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THE REPORT OF THE VICE-REGAL COMMISSION UPON IRISH RAILWAYS.

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[Read November 18th, 1910.]

I confess that when it was suggested to me that I might undertake a paper on the Report of the Vice-regal Commission on Irish Railways, I hesitated very much before accepting the task.

It was, I felt, practically impossible to go into the question within the limits of a short paper, and I was conscious that such a paper should be prepared by a chairman or general manager of a railway company, and I am not even a director.

Upon consideration, however, I felt that I was not altogether unprepared for the task. I have always taken a great interest in railways and railway management generally. I have studied them for years, and it so happens that I brought the condition of the Irish Railways before the public some thirteen years ago in various articles in the *New Ireland Review*. The first, which was entitled "Irish Railway Amalgamation," was published in November, 1897.

In that article I brought forward a plan for amalgamating the railways of Ireland on the basis of dividing the small, non-paying, and semi-bankrupt lines among those which were flourishing.

There were at that time about twenty systems of railways, which owned rolling stock, *i.e.*, were actual working companies; and the mileage of the country was 2,948 miles.

I divided the lines into two great classes:—

1. Those which paid dividends on their ordinary stock	Miles 2,246
2. Those which did not do so	702
		<hr/> 2,948

I then grouped all the lines into six :—

1. The Belfast and Northern Counties Railway.
2. The Belfast and County Down.
3. The Dublin and South Eastern (then D. W. & W.).

These three I left unaltered, as the first and second were highly prosperous, and the third, which then paid a dividend, was cut off by the Wicklow Mountains from the general system of Ireland.

4. I next assigned all the remaining southern and Munster lines to the Great Southern and Western Railway, dividing the Waterford and Limerick at Limerick, and giving to the G. S. & W. the southern section, 192 miles.

5. I assigned all the northern lines, except those I have mentioned (Nos. 1 and 2), to the Great Northern Railway.

6. Finally, I consigned all the western lines, including the section of the Waterford and Limerick north of Limerick, 150 miles, to the Midland Great Western.

The backbone of my paper and theory was that only solvent lines of considerable financial strength and adequate rolling stock and other resources could deal with the problem of the Irish railways, which I attributed to poverty and deficient capital, which had from the very first cramped their efforts.

To meet this objection I assigned a large and solvent railway company to each group, north, south, and west, grouping the smaller railways round them.

At the present day the cry of the Public is for concentration of all the Irish railways under an Irish Elected Authority, but the Public have very short memories, and have completely forgotten that thirteen years ago their convictions were the exact opposite of what they are now.

My article was followed by an anonymous reply in the same magazine for April, 1898, in which the writer held up my essay to ridicule on every ground, but particularly for advocating amalgamation.

Here are a few specimens :—

“ I assert, without the slightest hesitation, that nothing would tend more to destroy town and country than one of these gigantic schemes of railway amalgamation, and that the only practical and statesmanlike plan is to proceed in a diametrically opposite direction.”

Again :—

“ A little reflection will enable any thinking man to see that the inevitable result of such amalgamation

would be to expose the public to untold abuses and oppression, which no protective clauses in the Act of Parliament could possibly avert, and that the only real safeguard for the public interests is in free competition for the traffic."

Again :—

" It is at this moment that the cry is raised (by big railways) for railway amalgamation, in order that competition may be strangled. No statesman not fit for Bedlam, with these facts before him, could endorse such a policy."

And the article terminated thus :—

" Indeed it seems idle to multiply arguments in favour of this healthy competition and against the opposite policy of amalgamation. The effect of each cannot but be obvious to the least thoughtful mind."

Almost immediately after I had brought forward my plan, the Great Southern and Western Railway resolved to amalgamate the vast bulk of the southern railways with their system ; and this was eventually carried out, amid the most strenuous opposition, with vast benefit to the country, while at the present moment a much needed bridge to connect at Cork the G. S. & W. with the other three railways, the Cork, Blackrock and Passage, the Cork, Bandon and South Coast, and the Cork and Macroom, is in course of construction, and other amalgamations will probably follow.

