the president will be able to stop more than one leak in the system.

There is a good deal of co-ordination yet to be made of the several units constituting the National Railways, and scope for economy may be found in abolishing over-lapping staffs. Much of Sir Henry Thornton's success will depend upon his conception of his duties and responsibilities, and the front he opposes against political interference. He has the choice of being

master of the situation, or the mere administrator of a policy fashioned by politicians for partisan purposes. Success is within his grasp if he makes the former choice, resolutely applying to the management and policy of the railway those economic methods which alone can give prosperity. Of this he may be assured: that the difficulties and pitfalls he is certain to encounter are well understood, and that the good wishes of the Canadian people go out to him.