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The Road-Rail Conference.

THE recent discussions at Simla on the road-rail controversy have proceeded on the assumption that man is still rooted to the earth. Within the last quarter of a century he has succeeded in achieving a three-dimensional existence. The problems which confronted the Conference need not have been attended with the degree of acrimony which the lack of imagination in the bureaucratic mind about the trend of modern transport service has engendered. The whole discussion in the Conference bore an air of unreality, for in none of the speeches could one discover the realization of the fact that in a rapidly moving age of scientific discoveries and inventions no industrial or commercial concern, however strongly entrenched behind official support, can hope to enjoy protection indefinitely, unless it can visualise future developments and possess sufficient elasticity and power of adaptation.

The ostensible object of the Conference, as can be made out from the published speeches, is to discover the means of rendering the competition between the two systems of transport less wasteful, if not more profitable. This can be achieved only by making one of the services complementary or tributary to the other. A proposal of this character will naturally place the fields of operation by the road and rail system tangential and not parallel to each other. The consideration whether the bus service when restricted to the areas to be opened by the provincial schemes of road development, will continue to be a paying concern, has not fallen within the purview of the Conference. It is true that the security of railway service may be temporarily purchased by converting automobiles into subordinate feeders; and for this purpose the Government of India is prepared to raise a loan for launching an extensive scheme of road development in areas not served by railways. The mere construction of roads linking the isolated parts of the country with the more advanced distributing centres, does not offer hopes of promoting the social and economic prosperity of the rural population and when conditions of development such as irrigation projects, power service, organization of labour, modern scientific methods of cultivation and popularisation of subsidiary occupation are not simultaneously

introduced, the proposed costly roads are bound to remain ornamental failures.

According to Sir George Schuster, there are two favourable conditions at the present moment for raising a public loan in order to finance the provincial governments which are invited to adopt the doctrine that, "the main need on which the country should concentrate during the next phase of development is to develop the road system so as to bring that into balance with the railway system and provide a better circulation of traffic to railways." One of these conditions is that money is available at a cheap rate of interest rendering capital expenditure economically justifiable. The second condition is that the Government of India is not committed to any extensive capital expenditure and can therefore embark on the road development plan with cheaply available money. It is proposed to place the necessary funds at the disposal of the local governments, as soon as they produce schemes providing for the service of loans, the maintenance of roads and proofs of their economic productivity.

While we generally approve of the stipulations of the central government contrived to meet specific circumstances, we are not quite convinced of the economic expediency of incurring heavy public debts which add to the financial burden already none too light. Public credit like the giant's strength, is excellent to possess but grievous to use. One of the main objections to the loan policy of the government is that the exhaustion of public resources by offering attractive methods of investment, will result in a proportionate contraction of the capital for industrial development through private enterprise. It seems to us that for other and more serious reasons the present moment seems to be singularly inopportune for raising large sums of money from the public. With prevailing rates of low prices for the produce of the land, agriculture will remain for some time unhonoured. The sad spectacle of industrial collapse, such as is witnessed in Bombay, is sure to chill the ardour of the most enterprising capitalists for establishing new manufacturing concerns. To overstrain the public resources on the eve of momentous constitutional changes is a step likely to impose serious handicaps on the new Government. Above all, loans must necessarily produce serious repercussions on public revenues resulting in extensive curtailment of subsidies for

consolidating and inaugurating schemes of moral and material advancement. But what is the solution for the acute competition of the dual transport systems in which the government and the country are equally involved?