I followed my article with others, and some of them attracted attention ; but interest died away, to be revived in an entirely new form by those who had opposed my plan, and who, like converts generally, now want to go just as much too far in the opposite direction as they went originally in the other ; and they desire absolute union of all the railways to be worked as a State department.

They have succeeded in convincing themselves, without any special knowledge of the facts or study of the problems involved, that in this way the fares and rates will be reduced to a vanishing point, while the accommodation and facilities will be enormously increased. How these two contradictory advantages are to be obtained does not trouble them at all. They assume and declare that it can be done by " the Government."

I am unable to agree with the proposed unification of all the railways under an Irish Elected Authority, preceded by State Purchase ; and I have referred to my previous papers

to show that I held strong views in favour of amalgamation on a reasonable basis at a time when the vast majority held the exact opposite, and when, in the words of my critic, "no statesman not fit for Bedlam would endorse such a policy as amalgamation."

I think the present idea of State purchase and management is due to the same cause as the view of 1897 against it, that is to say, a certain amount of ignorance on the part of the general public in regard to the essential elements of the case.

I think it is necessary here to give some particulars of the existing lines of railway:—

Name	Miles	Dividend	Miles Paying no Div.
Ballycastle	16	Nil	16
Belfast and County Down ..	80	6 $\frac{1}{4}$	—
Midland (Northern Counties' Committee)	263	merged	—
Midland (County Donegal) ..	91	merged	—
Cork, Bandon & South Coast (and extensions)	95	3 $\frac{1}{8}$	—
Cork, Blackrock and Passage	16	Nil	16
Cork and Macroom	25	3 $\frac{1}{2}$	—
Dundalk, Newry & Greenore	26	Nil	26
Dublin and South Eastern ..	161	Nil	161
Great Northern	542	5 $\frac{3}{4}$	—
Great Southern and Western	1,121	4 $\frac{1}{4}$	—
Listowel and Ballybunion (Lartigue)	9	Nil	9
Londonderry and Lough Swilly	99	7	—
Midland Great Western ..	538	3	—
Sligo, Leitrim and Northern Counties	43	Nil	43
Waterford and Tramore	7	5	—
Light Railways	231	variable	—
Total	3,363		271
Mileage, 1896			2,948
Do. 1908			3,363
		Increase	415
Average receipts per mile (1908) ..			£1,265
Total receipts from all sources (1908) ..			4,255,458
Total working expenses			2,664,741
Net earnings			£1,590,717

The foregoing particulars are taken from *Thom's Directory* for the present year. There are two or three discrepancies, due to the fact that the dividends of two companies are merged in the Midland of England, and that it is impossible to give the dividends on the light railways, which are often guaranteed; but it appears that the non-dividend paying mileage has sunk from 702 miles, as given by me in 1897, to 271 at present, a result principally due to the great amalgamations of the G. S. & W., which has in the interval increased from 604 to 1,121 miles, nearly double, while 415 miles have been constructed since 1897.

Turning now to the Report of the Vice-regal Commission, it would appear to be impossible in a single paper to go at length into the voluminous report and evidence, but the first thing that strikes one is that the Committee is divided on the first and most important point, the future management of the railways.

The Chairman, Sir Charles Scotter, and the three Irish members signed a Majority Report advising the purchase of all the railways by the Government and their subsequent administration by "an Irish Elected Authority" of twenty members.

The other three members held that:—

"The best way of securing the economical, efficient and harmonious working of the Irish railways would be their union into a single commercial system by the voluntary action of the companies, assisted by permissive legislation and limited financial aid, and by a transfer of the powers now exercised by the Board of Trade to the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction."

It may perhaps be mentioned that while the Majority Report condemned the existing arrangements of the Irish Railways, the Minority Report stated (page 85):—

"In our opinion, the result of the evidence is that if the companies are considered as having been on their trial, they are entitled to a verdict of acquittal, and no case has been made out for the reversal of railway policy which our colleagues advocate."

It must be confessed that a Report which is passed by the smallest possible majority is a very different thing from a unanimous recommendation, and we must bear this in mind in considering the Report.

