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EDITORIAL

GOVERNMENT AND THE TELEGRAPH.

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THE most important passage in the lengthy report of the Postmaster-General is that which refers to the telegraph. After showing the progress made in the postal service during the past fifty years through the use of modern agencies of transportation, this official observes: "The only potent agency, and the only one that remains beyond our reach is electricity. Its practical value has been known for half a century { * * * } the Department stands { * * * } where it stood 50 years ago. . . . The first telegraph was operated by the Post-Office Department, and it was an evil hour for the people when, against the protest of the Postmaster General, it was surrendered. . . . Sixty-four million people are denied the right to vitalize the magnificent machinery of their post-office with the mightiest force which science has given."

It is a surprise to other great nations, he says, that the American people "do not rise up" to demand cheaper telegraphy, through the convenience and economies of the Post-Office Department. Great Britain and Ireland enjoy a rate, uniform like postage, of sixpence (12 cents) for 12 words to any distance. Germany has about the same rate, and Austria a lower one. In France and Belgium the rate is half a franc (less than ten cents) for ten words between any two points. At these rates the telegraph is found a profitable adjunct to the postal service of those nations. Under the corporate system fewer telegrams were sent in England than in America, but after the union of the telegraph with the postal service the number rapidly increased, and now it is twice as great in England as in America, in proportion to population. This growth of the telegraphic business in England, under national ownership and operation, as compared with its relative stagnation here under private management, is the more remarkable when it is

considered that since 1885 the post-office business increased 65 per cent. in this country, as against 31 per cent. only in Great Britain.

With the telegraph comes the telephone. In treating of the latter the Postmaster General seems to be quoting from *Looking Backward*. The advantages of connecting rural post-offices with railroad stations, he says, must be obvious in a hundred ways. "The rural population would be the greatest gainer. A telephone message from the post-office to the railroad station miles away to ascertain if expected freight had come would save the farmer many a needless wagon trip over bad roads; news of approaching frosts could be promptly spread over country districts and fruit-growing regions, and many a valuable crop saved." Even in other respects than mere pecuniary interests the benefit to that class of workers would be worth considering, for "country life would lose some of its drawbacks" by the extension of such facilities to the isolated, lonely producers of the very fundamentals {fundamentals?} of human subsistence and comfort.

But, observes the Postmaster-General, "a year from next March the telephone patent expires, and unless Congress acts promptly to authorize its adoption, it requires no stretch of the imagination to conceive that in the next two years one immense syndicate will unite and control all the telephone plants of the country, as the telegraph is now controlled, or the two will be united; and then for the next twenty years the most astute attorneys will be legitimately earning large salaries in indignantly opposing the so-called attacks of future postmasters-general upon defenceless vested rights."

To the absurd claim of monopolists that legislation intended to place the telegraph and telephone in the hands of the people would be unconstitutional, the following reply is made: "The clause of the Constitution is understood to be mandatory upon the national government to provide a postal service, since in the face of that provision neither of the States, corporations or private companies may do so. Therefore it might be truly said that it is unconstitutional for the government *not* to adopt, in the fulfillment of its duty to the people, the best modes of transmitting correspondence that appear in each age."

Mr. Wanamaker, however, is less logical when he says, further on: "Most adroit opponents of postal telegraph couple it with a like regulation of the railroads; but the government already employs the railroads as post-roads, and the form in which it is

proposed to contract with telegraph companies is precisely the same as that by which we have employed railroads ever since they were built. The business of the railroad is to carry freight and passengers, which is foreign to the purposes of a post-office.” In the first place the post-office already carries parcels, and the matter of weight and bulk does not change the nature of the service, which might be extended to all kinds of freight without any alteration of the principle upon which it is now rendered within narrow limits. In the second place, he states elsewhere that Government ownership of telegraphs and telephones would be justified by the fact that “such agencies are necessary to enable it to perform its constitutional functions”; why, then, does he propose to simply “employ” private companies, instead of making the Government the owner of the agencies in question?

Again, are not the railroads necessary agencies in the performance of the constitutional functions of Government as a letter-carrier? Are they not “post roads?” Why, then, should not the Government own them? Mark, furthermore, that its constitutional functions are not limited to the business of mail transportation and delivery; they embrace also the regulation of inter-State commerce, and, under the clause of the constitution which relates to this particular function, none but railroad lawyers will deny the right of Government to carry freight and passengers. If it had not this right, how could it, for instance, have incurred the risk, by lending money to the Pacific railroad companies, of having some day to assume the ownership and operation of their lines?

Taken altogether—and precisely because of the weakness of his arguments when Mr. Wanamaker (in deference, perhaps, to the feelings of Harrison & Co.) tries to escape the logical sequence of his fundamental position in favor of Government ownership of the telegraph—this report of the Postmaster-General is a document that the Socialists might circulate with profit.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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