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GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS.

Under any other circumstances than the present, the intimation of the Minister of Railways at Ottawa, a few days ago, that the Government may find it necessary to bring in a resolution providing for Government operation of the National Transcontinental Railway would have aroused the attention which such an important step deserves. The prospect of the adoption of the course mentioned cannot be viewed with any enthusiasm. The record of successive Governments in the running of the Intercolonial Railway, is not such as to inspire confidence in departmental ability to undertake successfully the operation of a great new line, a couple of thousand miles in length, running for the most part through an unsettled country, where traffic for years to come is bound to be exceedingly thin along whole stretches and handicapped at its eastern end by the running within competitive distance of the existing Government line. Under the circumstances of Government operation, it is probable the drain upon the taxpayer for the maintenance of the road will be considerably greater than it could possibly be under the arrangement originally contemplated. In its early years, if anything is to be done with the National Transcontinental at all as a business proposition, operation calls for stern economy. Who ever heard of a Canadian Government, whether Conservative or Liberal, Dominion or Provincial, being economical—especially where its patronage is concerned.

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Such a large extension of Government activities as that contemplated opens up prospects by no means reassuring. The blunders that have marked the construction of the road are well known to the country and there is no reason to suppose that if one political party instead of the other had been in power during the major part of this period that the work would have been more efficiently and less extravagantly done. There is, too, unfortunately only too good reason to believe that a great extension of Government activities such as that spoken of means a mediocre administration, more opportunities of "warm sympathy for our friends, cold justice for our opponents," and a considerable extension of opportunities of which there are already too many, for the plundering of the public purse by politicians and the crowds of their hangers-on.

Apart from any consideration of the respective merits of collective and individual administration, it is a simple fact that in Canada, Governments, whether national or provincial are not clean enough or able enough to run on proper business lines undertakings such as the National Transcontinental. The fact is not agreeable to the national pride, but nevertheless, it has to be faced. The successful running of a business demands at least an elementary honesty—ordinary commercial morality. Can that be obtained under present circumstances from a Government administration? Everybody knows the answer—the sickening evidence revealed by recent enquiries gives a fresh emphasis to it. Again, the successful running of a business demands ability, energy and enterprise. Nobody has yet discovered that these indispensable qualities for business success are fostered in the Government service, where the main qualification for thousands of posts is friends at court. These citations constitute no reflection on the honest and able men who hold responsible positions in the country's government. They cannot be held responsible. The huge machine of party patronage and graft—big and little—is beyond their control.

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Apparently dishonesty in public administration is an inevitable concomitant of young nationhood, at all events on this Continent. It is reported not to exist in Australia and New Zealand, which sounds almost too good to be true. The United States nationally has been running a considerably longer time than Canada, but by all accounts grafters are still able to graft without going to jail in what after-dinner speakers, with a fine touch of humour, are wont to talk of as "God's own country." The question of honesty in public administration has a very practical aspect at this time. In the days to come Canada will neither be able to afford either dishonesty or mediocrity in business affairs where the public purse is concerned. To expect the average politician to be anything more than a mediocrity is, of course, utopian, but it is at least as important, considering the size of the national obligations now being cheerfully shouldered and the increased taxation which is inevitable for years to come as a result of present events, that the public funds should not be wasted in graft as that there should be generally increased production. As it seems barely possible under present circumstances to secure an entire honesty of administration, it is desirable that dishonesty should have as few opportunities as possible for its exercise.