There seems to be an impression among those who should know better, and a conviction on the part of the public, that

the bulk of the Irish railways pay no dividends, and that the best of them make a very small return on the capital invested in them, and, therefore, the best might be bought out without injustice to the shareholders by the assignment of Government $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. Stock equal in nominal amount to their shares or stock, with a rapid reduction for the less flourishing lines.

Let us see how far this view of the bankrupt condition of the Irish lines is true.

We find by *Thom's Almanac* for 1910 that the capital of the Irish Railways in 1908 amounted to £45,048,544, made up as follows:—

Ordinary Stock	..	£15,530,591
Preference Stock	..	16,294,453
Debentures and Loans	..	13,223,500
		£45,048,544

In the same year the amount of Ordinary Stock—

Producing no dividend was	..	£1,968,019
„ not over 2%	..	52,480
„ over 2, not exceeding 3%		2,548,324
„ „ 3 „ 4%		332,050
„ „ 4 „ 5%		5,373,520
„ „ 5 „ 6%		3,975,473
„ „ 6 „ 7%		474,179
„ „ 7 „ 9%		350,000
		£15,074,045

We have already found that the total receipts were £4,255,458, and the working expenses £2,664,741, leaving £1,590,717 to pay the dividends on the £45,048,544, which gives an average of slightly over $3\frac{1}{2}$ %.

The Government could not confiscate the property of the shareholders, they must assign Stock to them in exchange for their shares; either so much Government Stock as will represent their capital at the present price, or else Stock the interest on which will be equivalent to that which they now enjoy. In strictness there should also be an allowance for compulsory sale, and for the prospect of improvement as the railways developed; and we have already seen, by the decrease in the non-dividend paying mileage, that there is steady improvement.

¹³⁴ It may be mentioned, in connection with this, that the bulk of the Irish Railway Stock is held by the Irish themselves, a fact of which the three Irish members of the Committee appear to be ignorant.

¹³⁵ Whichever course be adopted for estimating the price to be paid, the Government, with £45,000,000 paying $3\frac{1}{2}$ per

cent. to acquire, must look forward to raising from £55,000,000 to £60,000,000 of Stock at the lowest estimate, as the Funds now stand.

It is true that against this they would have the revenues received from the railways ; but now we are met at once by an enormous difficulty. The public have taken up the view, in fact, they have never abandoned it, that the railway fares and rates are enormously in excess of what is required ; and we are face to face with the avowal that the object of those who are pressing forward the scheme of state purchase is to reduce fares and rates to vanishing point.

How this is to be done they do not know ; in fact, they neither know nor care. The nearest approach I have ever heard to the question is that " it will be done by the Government."

It is all very well to say, " it will be done by the Government," but that is really shelving the question, how is the Government to do it ?

The fact is, that these questions require not only special information and knowledge, but a certain calibre of mind capable of comprehending accurately the bearings of the information supplied. Such minds are, comparatively speaking, rare, and the bulk of the public could no more deal with the question than they could calculate the time of an eclipse of the sun.

In the present case I believe that only a comparative few of the 4,500,000 inhabitants of Ireland know how many miles of railway there are in the country, what they cost to build, how much they bring in, what they cost to work. The public have been told that the directors get thousands a year, and they jump to the conclusion that these thousands will be saved ; while the fact is that all the directors' fees put together would not pay the salaries of the new officials who would take their place. They are really much smaller than is popularly supposed.

Personally I do not see how either fares or rates can be materially altered ; but as the point generally put forward is the question of goods rates, upon which very wild theories prevail, I will add a few words of explanation.

This talk about the goods rates existed in 1897, when numerous people were writing to the newspapers comparing American rates with Irish. but ignoring, or ignorant, that for the same class of traffic the American rates were and are higher.

The American cheap rates relate to enormous quantities of particular articles of commerce, say corn, or tinned beef or petroleum, consigned not by wagon-loads, but whole train-loads, for immense distances.

In the British Isles, and particularly in Ireland, the average

consignment would not fill one of our small wagons. The average weight of a consignment is far less than a ton, and I believe I am right in saying the average is below a hundred-weight. Hence the labour or expense of sorting and packing the innumerable consignments is enormous; while, instead of long hauls of 1,000 miles on end, without uncoupling (nothing unusual in America, it is the distance between New York and Chicago), we have a train dropping a half-empty wagon at Hazlehead, another at Sallins, a third at Newbridge, then Kildare, and so on down to Cork.

