

The Agitation for Cheap Cablegrams



AT a meeting of the Royal Colonial Institute, held last night at the Whitehall Rooms, Hotel Metropole, Mr. Henniker Heaton, M.P., read a paper on "Penny-a-Word Telegrams throughout the Empire." Lord Jersey presided, and there was a large attendance, which included—

Lord Strathcona, the Hon. Rodolphe Lemieux (postmaster-general of Canada), General Sir Alfred Gaselee, Sir Edward Sassoon, M.P.; Sir George Doughty, M.P., and Lady Doughty; Mr. G. Marconi, Admiral the Hon. Sir E. R. Fremantle, the Marquis Solari, Sir William Holland, M.P.; Sir Daniel Morris, Sir Arthur Douglas, Sir Charles Bruce, Sir Frederick Young, Major-General C. W. Robinson, Dr. G. R. Parkin, C.M.G.; Sir Somerset French (agent-general for Cape of Good Hope); Mr. J. G. Colmer, C.M.G.; Sir Benjamin Stone, M.P.; the Hon. C. H. Rason (agent-general for Western Australia); and Mr. J. S. O'Halloran, C.M.G. (secretary).

Mr. Henniker Heaton, after recalling the views which he had urged 21 years ago when he advocated Imperial penny postage and cheap cablegrams before a meeting of the institute, said he was denounced for the notion of cheap cabling. The proposals he placed before them were viewed with abhorrence by the cable companies. They could not see the practicability of his ideas. But in the course of years these so-called visionary projects had already come appreciably near to realization. That which he advocated in the closing years of the last century was a mild reform compared with what presented itself within a wider horizon in this twentieth century. Today what he wanted was a universal penny-a-word rate.

Political Frontiers

The chief obstacle in carrying out this policy was in the political frontiers, and the object, therefore, should be to abolish political frontiers, so far as telegrams were concerned, in our communication with every part of the earth. In this matter "political" frontiers, by arrangement with foreign Governments, ought not to be taken into consideration at all; between man and man they should not exist. If we could not get over this difficulty, he placed his hopes on his friend Marconi, who entirely ignored political frontiers. Let, Mr. Henniker Heaton observed, the Postmasters-General of Europe meet and resolve to abolish or, rather, ignore political frontiers for telegraphic communication. Already the political frontier had disappeared in our big mail services. Our sealed packets were sent by the Post Office every week to India, the East, and Australia through France and Italy. We hired a special train from Calais to Brindisi and Naples. Why, therefore, should we not hire from the friendly foreign Governments telegraph lines to carry our messages? Now, in his judgment, the first step should be that, for the first time in the history of the British Empire, the British Postmaster-General and the Postmasters-General of all the Colonies and India should meet in London to deal with the few problems involved, and the home and Colonial Governments should offer to construct land lines to the various portions of the Empire on the route to our possessions beyond the seas. In the first place, they would discover that the money they expended in cabling to London and the British Government expended in cabling to the Colonies and dependencies amounted to a sum sufficient to pay the interest on all the cables and the land lines they desired to acquire.

The Present Cable System

Of all the nations that ever existed not one was so greatly dependent on speedy communication as the British. It should be clearly understood that his hostility was not against capital, but against the tyranny of capital. There was no one so ignorant or foolish as to deny the debt which mankind owed to the cable companies for their spirited enterprise in facing many risks in the development of telegraphic communication. Those who carried out that great work deserved our gratitude and financial reward. He would not deprive them of one farthing of what they were justly entitled to; if they were to be bought out he would not haggle with them over the price because he might think it was based on an ungenerous tariff. The policy of the cable companies had been ungenerous to the public and unwise in their own interests; but he would not therefore assail them with abuse or suggest a retributive policy. His object was to show, without passion or prejudice, how the present cable system conflicted with the general good; that it could be altered, and how it could be altered without loss to any and with advantage to all. The British Government today did not subsidize our largest and greatest telegraph lines to India, China, and the East, or to Australia and Canada to the extent of one penny, with the exception of the line from Vancouver to Australia, although large sums were spent on the conveyance of mails. There was another extraordinary fact—namely, that the great merchants in England spent no less than five millions a year in sending cables to various parts of the world, while in our inland telegraph system we only spent three millions. The British Government alone paid steamship companies for mail transport about £700,000 per annum; but the inhabitants also paid £5,000,000 per annum for cabling, of which £1,000,000 went for American cables. We paid £1,000 a day to cable to Australia, £1,000 a day to India, £1,000 a day to South Africa, £1,000 a day to China

