

The Railway Problem

Article XII.—Questions Answered and Doubts Dissolved

By E. B. Biggar

To prove that the private ownership of railways is a usurpation of sovereign rights and a trespass of the first principle of representative government is to make it plain that the people should reclaim those rights. If the surrender of those rights has been a moral danger to the nation, then the recovery of them is an obligation, even if it were not shown to be an economic advantage.

But we have shown the case for state ownership from both sides, and we shall now seek to remove other doubts that may remain on the ground of expediency. These may be put in the form of assertion and answer:

To nationalize the railways would, by reason of the immense number of employees, put too great a power in the hands of a government, and make it impossible to depose a corrupt government. Answer: If this fear were well grounded then all our present public departments, including our systems of education, which, when added together, make a body of public servants equal to the railway service, would have already had that effect. But the thoroughness with which corrupt parties have been swept from power in Canada is a proof that the great body of electors will not always tolerate a corrupt party. As a matter of actual experience, changes of party in the countries of Europe and South America, and in Australia and New Zealand, where railways are state-owned, are more frequent than in Canada. What national calamity of this kind has state ownership brought upon Australia, South Africa, Switzerland or any other country?

State Ownership and Labor Control

State ownership will create greater

state railways of Belgium, Switzerland, Germany and many other countries for the representation of employees on the government advisory boards or councils so that grievances are automatically adjusted.

Efficiency of State Ownership

State management is not so efficient as private management. The answer to this question is, first, a counter-question: What is to be the standard or measure of efficiency? Is it the production of profits? If so, then private roads are more efficient, because large profits are obtained by using all the rate-taxing powers obtainable and at the same time by economies obtained too often by the denial of the reasonable claims of the mass of employees. Directors of companies often pay lordly salaries to a general manager or high officer just because of his cleverness in recouping them by exactions from the thousands under him, and by economies gained often at the cost of human life. It has been notorious in private railways of the past that life-saving appliances have been introduced only by compulsion of government, or by the force of example of a rival, and usually one of the first changes made when governments take over a private system is the spending of money on improving the safety of the roads, reducing the excessive hours of the operating staffs, as well as reducing the passenger and freight rates. It is plain that all these advantages cannot be given to the public, and profits increased at the same time. But if efficiency is to be measured by loyalty to the public and a desire to give the best service un-

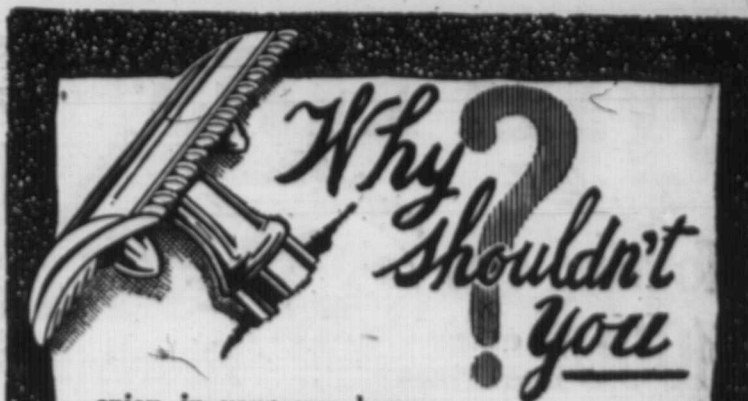


Wounded Russian troops: as Western front having their hurts dressed in the trenches

difficulties and danger from strikes and labor troubles. Answer: Strikes and labor agitations have prevailed both before and since railways were introduced. While it cannot be claimed that state ownership would end them it can be shown that difficulties are more easily adjusted under public than under private management, because a government is a juster employer than a private individual. There is never wanting a champion in parliament for a body of men who may be wronged, and the remedy for such wrongs may be more directly applied. The very fact of the relative unresponsiveness among private firms to legitimate complaints of employees was the cause of the creation of the Canadian Department of Labor with its arbitral powers. The continued existence of this department is in itself a proof that the confidence felt by employees in a government is greater than in a private company. Who ever heard of general and recurring strikes among post office employees or customs clerks? As a fact of history, strikes have been much less frequent or serious on state than privately owned railways. Provisions are made in the

der reasonable treatment, then surely the average man or woman will be more powerfully moved by the thought of serving the whole nation than of a private company. Moreover, there is no such thing as a dead level of uniformity, either in public or private control. There are state owned enterprises that are poorly managed at times, and there are private companies that are ill-managed, as the long record of receiverships and bankruptcies of these undertakings in many countries will show.

If the private lines were taken over by government there would be no incentives to improvement as in private management. Answer: The most important improvements and life-saving devices introduced in the railways of the United States and Canada have been adopted only because of government orders, or continued public agitation accompanied by such a number of actions for damages as to make compliance with the public demands less costly. Since the government and public opinion have been the source of the main improvements and life-saving appliances, which have been at first resisted by the companies, the whole ar-



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