I can quite understand that the objection to high rates is made in good faith; but the misfortune is that it is just as incorrect as the doctrine preached by my critic thirteen years ago, that the true system of managing railways was to set two starving railway companies to compete by low freights for traffic which was not sufficient to pay one.

This being the case, that is to say, that the wholesale reduction of fares and rates is an impossibility, if carried out in this manner, I see no prospect whatever of any government taking action which would involve the public purse in such responsibilities. Putting it shortly, they would, of course, have the traffic as revenue, but, on the other hand, they would be expected and required to make enormous reductions—fifty per cent. at least in fares and rates—and, as a student of such matters, I do not see how it can be done by the means suggested.

I am not saying that the Irish system of railway management is perfect, nor that it is impossible to better it; but it is a well-known fact that private enterprise is more cheaply and better served than that of the State. We shall find that the Minority Report agrees with this statement.

There are other objections to State management of a very insidious and dangerous nature.

For instance, there are gigantic contracts for rails, rolling stock, iron, coal, wood, every imaginable article. Would it be right that these should be left to the Government? What would happen when the Government changed?

I touch with much reluctance on my next objection, but it is not a wild supposition that politics and religion might influence the selection of officials. We might have a Unionist Government appointing Unionists to vacancies, perhaps evicting Nationalists, and on the next swing of the pendulum the other side doing the same.

I am not saying which side would be the aggressor, nor do I think one would be worse than the other. I am merely pointing out, as a matter of duty, that there would be tremendous temptation to introduce these influences, and I do so, as I have said, with the greatest reluctance, and as briefly as possible.

I now come to some criticisms of theory.

In the first place the Majority Report cites the Australian Railways as proving the contention in favour of the Government Management of the lines; but it is only fair to point out that the other three members of the Committee, who heard the same evidence, do not agree with the conclusion. On page 87 of the blue book they state in their report :—

1. "No critic of the Australian system appeared before us, though such critics notoriously exist."

2. "It is admitted, even by those who laud the system as it now stands, that serious difficulties and drawbacks existed at the outset, and were not got rid of for many years."

3. "It is shown by the official statistics that only within the last two or three years has the net income of the Australian Railways sufficed to cover the interest on the Railway capital."

4. "Mr. Davis, late General Manager of the West Australian Government Railways, told us in his evidence that, 'comparing Australia with Ireland, the goods rates are higher in Australia, passenger fares are higher, and there are fewer concessions of special fares,' and also that the Irish Railways give 'a much bigger service.'"

Finally, even the Majority Report states in paragraph 122, page 48 :—

"In comparing the Australian with the Irish Railways, due consideration must be given to the varying conditions of the two countries, which are in many respects so different."

The next remark I have to make is that there have recently been a whole series of terrible accidents in France on the Western Railway, the management of which has lately been taken over by the State and worked by it. So far as I can gather, the accidents show that they were not only due to defective arrangements, but to defective rolling stock, deficient brake power, defective wheels, worn rails, the result of over-anxious parsimony. To quote from a foreign correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* in October last :

"Accidents on the old Western line, purchased by the State, are now of daily, almost hourly, occurrence. Only the important ones are taken any notice of at all."

I have finally to point out a very singular omission from the Report of the Viceregal Commission, They have gone

with some attention into the Australian railways, but they seem to have overlooked the enormous railways of India, far larger than those of Australia, comprising more than 25,000 miles.

In that great country, State Management is almost universal, but it was and is so unsatisfactory that Lord Curzon, when Viceroy, appointed the late Mr. Thomas Robertson, Ex-Chairman of the Board of Works, and formerly Manager of our Great Northern Railway, to inspect and report upon them.

His report, dated the 5th March, 1903, and issued as a State Paper (Cd. 1713, 1903) condemned the whole system.

I read a paper on this Report before this Society in the year 1904, and it would take too long to go at any length into it, but it may serve a useful purpose to make some allusions to it.

