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Post Office Reform

WE do not know whether it was mere coincidence or good stage-management that Lord Wolmer's book on "Post Office Reform" (Ivor Nicholson and Watson, Ltd., 6s. net) was published a week before the report of the Committee of Enquiry on the Post Office (Cmd. 4149. H.M. Stationery Office, 9d. net). However this may be, no study of the findings of that Committee can avoid reference to Lord Wolmer's campaign since he ceased to hold office as Assistant Postmaster General, for it was his persistence, supported ultimately by more than three hundred members of Parliament of all parties, which led directly to the appointment, by the present Government, of Lord Bridgeman and his colleagues, Sir John Cadman and Lord Plender, as a Committee "to enquire and report as to whether any changes in the constitution, status or system of organisation of the Post Office would be in the public interest".

Criticism of governmental administration is no modern diversion, and the Post Office, like other great departments of State, has not escaped the baiting to which 'bureaucracy' is always liable to be subject from those who as a matter of principle abhor State intervention, particularly in the sphere of commerce. Nevertheless, as a result of the reforms associated with the name of Rowland Hill, the attitude of the public towards the Post Office, personified in that popular character the postman, has been not unfriendly. The speed and accuracy of its letter-carrying activities and the extent of at any rate the pre-War facilities as regards deliveries and collections indeed left little to be desired.

Serious criticism of the Post Office only began to arise after the Office, in 1912, became solely responsible for the administration of telephone services, and it is the relative backwardness of telephone development in Great Britain in comparison with other countries, coupled with a certain administrative inelasticity, that has supplied the real driving force of Lord Wolmer's campaign. On one hand, as Lord Wolmer insists, it is a fact that the number of telephones per thousand of population is lower in Great Britain than in most other countries; that this feature is also apparent if large cities at home and abroad are compared; and that such telephones as are installed are less used than those in other countries. On the other hand, it is equally an undoubted fact, to which the Bridgeman Committee pays handsome

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testimony, that the Post Office engineers have led the way in technical development in telephony and, we may add, in electrical communications generally. Yet with this tremendous advantage of an able and alert, if underpaid, technical staff, foremost in promoting the development of this highly technical industry, there has been, rightly or wrongly, widespread public dissatisfaction with the telephone service. If such dissatisfaction had not existed, it would have been impossible for Lord Wolmer's campaign to gather the necessary momentum to lead the Government to appoint the Bridgeman Committee of Enquiry.

The report of the Committee summarises as follows "the rather generalised charges" that have been made :—

- (1) An absence of the spirit of public service, among certain sections of the staff—an attitude of indifference instead of a desire to help the public.
- (2) A lack of initiative and an absence of elasticity and imagination in adjusting service to meet the reasonable variations in the public demand; prompt action is thought to be hampered by 'red tape' and dilatory procedure.
- (3) In general an absence of the commercial outlook necessary for the efficient conduct of what is, at any rate to a large extent, a business concern.
- (4) A failure in regard to the telephone and telegraph services which are of a highly technical character, to give proper scope to the engineer, whereby technical progress is impeded.

This summary may to some extent be taken as reflective of the criticisms of Lord Wolmer, who argues that the telephone and telegraph services have not been administered on commercial lines because they have been administered by a Government department organised on the traditional Whitehall basis, with all that such organisation necessarily involves in rigidity of administration, owing to day-to-day accountability to Parliament in regard to the minutest details; inability to take normal commercial risks as a result of financial control by the Treasury; and above all in the arrangement, copied from Whitehall, under which all sub-departments come to a narrow bottleneck at the Secretary of the Post Office, so rendering promptness of decision impossible.