and the East, and £1,000,000 a year to the United States. The Governments of the world paid an enormous sum at present for cabling official messages. In regard to the cables to India and the East, and to America, including the Canadian service, we were in the present high cable charges paying for abandoned cables, for superfluous cables, and also for unnecessary working staff and apparatus. In other words, the public was paying £4,000,000 a year for what could be supplied for £130,000. In fact, if we were to wipe out or destroy our present cable service it would be possible to reconstruct the whole system anew for less than half the original outlay. And, notwithstanding this enormous sum of £5,000,000 spent on cabling, not one message in a hundred was a social message, and we had overwhelming evidence that a myriad messages would be despatched to our sons and daughters beyond the seas if the charges were not prohibitory. Merchants and business men were terribly handicapped as things stood. The cables should be for the people and not for the monopolists, and he declared that if they united to solve the difficulties, this closed door to cheap intercommunication between all the peoples of the Empire would be thrown wide open to all. Cheap cabling was the key to all the really momentous problems which confronted our statesmen and merchants. It annihilated distance, abolished delay, bridged the ocean, laughed at the storm, created trade, nourished individual and racial sympathies, multiplied our strength, and in the event of war or threatened war, enabled us to mass our collective resources at the menaced point.

The Cable Monopoly

For a quarter of a century he had watched the growth of the immense cable monopoly, and not one word had been spoken by a British Postmaster-General in favor of reducing the excessive rates to our Colonies. He had sat at great State cable conferences side by side with the representatives of the Government of Great Britain, and not one attempt was made by them to lessen the cost of cabling. Yet it must be remembered that the Postmaster-General had absolute control over the cables in his hands, because he held the landing rights and inland transmission for Great Britain, without which not a single cable message could be sent by the monopolist companies. It would be advanced that the cables could not cope with the rush if a popular rate were introduced; but the marvellous "Pollak-Virag" system had met this difficulty. By its means an increase of messages of eight times the number of messages could be sent on any wire at about a third of the present cost. It was futile to argue as regards, say, the transatlantic cable rates (i.e. a word), that this rate was based on supply and demand, because the number of words sent in those cables (20,000,000) represented only a twelfth of the carrying capacity of the lines. This, therefore, was what it amounted to. To pay on the unused eleven-twelfths the two owners of the Atlantic lines combined to charge a prohibitive tariff on the other twelfth, thus rendering what was a necessity a luxury for the few. Penny-a-word cables with a minimum charge of 1s. would pay when men recognized that they were not a luxury but one of humanity's needs. Moreover, such a reform as this would be a filip to the scientist. We were as yet only in the entrance-hall of telegraphy. The "Pollak-Virag" development was a sure indication of what had yet to be learned concerning the adaptation of electricity to the needs of modern life. Increased use would bring greater economy of working, and the utilization of new ideas with which, as matters at present stood, monopolists, sure of their profits without further trouble, did not, unfortunately, greatly concern themselves. This comfortable apathy stood between mankind and a natural right.

The Remedy

As to the remedy, Mr. Henniker Heaton, advocated an international arrangement for the transmission of telegrams between any two points in Europe at a penny a word. They knew that the great and powerful European classes, from bankers down to shopkeepers and artisans, knew no nationality when common interests were concerned, and these classes might be trusted, if once awakened to the thorough-going urgency of this question, to make short work of the opposition of bureaucratic cliques or the selfish lethargy of those who would thwart advance. If the cable monopolies would not move, what was the remedy? Well, we were independent of them. We wanted a cable to Canada, and the land lines would do the rest. Let it never be forgotten that the natural trade route to Australia was, and always would be, by way of India and China. Moreover, it was in the East that our commercial classes felt most acutely the stress of competition. It was, therefore, easily within our power to give our merchants—and this without the smallest sacrifice of revenue—this priceless aid of cheap telegraphic communication, and by that means to reduce the disadvantages of distance. He did not want to do injustice to any man, but simply desired the British, Canadian, Australian, and South African Governments to combine, either to buy out the cable companies at the market price of the day or to act on the policy he had laid before the meeting. He founded his claim for reform in the breaking down of the present cable monopolies on the following good and sufficient reasons:—(1) Cable rates were too high and prohibitory; (2) commerce was hampered and hindered by present monopolies;

