

Post Office Inefficiency

By JOHN SAXON.

THE utter break-down of the Post Office at Christmas time will be the subject of an official inquiry. Pending completion of that prolonged operation, it has been extensively criticised in the Press—not always with lucidity, or without the prejudice that has its origin in political or business hostility. I propose to consider here, impartially if I can, the reasons of the collapse and the possible remedies. It is, of course, useless to launch invectives against State Trading, or to suggest that the causes of the catastrophe—for it was a catastrophe—were inherent in the System. With a profound belief in the superiority of private enterprise, as a general proposition, I am constrained to admit that there are cases in which the combined effort of the community, concentrated upon a particular service through a colossal State organisation like the Post Office, is likely to be at least as efficient as, if not more efficient than, the maximum energy of any individual, or any Joint Stock Company.

Apart from the difficulty of providing the necessary capital, the very extent and complication of the machinery would make it impossible to exercise that individual supervision and control of details which is the secret of the superiority of private enterprise. In the case of a Company of the proportions required to carry on such a business as the Post Office, the control would be as little in the hands of the individual shareholders, and as much in the grasp of their paid servants, as it is, and always must be, in the case of a Government Department. And Governments have powers and possibilities of facilitating operations and coping with emergencies which could not be conceded to any private undertaking. Besides, the Christmas mails have, on the whole, been handled hitherto with conspicuous success. What we have to investigate is, so to speak, an isolated phenomenon; and isolated phenomena are generally the result of more or less isolated causation. We may, therefore, begin by ruling out the explanation that the failure of the Department was due to its dose of original sin. We must seek for it in some other direction.

What, then, is the explanation? Students of psychology will recollect the theory that the nervous system—the Post Office of the human organism—in the earlier stages of its evolution, conveyed its messages direct from point to point, with little or no central control; that later the tendency was for messages to travel more and more through the central office; and that later still, when this threatened congestion, all mere routine reflexes were remitted to subsidiary centres with a minimum of central control. Only messages demanding deliberation were, as a rule, referred to headquarters. Roughly, that theory, with modifications (as slipshod statutes phrase it), may be applied to the Post Office.

The tendency towards undue centralisation, characteristic of bureaucracy, has there reached the point when it becomes a drag upon efficiency. This is especially the case in the Inland Section; and by a coincidence which suggests a connection, that is where the failure was most conspicuous. Reconstruction has been at work recently in this Section. Traffic Managers have been installed, as in the Telephone Department, and there has been increased centralisation both of traffic and control—intensified centralisation where already congestion was threatened under normal conditions.

But there was not only a new system to be worked and an overtaxed bottle-neck to be negotiated by the traffic. There was a new equipment of standardised fittings in use, insufficient in quantity, unsuitable in character and inadequate in size; there was lack of imagination in the superior control; there was lack

of flexibility in the working of the machinery; there was lack of co-ordination between the sorting and the dispatching agencies; and there may have been a suspicion of ca'canny among dissatisfied members of the emergency staff. In effect, the whole thing resolves itself into the simple conclusion that the men at the top were not big enough for the crisis; and the practical men at the working face either had not the experience or the vision to foresee the difficulties, or they lacked the courage to correct the optimism of those above them. They were the products of a perverted system which suppresses Initiative and which only a super-man could resist.

Let us consider what used to happen in a big Post Office before the Christmas rush came. About three months in advance, the Postmaster made his estimate of the quantity of extra work he anticipated, the number of extra hands he needed, the amount of extra space he required, the tale of extra fittings the occasion demanded. His estimate was submitted to the local Surveyor, who had discretion to sanction it or to question any detail. If he thought it excessive he referred his doubt to headquarters. Subject to this check, the responsibility was the Postmaster's. His estimate approved, he hired the necessary premises, indented the necessary fittings, and engaged the necessary helpers. Naturally, he saw to their training for the work: he personally supervised it. Then he was on the Bridge through the whole cyclone, easing this, shifting that, determined through all to get the job finished in time. His reputation was at stake. If a regulation stood in the way, he ruthlessly broke it. If he had to promise unauthorised pay or privilege to ensure the necessary speeding up, he promised it. And he kept his promise. The work was done, the community was satisfied; though Red Tape rules were scandalously violated.

The Postmaster's trouble began when bags from the London centre arrived after the dispatch of the out mail which they should have been in time to catch; or when traffic came in faster than sorters could deal with it. The former had to wait for the next dispatch. That was a minor evil. With an accumulation, the extent of the trouble depended upon the way it was tackled. If the sorting was worked from the end that came in first, the delay was minimised, though it was spread over the whole sequence of deliveries. If it was worked from the end that came in last, some of the later packets were dispatched without delay; but the ones that were first received would be the last sent out, and the Office lost its reputation for efficiency. Whether the one or the other happened depended upon the Man on the Bridge and his methods of working.

We are now in a position to understand what occurred last Christmas. Traffic which should have been dealt with at a District Office was passed through the Central bottle-neck. The discretion of Postmasters and Surveyors was curtailed and subordinated to a centralised Control. There were, in consequence, large District Offices with little or no pressure, and others, especially in the Eastern, South-Eastern, and Suburban Divisions, hopelessly congested. The trouble was increased by premature discharge of temporary men, in accordance with standing instructions from headquarters. There was nobody with sufficient courage to disobey and trust to Providence for absolution.

It was in the London Centre of the Inland Section that confusion was most confounded. The job was too big for the new Traffic Managers and those above them. It was not direct intervention of the Treasury that was to blame; but fear of the Treasury and of the indiscriminating demand for economy. The volume of traffic was grossly and inexcusably under-estimated. The premises provided were insufficient. There were not enough tables, or receptacles, or bag frames; frames and receptacles were individually too small for the work; and difficulties with bag frames retarded

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