In the controversies generated by Lord Wolmer's campaign, the serious questions of organisation involved have tended to become obscured by political factors. The fundamental issue has been

represented to the public as being primarily one of the respective merits of public and private enterprise; and to overcome the weaknesses of Post Office administration, reformers have offered us a choice between the transfer of the Post Office communications services either to a public board on the model of, say, the Port of London Authority, or to a public utility company analogous to the Imperial and International Communications Company Limited, which is now responsible for all international wireless telegraph services originating in Great Britain. Unfortunately, the form which the public controversy has taken has caused certain essential elements of the problem to be overlooked, especially the obvious but all-important fact that, although for historical reasons the postal, telegraph and telephone services have become closely interlocked, the industrial structure of the Post Office, as regards electrical communications, is very largely, indeed almost entirely, the fashioning of scientific discovery and invention. The telegraph and telephone services are dependent, to a much greater degree than are the mail-carrying services, upon research and technical progress. No change of ownership or control which fails to take account of this fundamental fact is likely to achieve the desired results.

These considerations are by no means novel, for they were in the minds of that somewhat unpromising body the Select Committee on the Telephone Service, appointed so long ago as 1922 "to inquire into the organisation and administration of the telephone service and the method of making charges". That Committee emphasised that telephone business is essentially commercial and must be *administered on commercial lines*. It pointed out that the carriage of letters has always been upheld as the main foundation on which Post Office management rests, and when the telephone and telegraph undertakings were in turn transferred to the Post Office, "it seems to have been decided to patch them into the existing organisation rather than to alter the organisation to suit the extended conditions". The Committee recommended, therefore, the separation of the telephone and telegraph services from the mails. It also pointed out that "the Secretary's Department at the General Post Office, which really controls it, has neither special business training other than that of the ordinary Civil Service, nor special expert and technical qualifications", and it hinted at the desirability of the establishment of an administrative board

for the control of the segregated telephone and telegraph services. Finally, the Committee insisted that greater weight should be given to technical knowledge both in settling policy and in ordinary routine.

The Bridgeman Committee again and again throughout its report pays tribute to the zeal and ability with which the Post Office staffs carry out their duties. Yet the Committee is constrained to state that the criticisms of the telephone service "are not devoid of some substance", and that it believes that "there is room for improvement", but that "such improvement can only come from a removal of certain fundamental impediments to efficiency". These fundamental impediments are considered to be the relationship in which the Post Office stands as a revenue department to the Exchequer, and the internal organisation of the Post Office. The Committee, however, rejects the transference of all Post Office communication services to an independent authority of the public utility company or statutory corporation type, for it considers that "the public have a right to the influence which Parliamentary discussion and control alone can give". The proposal for the transference of electrical communications to an independent authority is also rejected. It is admitted that there might be advantages in this course if it were a question of inaugurating for the first time in Great Britain a new system of communications, but the Committee makes a point of considerable importance which, it must be admitted, has the force of expediency. Under present conditions, in all but the largest offices, the counter staff now deal indiscriminately with all kinds of business, and in all the smaller towns the sorting and telegraph operating staffs are combined to good effect, since the 'peak' hours of postal work are usually outside those of telegraph business. Separation, in the view of the Committee, "would entail large additional expense and would result in two separate organisations, neither of which would be carrying a full load."

Limitations of space prevent us from dealing with the first of the above-mentioned impediments to efficiency. We need only say that, in the view of the Committee, "In the present state of the National finances it would be impracticable to suggest any other principle than that the Exchequer should retain out of the net revenue collected by the Post Office a sum approximating to the amount which it is at present receiving."

As regards the second fundamental "impediment to efficiency", namely, the system of administrative control at the Post Office itself, the Committee is more drastic. It considers, in the first place, that there is far too much centralisation of staff management at headquarters and too little freedom left to the local officer in the provinces. It believes that much of the dissatisfaction with the telephone system is due to the general diffusion of responsibility and absence of co-ordination between those concerned with the various elements involved in the provision and conduct of the service. There is, the Committee says, "no one authority who can deal with complaints or ensure that orders are promptly and satisfactorily executed". The District Manager, who is, broadly speaking, responsible for the telephone service in his area, has no jurisdiction over the engineering and little disciplinary control over the operating staff. The Committee states that the District Manager is also handicapped by the restriction of his executive authority and is subjected in such matters as publicity, canvassing, etc., to rigid control by headquarters on matters of outlay and method, which tends to repress zeal and initiative as well as to waste time and money.

