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The Railway Problem

Article III.—Remarkable and Uninterrupted Advance in State Ownership
of Railways throughout the World

By E. B. Biggar

The private ownership of railways was transplanted from Great Britain to the United States and Canada in a very easy way, because the pioneer manufacturers of railway equipment were ready to sell engines, rails and rolling stock at good prices, and contractors and investors had thus early seen the opportunities of making big profits out of railway franchises. State governments at that period were not always disposed to invest large sums in such works, but private capitalists were alert to the opportunities of profit in the control of transportation; while few of the people had dreamed of the extent to which this control, with its powers of taxation, could defeat self-government by the corruption of the people's representatives. With these sinister influences following the world's leadership in railway construction, the wonder is, not that this false start in Great Britain has misled so many other countries, but that the example of little Belgium has won such an uninterrupted series of victories for national control.

To a large proportion of our people who were born under the regime of private ownership the exercise of this tremendous power seems so much like one of nature's laws that it will require an effort of faith to realize how large a number of other nations have fully awakened from the economic nightmare. So steadily has the tide set in against private control that out of sixty-five countries throughout the world that have railways, no less than fifty-one have now adopted government ownership, while some control the service by government operation of railways as yet under private ownership. Details of these may be found in a recent return laid before the British parliament.

Movement Towards State Ownership

In this world-wide movement there are three features that make it remarkable. First, the slowness of the change in the first fifty years of railway history, and then the rapid swing of the movement since. In 1880 according to one return, the world's mileage showed only 10,000 miles under government ownership. Now there are, in round numbers, 255,000 miles under government ownership and operation, exclusive of the large total of military lines built since the war began, all of which are necessarily under government ownership.

The second feature of this movement is that since it has attained its momentum, there has been no backwash, no recession towards private ownership. It is a striking fact that there are only three cases in the world of even partial abandonment of state ownership. These are Cuba, Peru and Newfoundland. The case of Peru, however, is qualified by a condition that at the end of a stated period the Peruvian government may exercise its option of resuming possession; and in the instance of Cuba it is interesting to learn that within the last few months the Cuban government has decided to appoint a commission to consider the purchase of the privately owned lines of the island. In the case of Newfoundland, the railways were owned by the government, but constructed and operated by a company. After purchasing the lines from the colonial government, the company sought to make the purchase irrevocable by an advance cash payment of a million dollars, but there was such an outcry against such a perpetual alienation that public opinion forced the government to annul the contract and the million dollars was returned. The condition now is that at the end of fifty years the government of Newfoundland may resume possession of the railways.

A still more impressive feature of this is that state ownership has been brought about in countries of the most diverse forms of government, varieties of race and conditions of people. It has been adopted under the absolutism of Turkey and in Russia under the autocracy (now happily melted into the new Russian constitutional administration) and in countries of the other extreme of popular government, such as the referendum ruled country of Switzerland and the highly responsive democracies of Australasia. It has succeeded as well with the diversified races and peoples of India as with the quified

and highly trained peoples of Europe. Its adoption in various parts of the British Empire is a splendid testimony to the discernment and the saving sense of British administrators when given the opportunity to decide matters solely in the interests of the people, unfettered by precedent. There are seventeen crown colonies and protectorates in the British Empire and of these no less than twelve operate their railways under direct government ownership. If the four German colonies now occupied by Great Britain are retained, this will make the total in this group sixteen.

Of the self-governing British Dominions, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa all carry on their main lines under government ownership and to these we add the Empire of India. In the case of Canada, it must not be forgotten that this confederation was only accomplished thru the agency of a state-owned railway, the Intercolonial, the building of which was the specific condition under which the two maritime provinces came into the Dominion.

Miracle in Great Britain

But more astonishing is the miracle accomplished in Great Britain itself, where, on the outbreak of war, the railways of England and Scotland passed under government control, literally in a day. The legislative machinery by which this was carried out had already been prepared, and the railway employees went on without disturbance. For divided and more or less antagonistic control by the companies there was substituted a unified management, and the strongest partisans of private ownership have had to admit that the transformation in the service, by which all the requirements of the army and navy have been met and the ordinary traffic of the country carried on so smoothly, has been wonderful. The details have not yet been revealed to the public, but the demonstration that has been made of the advantages of direct government control is so convincing that there is no possibility of going back to the old wasteful and expensive methods. How the war revealed the railway problem to the British people is well told by A. G. Gardiner in "The War Lords." "We have talked for generations about the nationalization of railways, and have found the scheme too vast to tackle. We woke up one morning to find that the companies had been dispossessed of their control, and that the twelve hundred directors had been sent out to play, and that the whole railway system of the country was subject to the government. And the transition seemed so natural and proper that no one even wrote to the papers about it." At the impact of a great occasion the whole theory of railway ownership and control collapses without a murmur. It is seen that the sole ultimate function of the railway is to serve the state, and that anything that interferes with that function in a time of emergency is brushed aside as lightly as a feather. The lesson will serve for future use. By a flash of lightning as it were, it has revealed the true relation of the railway to the community, and that relation is as applicable to the conditions of peace as to conditions of war.

Calculations made for the first year of the war by the government railway committee show that the working of the British railways is probably the greatest feat of British organization during the war. Commenting on this, a writer, evidently deriving his information from the authorities, says:—"It cost the government the comparatively trifling sum of two million pounds (\$10,000,000) wherefor millions of troops were transported to all parts of the country, while the regular passenger service scarcely showed any sign of the war. All the railways are under government control and are worked by a committee of managers, payment being calculated according to the difference between the net receipts of 1913 and the receipts during war time. Considering that some of the railways carried occasionally fifty troop trains in one day as well as innumerable trains for military supplies, the cost to the government is amazingly small. The low expense is attributable to the economical methods

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