

Enclosure in No. 55.

“THE ATLANTIC CABLE POSITION AND ITS MORAL.”—(Address by Mr. CHARLES BRIGHT, F.R.S.E., M.Inst.C.E., M.I.E.E., to the Members of the London Chamber of Commerce, on Wednesday, 29th November, 1911.)

On the 29th November, 1911, Mr. Charles Bright addressed the members of the London Chamber of Commerce, at the offices of the Chamber, on “The Atlantic Cable Position and its Moral.”

The Right Hon. Lord DESBOROUGH, K.C.V.O. (President of the Chamber), in introducing Mr. Bright, referred to the fact that that gentleman addressed the members of the chamber in 1902 on the subject of “Imperial Telegraphic Communication and the All-British Pacific Cable,” and that he possessed an hereditary interest in that important and increasingly important subject, his father, the late Sir Charles Tilston Bright, having been instrumental in the laying of the first Atlantic cable when he was only twenty-six years of age. He (Lord Desborough) was of opinion that telegraphic communication with our overseas dominions should be in our own hands—(Hear, hear)—especially so in regard to Canada, from which dominion he had just returned, and which was becoming a most important and a great community within the Empire. (Applause.)

Mr. CHARLES BRIGHT, F.R.S.E., said,—

On the 4th December, 1902, I had the honour of addressing the Chamber of Commerce in this the first city of the Empire on “Imperial Telegraphic Communication and the All-British Pacific Cable” (London Chamber of Commerce Pamphlet No. 40).

Previous Suggestions.

I took occasion then to point to a number of matters that called for attention in our Empire's telegraph service. This was on the same lines as the attitude I adopted at a Government inquiry. I first dwelt on the fact that the all-British character of the Pacific cable was somewhat marred by the connecting-links from the Mother-country to Vancouver being lacking in this respect. There were three choices. A message could be handed to the Anglo-American Telegraph Company and conveyed by one of their four cables landing on British territory, but along a route very near to the French island St. Pierre de Miquelon (off the south coast of Newfoundland), whilst the land-link at that time went through the State of Maine, on its way to Montreal. From here, again, it passed along the Canadian Pacific Railway, the route of which is for some distance more or less close to the American border. Alternatively, a message might be handed for transmission by the Direct United States Cable. In that case the same objection prevailed as regards the land-line connection. The other alternative route is that of the Commercial Cable Company—an American organization (coming under American law), with five Atlantic cables.

On the strength of these facts I next pointed to the desirability of an independent all-British telegraphic link between the Mother-country and the Pacific cable at Vancouver, to be worked at a comparatively low tariff. A general statement from the Colonial Office set down that this should be effected, for it was clearly recognized that the Imperial Pacific Cable without an Imperial link from this side was at a great disadvantage, and only very inadequately carried out its aims. [Blue-book, Cd. 46, p. 25.] My address further indicated the undefended and highly pregnable character of existing Atlantic cables between our shores and Canada, and the necessity for better provision to meet this objection in any all-British line. I next urged the importance of effective Government control of all cables in which the Empire was interested, partly for strategic reasons and partly in the interests of the public as regards tariff and other conditions. In this connection I again pressed for the introduction of reduced rates for deferred messages of a non-urgent character, whilst also protesting against “blocking” rates—*i.e.*, the charging of excessive rates for forwarding messages on behalf of another system with a view to destroying competition. Licenses for landing-rights were then pointed to as a valuable weapon for bargain in the matter of tariff, &c., and it was suggested that exclusive rights should be more closely limited than they have been. I further urged that the Government might suitably guard against financial amalgamations, joint purses, &c., and that provision should be made for taking over a given cable (at an expert's valuation) at any time, if found desirable. Finally, it was argued that where competition is excluded to the benefit of any particular interests, a corresponding advantage should be secured by the Government on behalf of the public.

Some of these various pleadings in my previous address to the chamber were a little later re-echoed by the Associated Chambers of Commerce in the course of an annual gathering.

What has been accomplished?

And now let us take stock of what has been done towards meeting the objections here mentioned—aye, to what extent the position has changed since the 1902 report of the Cable Communications Committee, wherein most of these recommendations were advocated. It will not be necessary to detain you long over the process, because, as I think you will see, next to nothing has been achieved during the ten years that have elapsed, though practically every one of the suggestions has been recognized as sound—much less have any been refuted.

I should here explain that in the interval there have been successive First Lords of the Treasury, successive First Lords of the Admiralty, successive Ministers of War, successive Secretaries of State for the Colonies, and successive Postmasters-General; and by the time any of them have come to the conclusion that something adequate might be done to meet the position they have probably been removed, or have removed themselves, from office. Put briefly, in the midst of party strife, matters which are outside the pale of party politics remain outside, unless of a character that will obviously appeal to the electorate as a whole. It should be added that the number of voters who concern themselves about the safety and well-being of the Empire is small compared with the number who are always keenly alert to what seems most likely to benefit themselves individually.