

*A Practicable Veto.*

The American absorption of these British Atlantic cables, though agreed to between the parties, is not yet an accomplished fact, and cannot be in the manner contemplated unless or until His Majesty's Government transfers the landing licenses—that were originally granted to the Anglo-American Company and the Direct United States Company respectively—to the Western Union Company. Without that transference the "deal" can apparently only be effected as a trust, and that, as we know, would run counter to the Sherman Act in America.

It may be thought by some that a Government should take no initiative in such a case, and should, on the contrary, leave things to run their course, unless or until an appeal is made. On the other hand, without indulging in what ordinarily goes by the name "protection" in its restricted sense, it is surely open to the Government of the day to protect or guard the commercial—not to say strategic—interests of our country. We have a good example set us in this matter by foreign Governments, like those of Germany and the United States, who are remarkably active in looking after the interests and welfare of their own people. We may, indeed, expect the same of our present Government here, if only on account of its extreme industry and activity; indeed, we have every reason to hope that the gentlemen considering this highly important matter will arrive at a conclusion that will be in accord with national and Imperial interests.

It would appear at first sight that the Government is favourable to the "deal," or the negotiations might, presumably, have received their quietus before now. If this be so, seeing that we have an eminently "live" Postmaster-General, it may be safely assumed that something in the nature of a bargain is being made by which the people of this country will gain something in return for the concession. The question, however, arises whether any concessions—such as reduced rates—would be of a sufficiently binding nature in a permanent sense, and whether, indeed, concessions for the benefit of the individual would be a suitable substitute for the national and Imperial loss we sustain by British cables passing into the control of a foreign company.

It has to be remembered, too, that whereas H.M. Post Office has always been ready to lease land-lines over here for the use of foreign Atlantic companies, the Western Union Company has refused the same facilities in the United States to British transatlantic companies. This, together with the fact that the Western Union Company omitted to apply for a license for their last cable until after the cable had been actually laid, would surely obviate any surprise on their part if the transfer of licenses was ultimately refused.

In the event of the transfers being granted, however, even commercial requirements would scarcely be met merely by the introduction of reduced rates for deferred messages in plain language; for though this innovation will undoubtedly be appreciated for comparatively unimportant cablegrams of a more or less personal and social order, it will be of little account for business purposes.

*The Obvious Alternative.*

We are here reminded of a resolution passed at the Imperial Conference last spring—"That, in the event of considerable reductions in the Atlantic cable rates not being effected in the near future, it is desirable that the laying of a State-owned cable between the United Kingdom and Canada be considered by a subsidiary conference."

Apart from this resolution it may, perhaps, be assumed that if the Government decide to transfer the British licenses to an American company it would forthwith favour the scheme for a State Atlantic cable to meet the altered national position. Alternatively, it may conceivably decide to take over the British cables (or some of them), and, in partnership with Canada, establish a satisfactory land-line connection with the all-British Pacific cable, along a route removed for some distance from the American border. In view of what has gone before, it would, in my view, be quite legitimate to run these State telegraph links at a low-rate basis—say, 6d. (and Press rate 3d.) a word to Canada—whilst still retaining the 1s. tariff for messages to the United States. This form of Imperial preference could scarcely be objected to, and it should do much for developing and encouraging inter-Imperial Trade.

*Another Alternative.*

It is sometimes thought that the desired goal—cheap inter-Imperial communication—can be gained without any longer having recourse to cables—*i.e.*, by radio, or wireless, telegraphy; and certainly any possible competition between the two methods can but react for the benefit of the public, especially if the effect is to induce a greater popularization of the cable service and its tariff.

Mr. Marconi and others have developed radio-telegraphy to a wonderful extent within recent years, and the Marconi system is continually increasing its sphere of usefulness—partly across the Atlantic. Perhaps on this account some people have been rather carried away with the conviction that this great invention is destined to supplant the cable; and it was only the other day that I read in an article on "Wireless around the World" that "the death-knell of the submarine link was sounded." ["World's Work," Nov., 1911.] I cannot help associating statements of that kind with a lack of knowledge as to the relative capabilities of cable and radio telegraphy. In this particular case, for instance, the writer actually spoke of radio-telegraphy "possessing the additional advantage of acceleration."

Personally, I have always been a firm believer in radio-telegraphy as forming the nucleus of an excellent auxiliary service. I am even in favour of it being made compulsory for certain classes of ships. But though a radio installation comes somewhat cheaper than laying a cable as a rule, and therefore the tariff charged is lower, make no mistake about it, you are dealing with a different class of article—as different as the difference between an express and a suburban train.