From that report we learn that of all the 25,936 miles of line then in the country, the proportion absolutely free from Government control was 5,461 miles, say, one-fifth of the whole, and that these were the best managed and most prosperous. The State, in one form or another, had financial responsibility and more or less control over the remaining 20,474.

As a matter of fact, 5,998 miles actually belonged to the Indian Government, another 2,184 to the Native States, and the remaining 12,290 were bound to the State by guarantees of their dividends, and practically controlled by representatives of the Government.

So far from this Government working and control proving satisfactory, Mr. Robertson's Report, though as an official document it is most subdued in its language, was decidedly adverse to the system in operation and to its results.

Omitting the question of further construction, which is peculiarly bad in India, and is not much required in Ireland, the first complication is the singular fact that the Government has constructed the bulk of the lines on two different gauges and both of them are condemned by Mr. Robertson, one as too broad and the other as too narrow. There were in 1902 14,312 miles of 5' 6" gauge, wider than the Irish (5' 3") or the English (4' 8½"), and 10,986 of metre gauge (3' 3"), not to mention 728 miles of smaller varieties, the narrowest being the Darjeeling which only reaches 18 inches.

The effect of the diversity of gauge, for the broad and narrow gauges are not localised, but scattered over all parts of the country, has been most unsatisfactory. So far as passengers are concerned it has only subjected them to delay and trouble in changing from carriage to carriage at inconvenient times and places, but as regards the goods traffic, it has enormously increased the expense. Goods traffic must be shifted by hand at every break of gauge, and this is terribly

expensive, and reacts on the rates, and these again on the prices charged for commodities.

The next peculiarity is the immense difference between British and Indian railways in point of speed. In Great Britain passenger trains generally run at about 45 miles an hour, excluding stoppages, and goods trains at about 25. Stoppages reduce these speeds according to their number. There are, of course, exceptions. Birmingham, 113 miles from London, is reached in two hours, 56 miles an hour; and the Scots Fish from Aberdeen, through Carlisle, to London, though a goods train, runs the whole way in front of an express train, half an hour or less behind it, at an average rate of more than 45 miles an hour. It is, of course, fitted with vacuum brakes, and is treated as a passenger train in every way. The speed of the Irish lines, although it is somewhat lower than the English, is not markedly inferior. The Cork and Belfast mail trains run at over 40 miles an hour, including stoppages, even the M. G. W. at 35.

On the contrary, in India, there is one train, the once a week postal special from Bombay to Calcutta, which rises to the giddy speed of 34 miles an hour. After this, with the exception of two trains which reach 31 and are very special, we are in the twenties, and below them. The average speed on main lines is only 13.99, say 14 miles an hour, and on branches it sinks to $7\frac{1}{2}$ (7.55). From Madras to Calcutta, broad gauge, is 1,031 miles, the best train takes 45 hours for the journey. So long ago as 1899 the distance between New York and Chicago, 971 miles by the New York Central and Lake Shore route, was covered in twenty-four hours, as nearly as possible double the speed of the Madras and Calcutta train.

This defect in speed might be explained if the traffic were small, but it appears that the Indian passenger trains are the most crowded in the world, and that, though the fares are considerably lower than the British, they are, having regard to the cost of living and of labour, really higher than those of our home railways. Further, as to the goods traffic (the great difficulty with us), 80 per cent. of the Indian goods traffic is what is termed in railway language "heavy," that is to say, large consignments of specific commodities, such as corn and coal, which can be cheaply carried; not the miscellaneous goods in enormous variety and small quantity which vex the souls of British traffic managers.

There is naturally the same preponderance of third class which exists in the British Isles, but the traffic is immense.

It would probably be imagined that with so much State supervision the railway arrangements would show the most paternal regard for the safety of the public, but, on the contrary, this is distinctly neglected, and it would seem to me

that the official mind is more bent on raising revenue than on accommodating the public, from whom officials have nothing to expect. The block system is not in anything like general operation, and in 1902 only 18 per cent. of the stations were supplied with special block instruments. Similarly only about the same percentage were possessed of interlocking points and signals. Automatic brakes were only in universal use on two small lines. There are thirty-three systems of railways in India, and, while twenty-six lines had no automatic brakes at all, the average was only about 50 per cent. This was for passenger traffic, automatic brakes were not used for goods traffic.