and (3) cheaper cables would mean federation and international peace. In conclusion, Mr. Henniker Heaton, in summarizing the points which he was desirous of placing before the British people, said that he wanted to secure for his countrymen cheap and perfect communication by telegraph with all parts of the world; that it was advisable at all costs to put an immediate end to all cable monopolists, who should be bought out at the market price of the day by the Governments of the civilized world; that the present high cable rates were prohibitory to the masses of the people; that the British and Colonial Governments now paid every year for official cable messages nearly a quarter of a million sterling, a sum which would go far towards the interest in purchasing the cables from the companies; that our cables would in Government hands cost us one million in place of four millions sterling annually; that the first step was to call a conference of the Postmasters-General of the world for the establishment of a penny-a-word telegraph rate throughout Europe; that the next step was to hold a conference with the postal authorities of America; that the civilized Governments of the world should abolish political frontiers for telegraph purposes; that a land telegraph line could be constructed throughout Europe and Asia at a cost of from £25 to £30 per mile (a cable cost from £200 to £300 per mile); that a land line could carry 90 words a minute and a cable only about 30 words per minute; and that Europe, Asia, and Africa (and even with short sea gaps Australia could be linked up) should be connected by international land lines by arrangements with the various Governments. (Hear, hear.)

Speech by the Postmaster-General of Canada

The Hon. R. Lemieux, the Postmaster-General of Canada, said that he was pleased to state that under the excellent administration of Mr. Sidney Buxton the British Post Office was living up to its reputation. The introduction of penny postage in Great Britain, its further extension to Greater Britain, the recent penny post to the United States—and he might add the Canadian magazine post—were epoch-making events of which the Anglo-Saxon race the world over might well be proud. It was to be hoped that the day was not far distant when the examples set by Great Britain will be followed by the other nations, and that universal penny postage would be adopted. But our veteran champion of postal improvements was evidently not satisfied with cheap postage alone. According to his definition, the Post Office was the machinery of thought, but electricity was thought itself displayed in action, the living fire that made the massive wheels to turn. At this period of the world's history in face of the refined and perfected strategy employed to appropriate trade, the nation which made the best use of electric agencies, according to its special needs and circumstances, would be supreme. In Mr. Henniker Heaton's masterly effort of this evening he had nailed new colors to his mast with the very suggestive and captivating motto, "penny-a-word telegrams throughout the Empire." Speaking for himself and himself alone, he (the speaker) looked upon the penny-a-word cable as an ideal, as a blessing, which some day, sooner or later, should be attained and secured. Mr. Henniker Heaton's scheme embraced the whole world. As a Canadian he was personally and chiefly concerned with what he thought Canada might do for herself and the Empire of which she formed so important a part. Canada's interest was defined by her geographical position. Lying as she did in the Western Hemisphere, the link joining Great Britain and Australia, Canada might not possibly do more than to make the most of her position to reduce to its minimum the distance between those parts of the Empire. The All-Red route would be one instalment in the right direction. Would not an All-Red cable be another? He preceeded to point out that, confining herself within the limits of the British Empire, Canada had had a principal share in the great movement which resulted in the Pacific Cable. This cable, owned by the Governments of Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, was operated under the direction of a board made up of representatives of those Governments. The mere announcement of this new cable caused at once a drop in the rates of the Eastern cables from 9s. 4d. to 4s. 9d. a word, and when the cable was laid, there was a further drop to 3s., thus practically saving to the consumers by this last reduction \$1,000,000 a year. Without dwelling at any length on what could be done on the Atlantic side between Canada and Great Britain, he said that still more hopeful results could be achieved. If all postal experience was not belied, there would be, there must be, a large increase in the cable business within a short time. Those who now used the cables would use them more freely. Every reduction in rates would open the door to a class of traders who could not now afford to use cables, as the cost of cabling was practically prohibitory. Mr. Henniker Heaton, who had already done so much for the cause of Imperial penny postage and who had devoted his life in advocating cheap communications, was convinced that a penny-a-word cablegram was practicable. He was well aware that objections were raised from a scientific and financial point of view, but many in the audience would remember the stern and relentless opposition made against penny postage, not only in Great Britain, but in various other countries, Canada included. In conclusion, he expressed the hope that such a grand idea as

Mr. Henniker Heaton had enunciated that evening should be pressed on, and that an unbiased inquiry should be made into its feasibility and prospects of success. (Cheers.)