The Committee proceeds to remark that the Post Office Secretariat "has come to acquire a status out of proportion to that of other Post Office departments"; no executive department of the Post Office can give an instruction to another department, nor can it through its own officers do anything for which it has not Secretariat authority. The present position of the Secretariat, it is stated, "contravenes the fundamental principle of organisation, namely, the distinction between policy and practice, between the administrative and the executive functions". The Committee considers that the neglect of this important distinction is one of the main weaknesses of the existing Post Office organisation, and it arrives at the same conclusion as the Select Committee of 1922 that the Secretariat, as at present constituted, is unsuited by training and experience for the duty of conducting the daily business of the Post Office services, which function it undertakes in addition to the framing and formulation of policy. It is noted too that, owing to the "autocratic isolation of the Secretariat", the Engineering and Accountant General's Departments are prevented from taking an adequate part in the general scheme of control, and although the Committee considers there is no evidence that the engineer is unduly

hampered, it believes that engineering experience is insufficiently brought into the consideration and formulation of general policy.

Such serious defects demand radical treatment, and the Committee recommends that the control of all Post Office business shall be taken out of the hands of the Secretariat and effected through the medium of a functional Board, presided over by the Postmaster General. In addition to the Assistant Postmaster General the Board should, it is suggested, comprise four or five members of the Post Office staff representing such functions as general operating and supply, engineering and research, finance, and personnel. In the absence of the Postmaster General the Board would be presided over by the senior permanent member, who would carry some such title as 'Director General', and whose duty it would be to ensure that Board decisions were made effective, that continuity and unity of policy were maintained, and that the general machine of administration worked smoothly and effectively. The duties of the Board would, so far as possible, be restricted to the consideration and formulation of policy, leaving to the heads of the district organisation the duty of translating into effect the policy prescribed by the headquarters board. In the provinces it is recommended that the local administration should be controlled by regional directors who would constitute the co-ordinating authority for their respective regions and whose organisation would in effect be a reproduction in miniature of the headquarters board. It is in the application of this recommendation that controversy is not unlikely to arise, for the engineers in each district, hitherto autonomous, would thus come under the local control of a regional director, who might or might not be a 'telephone' man.

Other vital recommendations are that the existing division between the Secretariat and the rest of the staff should be removed and fluidity of interchange of staff between headquarters and the provinces secured. The Committee proceeds to make the long-awaited recommendation from a public inquiry: "As regards access to administrative posts, we consider that there should be no bar to a technical officer holding such posts, provided he has shown himself to possess administrative ability." With regard to the problem of the technical expert, the Committee considers it essential in an organisation such as the Post Office, which depends so much upon scientific discoveries and developments and

their practical applications, to bring engineering and research into more intimate touch with the general problems of administration.

In its appreciation of the fundamental weakness of present-day Civil Service administration the Committee has rendered an important public service. That the higher administrative posts in Government departments are commonly held by individuals of exceptional ability cannot be challenged, but a system under which almost autocratic powers of control and the monopoly of the formulation of policy are solely vested in individuals who may have no knowledge of or sympathy with scientific and technical developments can only be described as a national menace; for what the Bridgeman Committee has discovered in the Post Office can equally be said *mutatis mutandis* of most of the larger departments of State. The remedy proposed—the introduction of the Board system, under which departmental chiefs, both technical and non-technical, would be given a full opportunity of taking their proper share in the formation of policy—is one we have consistently advocated. The Committee's recognition of the importance of the expert and of the folly of debarring him irrespective of his administrative capacity from positions of control is of first importance. The divorce between the administrator and the technologist, the failure to achieve anything like a complete synthesis of the administrative and technical sides, is not peculiar to the Post Office in particular or to government departments in general. It characterises far too many business and industrial organisations.