Further, one great British institution, the Railway Clearing House for the arrangement and settlement of inter-railway accounts, is conspicuous by its absence, a cause of enormous expense to the railways, as each has to settle its accounts with its neighbours, a serious thing when we find thirty-three systems of railways.

It would not serve any useful purpose to enter upon the details of Mr. Robertson's report, but the following summary of its recommendations will show to some extent what are the weak points to be improved :—

Omitting, as before, the question of construction of extensions, the following are the principal suggestions :—

1. The adoption of American principles as to rolling stock, locomotives, carriages, and wagons, with a considerable reduction of fares and rates.
2. A very substantial increase in the speed.
3. An immense extension of the block system, and interlocking points and signals.
4. The wholesale introduction of automatic brakes in carriages and goods wagons alike.

The final question now is :—If this be the way in which the State has managed its own railways, with all the despotic power which the Government of India possesses, is it desirable to entrust the management of the Irish lines to the same power, especially having regard to the political and religious questions which unhappily seem to be called into play in everything connected with the government of Ireland ?

Turning now to the Minority Report, it commences with the opinion of its members that the Irish railways should be acquitted of the charge of mismanagement, and it then points out how different has been the influence of railways on agriculture and manufactures in Ireland. It has helped the exportation of Irish agricultural produce by supplying a market, but has damaged her manufactures by cheap importations.

The report next states that it is not easy to see how far the decline in population of Ireland led to the decay of industries, or how far the failure of the industries forced the people to emigrate. In fact they point out that the decline in English rural population has been as large as in Ireland; but whereas in England the rural population has gone into the towns of that country, in Ireland the rural population has gone into the towns, not of Ireland but of England.

The next statement is also important:—"It is a matter of common knowledge that low rates and special facilities are the chief and invariable accompaniment of traffic, large in volume, regular in transmission, and presented to the carriers in a form convenient to handle."

These are the three essentials, the absence of one of them is fatal. They are the points of a practical man, and the report illustrates its meaning by an example. Irish butter is cited. It is shown that the Irish butter trade is large in volume, presented in convenient form, but unfortunately intermittent in supply, owing to the neglect of winter dairying and hence the rates are higher than they would otherwise be.

After a reference to the Australian Railways, which I have already quoted, the report then deals with the three terms of reference.

1. How far do the railways in Ireland afford separately or in conjunction with other means of transit, adequate facilities for the cheap and rapid transport of goods and passengers within the kingdom and to Great Britain?

Their reply is this, that the Trunk lines give, generally speaking, adequate facilities; that there is comparatively little ground of complaint on the score of administration; and they enumerate a dozen ways in which the railways have sought, generally with success, to introduce improvements.

In regard to the light railways, they cannot arrive at this conclusion, and in their view, "their continued existence as independent companies is economically indefensible."

This was my view in 1897.

2. The second question is:—"What causes have retarded the expansion of traffic upon Irish lines and their full utilisation for the development of the agricultural and industrial resources of the country?"

To this their answer is that the railway companies have done what they could, in their own and the public interest, to stimulate traffic, but they hint that there are certain difficulties, for instance, in construction requirements, which might be removed.

Perhaps I should explain. The Board of Trade has certain standard requirements for railways suited to the crowded lines and enormous traffic of the great English lines, but not really requisite or suitable for our lines. They are precautions for the safety of the public in a country where, in the English sense of the word, "there is no public."

I made a similar statement some years ago, and I understand that since that time some requirements have been relaxed, but many are still retained.

The report makes an excellent suggestion, that in all cases in which State aid may be given to construct a line, a right should be reserved to the State to call for additional trains at a price to be fixed in advance.

Incidentally the Commissioners make a point I myself made in 1904 against government management in India, that government is not progressive, that economies and improvements would be checked by the loss of stimulus due to direct interest in successful working.

It is next stated that, in the opinion of the Minority, expectations of advantage which the substitution of public for commercial management might be expected to confer upon traders and the general public, would not be realised, and that economies which might, in theory, be effected by a change of administration, would be more than neutralised by the loss of the stimulus which direct interest in successful working alone can give, and by the increase of expenditure which would, they doubt not, be the result of non-commercial management.