Mr. Marconi on Wireless Telegraphy

Mr. Marconi then addressed the meeting. He said that he was sure that they were all in agreement as to the great benefits which would be derived from a reduction of the cable rates to one penny per word between all parts of the British Empire, but, considering the cost and enormous capital invested in cables, he very much doubted whether it would be possible to send messages over great distances by these means without having to incur a very great loss. He sincerely hoped that before any large scheme, such as the Government ownership of all cables, was entered into, that those interested in the matter would thoroughly investigate what had been done and what was likely to be done in the near future by long distance wireless telegraphy, which, for distances such as those separating Canada from England, cost in capital expenditure and maintenance only a small fraction of the amount necessary for the construction and operation of a cable. The recent establishment of wireless telegraphy across the Atlantic Ocean had awakened a very large amount of public interest in this new method of communication, and he was glad to have the opportunity of expressing his gratitude to Mr. Lemieux, the Postmaster-General of Canada, for the encouragement and assistance which the Canadian Government generally, and his own department particularly, had given to his endeavors to establish a cheap and efficient system of telegraphic communication between Great Britain and Canada. The discussion of how to obtain low telegraphic rates between the distant parts of the Empire was the object of this meeting, and it might be of interest if he recalled the fact that in 1902 the Canadian Government granted him a subsidy of £16,000 to assist him in his experiments, in return for which he agreed not to charge more than 2½d. a word for Press and Government messages, and 5d. a word for commercial messages transmitted between this country and the Dominion of Canada. They might ask whether it would be possible by means of wireless telegraphy to have a reliable service at 1d. a word between England and Canada. This would certainly become possible in time. At present a rate of only 2½d. per word was being charged for Press and Government messages, many of the former having appeared in The Times and in Canadian newspapers. From a technical point of view the possibility of low rates, whether by cables or by wireless telegraphy, resolved itself into the question of the speed at which it was possible to work each circuit, and any invention such as that of Pollak-Virag, if applicable to cables or long distance wireless, could only result in furthering the possibility of cheap rates. The Transatlantic stations at Clifden and Cape Breton, although not yet completed, had already transmitted and received in one year over 300,000 paid words, and when the completion and duplication of the plant was carried out he had no doubt but that they would be able to handle at least 20 or 30 times that amount. Notwithstanding all that had been said and written about the defects of wireless telegraphy and its lack of secrecy, not a single complaint as to such want of secrecy had been received from any user of the service, and the daily messages offered for transmission from large business firms in England and America were so numerous that it had been found necessary to limit the service to Montreal only, as more messages were offered from New York and other places than could be at present efficiently handled. Whatever might be the views held by some on the subject, he believed they would find he was right if he said that there was no doubt that wireless telegraphy across the Atlantic Ocean had come to stay, and not only to stay, but would continue to advance. Whether this new telegraphy would or would not injure or displace the cables was still a matter of speculation and depended a great deal on what the cables could do in the way of cheaper rates. The best judges of what was being done by wireless telegraphy across the Atlantic were those who had made practical use of it. The New York Times, in a leader which appeared on November 18, 1907, said:—"Our wireless despatches come to us in excellent shape comparing favorably with those sent by cable." The London Times, after saying that it had used the system nearly every week for a year, stated in a telegram from New York, which appeared in the issue of October 19 last:—"The service within its present limitations has been satisfactory, and messages of 1,500 words have been transmitted with the same degree of accuracy as messages sent by cable."

Mr. Marconi, owing to the fact that his station is at Glace Bay, N.S., and to consequent delays upon the land telegraphs, requires a few hours more time than the cables." The additional stations which are about to be erected nearer to the great business centres in America would, he was sure, give increased facilities and result in more rapid transmission. In conclusion, Mr. Marconi said he had every confidence that wireless telegraphy for commercial purposes and over great distances, possibly round the world, was bound to become general in the course of time—and that not a very long time—and that it was extremely gratifying to those working at the problems to feel and know that its present use at sea was increasing the

comforts and diminishing the perils of "those who go down to the sea in ships," besides also promising to provide a new method of instantaneous communication to distant countries at such rates as would be within reach of the majority. (Hear, hear.)