We agree that the suggestion of the central government for an extensive scheme of road development may be expected to provide at least temporary relief; but we are not charmed with the methods proposed by them to secure the end. We hold that the situation could have been avoided through the exercise of a little imagination. In normal times, the public revenue and resources of special funds, such as we had advocated in these columns some time ago, should be adequate to handle an emergency of this character. However, Sir George Schuster points out that "the justification for the construction of roads from loans rather than from revenue must be that construction from revenue would be too slow to meet the needs of the case." A rapid completion of public works need not necessarily imply immediate improvement of their taxable capacity and especially in a case like the road development, in which, the loan is intended to be applied to a single limited purpose, the economic productivity of the proposals, depending as it does on the equally important collateral projects, must be a process of slow evolution. The alternative suggestion we make of utilizing the revenue and resources of reserve fund for developmental programmes offers advantages, such as consolidation, revision, periodical tests of the works and cautious application of the funds which should characterise the administration of public finance. The acuteness of competition has been permitted to grow over a fairly long period of time without thought of its pernicious character and the hasty remedy proposed to be applied is likely to shift the malady in a worse form to some other part of the social organism. Sir Guthrie Russell points out that the main cause of the present position is not motor competition,—it is the world-wide economic depression and the loss sustained by the railways on account of competition is estimated between one and a half and two crores of rupees, and for redressing this and for stimulating the economic productivity of the rural areas through road development, a loan amounting to three times this sum is proposed to be raised.

Sir Guthrie Russell's speech is devoted to the consideration of rendering the competition fair, by imposing statutory obligations on motor service, such as those under which the railways work. Some of them, especially those which ensure the safety and convenience of passenger traffic, are necessary in the interests of the public, but to enforce them all at once in the categorical order enumerated by the Chief Commissioner of Railways would kill the automobiles. But the position of the Government is that since the railways are capable of handling any volume of passenger and goods traffic, and of providing advantages, such as the road motor services cannot for a long time contemplate, it is only reasonable to withdraw automobiles from those roads of 1300 miles which run parallel to the permanent way. In an economic controversy of this nature, it is not the interests of the competing agencies alone that are involved, but those of the public which indeed are paramount. It seems to us that, should the Conference, instead of discussing the problems of competition and the prospects of public loans, have investigated the causes of the unpopularity and unattractiveness of the rail system of transport, a great step would have been taken in the solution of a controversy which is fundamentally psychological. Travelling and circulation of goods are the essence of civilized life and this fact should not be permitted to be exploited either by competition or combines or monopolies.

Perhaps, the Hon. Mr. E. Miller's plea for the early consideration of resolution No. 8 regarding a coordinating authority, envisaged the complexities of the situation in their proper perspective and their future relations. Within a very short time the Government and the people will be confronted with the problem of providing the country with a well-articulated system of water-rail-road-air ways working on a co-operative basis. If the railways are to be preserved from becoming obsolete, the problem of gauges should engage the attention of the authorities immediately. The transfer of passengers and goods from one gauge to another entails a certain condition of affairs which, if not remedied, must ultimately render the rail service totally unpopular. It is wasteful and uneconomic to protect defects in the

means of transport which in a fair field of competition, will automatically be removed. Before the Government seek to impose statutory obligations on the bus service and stop the competition between road and rail systems of transport in places served by the railways, the public, especially that section which contributes 89 per cent of the railway earnings, should receive the fullest assurance that they will be provided with a cheap, sanitary and comfortable mode of travel in third class compartments.

We said that want of scientific imagination is the root cause of all our social and economic troubles and that resolution No. 8 on the agenda of the Conference is the most important one. We cannot forget the fact that for shipment of goods and booking of passengers for less than forty miles, the bus and motor offer facilities which the railways can never hope to provide and it should be no wonder that in years to come an increasing volume of short-haul business is completely diverted to motor trucks. Besides the problem of distribution,—perhaps the most intricate problem with which the industries and transport service are confronted,—can approach a solution in the activities and success of the committee such as is contemplated in the 8th resolution.

During the last twenty-five years scientific discoveries and inventions have introduced us into a new world with a different outlook and environment. The evolution has been so rapid that readjustment has become difficult. The Government which lacks imagination to foresee the coming changes and to prepare for new adjustments will find itself in a vortex of trouble and deal with the altered conditions with crude and clumsy methods. If and when the Geneva Conference decides upon the abolition of aeroplanes for military service, the world will witness a new competition in commercial aviation which bids fair to render obsolete the existing systems of transport by land and sea. To meet this situation successfully Governments should begin to rely more and more on science to provide a suitable machinery for mutual adjustment among the competing services and if they do this, they would have laid the foundation of a lasting and orderly social structure.