This a terse summary of what I have already said in the earlier part of my paper.

Their formal answer to the second question is that, "while they find little evidence of retardation in the expansion of traffic traceable to any neglect of opportunity or defect in management on the part of the railway companies, they think that expansion might be assisted by the adoption of a better system, but much more by improvements, *apart from railways*, in the methods of agriculture and industry."

3. The third reference was :—"By what means the economical, efficient, and harmonious working of the Irish Railways can be best secured?"

The Committee, under this head, reiterate their opinions that the existing railway system is faulty, and the reason they give is that they consider that it is so because of its subdivision among a number of independent companies, entailing the evils of divided control, absence of co-ordination, needless expense and financial weakness.

They then mention various proposals which have been put

forward for purchase or amalgamation, and finally decide in favour of amalgamation as against State purchase. Their formal answer is as follows :—

“ That in their opinion the best system of securing the economical, efficient, and harmonious working of the Irish Railways would be :—

“ 1. Though the amalgamation into a single commercial system of all the principal Irish railways by the voluntary action of the companies, assisted by permissive legislation and by limited financial aid.

“ 2. By transferring to the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction the power now exercised by the Board of Trade of dealing with complaints, and by requiring the Department to intervene, as representing the interests of Ireland as a whole, in all cases affecting Ireland that are brought before the Railway and Canal Commissioners.”

I confess that when I read this conclusion without reading the previous argument I felt that I could not agree with it, it was too sweeping and in excess of what was demanded.

Later on, however, on reading the full report, I came across a paragraph which made a great change in the aspect of the case. First, the dissenting members of the Committee state that there are certain lines, such as the Dublin and Lucan, which are really tramways, and, therefore, need not be incorporated ; and, second (the words are important), “ that they do not consider that amalgamation need be effected at one time, or by one operation. They think it should take place by degrees, beginning with absorption by the large companies of smaller lines with which they are in close connection, whether physical junctions (*i.e.*, actual junction of rails) exist or not.”

This makes all the difference between my old plan of amalgamation into six lines and instant and simultaneous fusing of all lines into one.

My view was and is that you could never advantageously fuse into one body the north and south of Ireland railways, not to mention the western. Frankly, the nature of the railway business differs in the three districts ; there would be a better chance of the circumstances of each district being considered if the Boards were separate ; and it must be borne in mind that there is always to be considered the question of politics, religion, social habits, agriculture, manufactures.

I would be quite content to agree with the general idea of the greater companies absorbing the small, “ with limited financial aid, if necessary,” and by that time the other question of the amalgamation of the large lines would probably settle itself in favour of my suggested division.

There remains the last recommendation of the Minority Report, that certain powers of the Board of Trade should be transferred to the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction.

Singularly enough, this suggestion, which, to my mind, is an admirable one and of the utmost importance and advantage, is only briefly referred to. It is all confined to page 95 of the report, and only the latter half of the page, 35 lines of print, is devoted to the subject.

I have often thought that the Board of Trade, with its headquarters in London, is quite unable to deal with the circumstances of another country. The officials do not know our ways, nor have they any knowledge of our peculiarities, while practically everything has to be done by correspondence with an unknown Board three hundred miles away.

If, on the contrary, there were a Railway Department of the Board of Agriculture and Technical Instruction situated in Upper Merrion Street, Dublin, where people could, if necessary, come and explain what they wanted, it would be an immense benefit to the country, its agriculture, and manufactures. Moreover, the Board itself would be the better for knowing something about railway requirements, and it could teach or point out to people where their methods, for instance in packing, are faulty—I have had abundant experience how faulty these are.

In fact, I look upon this suggestion as one of the best I have ever heard of for Ireland. The misfortune is that I fear it would be very difficult to find a properly qualified head for the new Department, he would require so much miscellaneous knowledge, and when he was found I fear he would have what in vulgar language is called “a remarkably lively time.”

I have now finished my attempt to deal with this report. I am quite conscious of my inability to do so adequately but if my paper lead others to take the matter up, it may be a benefit to the country.