Mr. Henniker Heaton said that he would like to ask Mr. Marconi whether he was prepared to transmit messages from shore to shore between the United Kingdom and Canada for one penny per word.

Mr. Marconi: Do you mean at once?

Mr. Henniker Heaton: Yes.

Mr. Marconi: Should say "Yes," providing the Governments concerned, or one of the Governments with pay for the working expenses of the stations on both sides of the Atlantic, and also give a comparatively moderate subsidy. (Laughter.)

Mr. Henniker Heaton: That is exactly the answer I anticipated, and it turns out on that speculation that we can carry three million words to America for about £25,000, as against £180,000 now given to the cable companies for the same number of words. (Hear, hear.)

Mr. G. R. Neilson, who did not speak in any representative capacity, said that there was an attempt in the paper to achieve a not very generous victory over the dead. He pointed out that there were grave inaccuracies in the paper, and that from the beginning to the end there was not a word devoted to an estimate of the number and cost of the lines, by which an enormously increased traffic could be carried. He thought that a vast proposal of this nature which entirely omitted the fundamental consideration was not respectful to the meeting, the Press, or the public. Sentiment was a sorry substitute for sound finance.

Lord Strathcona and Dr. G. R. Parkin were among those who took part in the discussion which followed.

Views of Cable Experts

A representative of Reuter's Agency yesterday obtained the views of the cable companies on Mr. Henniker Heaton's proposal for a cable rate of a penny per word. It was pointed out that the initial amount required to buy out the cable companies would be stupendous, the figures were too big to be set down at a moment's notice, but they would run into an indefinite number of millions, and if the traffic was going to increase in proportion to the reduction in the rate, enormous sums would have to be expended in the laying of new cables. Moreover, the maintenance and repair of a cable was a frightfully costly matter. One of the Transatlantic cable companies alone had had a bill amounting to £20,000 for cable repairs during the year.

The Anglo-American Cable Company declared that the chief users of their cable were already practically paying 1d. a word and even less for their messages, and in support of this statement Mr. Carson, the manager of the company, produced a code message of two words at 1s. apiece, which, when decoded, ran into 170 words, or a fraction more than seven words for one penny. Ninety-five per cent. of the Anglo traffic was in code. Mr. Carson said that his company would in no way be adverse to a 1d. rate, if the Government were willing to give a guarantee for loss of revenue, cost of laying new cables, cost of maintenance, of renewal, and of an increased staff. Reference was also made by a cable expert to the time of the cable tariff war, when the Transatlantic cable rate was reduced to sixpence. "It is urged," he said, "that the increase in traffic with a 1d. rate would compensate largely, if not wholly, for loss of revenue on the reduction, yet this cut of 50 per cent. on the Transatlantic rate only produced a 10 per cent. increase in traffic."

"If," said the manager of an important eastern cable company, "Mr. Henniker Heaton suggests cheapening telegraphy by a wider use of land lines, can he explain how he is going to obtain the consent of foreign Governments to a 1d. a word rate? Overland wires are worked by staffs supplied by the Governments of the countries through which the lines pass, and those Governments require to be remunerated. It is hardly to be expected that they are going to sacrifice revenue with the object of knitting the British Empire closer together."

The whole question was declared, at one office, to be an attempt to make the bulk of the people pay for the cables of the few, and the Colonial support for the idea was, therefore, quite easy to understand, when it was borne in mind that the few millions of people in Australia, while naturally having more use for the cable than the 40,000,000 at home, would bear an infinitely smaller amount of the huge loss which would inevitably result.

"Mr. Henniker Heaton might as well," suggested one gentleman, "advocate on the same lines a shilling passenger fare to any spot within the Empire."

NO WORK FOR HIM

"But," said the good old lady, "why don't you go to work?"

"Why, ma'am," began the disreputable old loafer, "yer see, I got a wife an' five children to support—"

"But how can you support them if you don't go to work?"

"As I was a-sayin', lady, I got a wife an' five children to support me."

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