In a paper read last year during the centenary meeting in London of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Major L. Urwick, the director of the International Management Institute, Geneva, pointed out that throughout the century of the life of the British Association, despite the immense services which the inductive sciences are rendering to industry, it apparently has never occurred either to industrialists or to men of science that these services are other than contributory or ancillary. The Bridgeman Committee is the first public inquiry committee to give full recognition to the scientific expert in the Civil Service scheme of things. What it proposes amounts in sum to this, that the scientific expert is to be brought into the industrial family on level terms with the administrative expert and the financial expert and to have his due say as well in the formulation of policy as in the control

and execution of the routine operations. There is no suggestion that the business of the Post Office should be turned over entirely to the technologists. Viscount Bridgeman and his colleagues say sensibly: "Generally speaking we think it to be true that the specialist in any walk of life tends to remain a specialist; but there are, of course, well-known exceptions to the contrary, and we consider that where a member of the technical staff has shown that he possesses administrative talent he should be eligible for other appointments." No champion of the scientific worker in industry need ask for more than this or should be satisfied with less. The recommendation of the Bridgeman Committee, "to bring engineering and research into more intimate touch with the general problems of administration" is to be welcomed, not only for the beneficial effects which, if it is adopted, it is likely to have on the development of the Post Office, but also, and perhaps especially, for the stimulus it may give to the wider movement to bring about a closer fusion of science and industry and to get the scientific worker fully adopted into the industrial family.

Anthropology in Nigeria

Tribal Studies in Northern Nigeria. By C. K. Meek. Vol. 2. Pp. viii + 633 + 48 plates. (London: Kegan Paul and Co., Ltd., 1931.) 25s. net.

IN this work Mr. Meek apparently concludes his valuable notes on some of the smaller and lesser known peoples of Northern Nigeria—more than a score in all. As in the first volume (see NATURE, vol. 128, p. 285; 1931) chief attention has been paid to linguistics and social organisation and little to religion, which in the main consists of animism and ancestor worship. Each tribe is dealt with separately, and no attempt is made to give a general description of any particular custom or belief—doubtless the wisest course to pursue until more information has been collected.

One of the immediate practical advantages to be gained from these studies is that it should now be possible to group these peoples more scientifically; at present the Katab, for example, are not only divided by provincial boundaries, but also some of them are directly administered by British officers, while others are under Fulani emirs. One of the chief defects of indirect rule, as practised in Northern Nigeria, lies in the fact that so many pagan tribes have no native courts of their own

but are subject to the judicial administration of Mohammedan alkalis.

Most of the peoples under consideration are of ancient semi-Bantu origin and possess interesting features in the way of totemism, exogamy and mother-right organisation. As is usual in Nigeria, totemism is mixed up with metamorphosis and is now fast breaking down. There is a certain amount of evidence for the belief that clan exogamy—at any rate in this region—arose from a desire to avoid local conflicts, and has nothing to do with consanguinity or the hypothetical unattractiveness of the woman whom you see every day; among the Piti, for example, intermarriage is most usual between those 'wards' which are nearest to one another. Fundamentally, no man may marry a woman of his own clan but, as the sense of kinship with the parent community dwindles, the exogamic taboos become confined to the new group.

There are examples of all stages of development, from the mother-right Longuda to the Kanakuru, who are mainly patrilineal though matrilineal in totemistic affairs, and the wholly patrilineal Bornuese tribes. Marriage is often matrilineal, and the children may be handed over to the mother's relatives, though occasionally to those of the father.

Until lately, marriage by capture was quite usual and traces of the custom are found in most tribes. One of the commonest methods of obtaining a wife is that of elopement with a married woman from another group or clan—a transaction previously regularised by payments to her family. This practice is apparently recommended, since it gives each party the opportunity of finding the one who suits him, or her, best; the original marriage is generally arranged at a very early age, sometimes even before the girl's birth. Children begotten of the second husband, as a rule, belong to him, but he cannot claim the return of his dowry should the woman leave him in turn, while the first husband practically never does so, as he always lives in the hope of her coming back to him.

Indeed, the position of women here, as in so large a part of West Africa, is highly enviable. The man is always anxious to gain, or keep, the services of at least one wife to cook for him; among the Gabin, where the women make the beer, they do not hesitate to dictate as to the friends who are allowed to partake of this, and even to forbid their husbands to attend a neighbouring celebration, if they consider that these would be better employed at home. The husband must continue to pay court not only to his wife,