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Government Ownership Of The Telephones

By M. H. Buehler.

Second Vice-President and General Manager the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company; from an address to the Telephone Society of Baltimore.

We have heard a good deal recently in regard to Government ownership of the telephone and telegraph. We do not believe it to be our duty either to champion that plan or violently to oppose it. When the people of this country decide that it is their wish that the Government of the United States own the telephone and telegraph, then the Government of the United States will own them. There is no doubt about that.

We do not intend to set ourselves up in opposition to the expressed wish of the people—that isn't our plan or our policy—but we are going this far: it will be our policy to present the salient facts; we do believe it is our duty to let the people of this country know just what is involved in the proposition of Government ownership.

If you will compare the progress of the telephone business where it is under the direct ownership and operation by governments with the progress of the telephone business in this country, you will be convinced that there is an underlying difference of some sort.

If we consider only the question of development, we find that of the cities possessing 10,000 telephones and over considerably more than half are situated in the United States.

There are at least 50 American towns where there is a telephone to fewer than every 10 of the inhabitants. In Europe there is only one. London, with a population more than three times as great as Chicago, has fewer telephones. Paris is twice the size of Boston, but possesses little more than half as many telephones.

In the whole of the United Kingdom there are only about as many telephones as in New York and Chicago; in all France there are fewer than in Chicago alone; in all Russia there are fewer than in Philadelphia; in Austria fewer than in Boston; in Italy fewer than in Los Angeles; in Spain fewer than in Toledo, Ohio; in Belgium fewer than in Kansas City, and in Hungary fewer than in Pittsburgh.

We may take the figures in yet another way. Roughly speaking, there is one telephone for every nine Americans. Remember this ratio in the United States, one telephone to every nine persons. If the same proportion obtained in Europe, Denmark would have 3 times as many telephones as she actually possesses; Sweden, 3½ times; Norway, 4½ times; Switzerland, 5 times; Germany, 6½ times; Great Britain, 7½ times; the Netherlands, 11 times; Belgium, nearly 18 times as many; France, 19 times; Austria, all but 30 times Hungary, 37 times; Italy, 56 times; Portugal and Spain, about 80 times; Russia, 105 times, and Greece, Servia and Bulgaria, from 170 to 4 times as many.

Think of London with a population of over 7,000,000 souls served by a telephone system of about 245,000 stations; of Manchester, with a population of 1,200,000 and 29,400 stations. Why, Baltimore has half as many people and twice as many telephones as Manchester. Glasgow, with a population of 1,150,000 and 42,000 telephone stations; of Birmingham, with a population of 1,069,000 and only about 18,000 telephones of Liverpool, with a population of 1,000,000 and only about 32,000 telephones.

What is said of exchange development and exchange service can also be said of toll development and toll service. The European governments for the most part construct such toll lines as are constructed when they are forced to do so by an excessive demand. Our policy has ever been to construct the lines *ahead* of the demand, to be ready when the demand comes to show the value of the service and thus help to create a demand. Our policy has been to build for the peak of the load instead of for the average load, and there is a vast difference both in the amount of investment required and in the convenience to the public between these two policies.

In the Bell System in the United States there are 7,500,000 telephones working together to take care of the telephone needs of the people of this country—twice as many telephones operating under a single system in the United States as there are under all systems and all companies in the whole of Europe.

Why is it that the United States has forged so conspicuously ahead? Is it that the Americans as a people are readier to adopt a new invention and quicker to perceive its possibilities? Partly that, no doubt.

Now, it is a fact that the men immediately in charge of the government ally owned telephone and telegraph enterprises in Europe are generally men of a high type. We are well acquainted with large numbers of these gentlemen, because they spend a good deal of time in the United States studying our way of doing business. They frankly say that they look to us for all that is new and good in the conduct of the telephone work. These managers of Government telephone enterprises are skillful men, men anxious to do a good job, able to do a good job, but hampered, as they themselves will tell you, by the fact that they are working for a Government and not for a commercial enterprise.

In the European countries appropriations required for the extension and improvement of the business have not been forthcoming. The managers see the opportunities for extending the development of the service and cannot take advantage of these opportunities because the decision as to the appropriation for the telephone service has rested with administrative and legislative bodies, only remotely interested in the possibilities of the service, not correctly informed as to the real need for the appropriation. The result of the arbitrary cutting of appropriations, the inability of those responsible for the service to get funds at the time needed, is plainly shown in the figures that I gave you a few moments ago.

We apply the term "privately owned" to enterprises conducted by corporations such as ours from those owned and operated by some form of governmental agency, which, on the other hand, we call "publicly owned." But when we apply the term private ownership without thinking a little of really what the ownership means, we are apt to be led into a mistake.

In the first place, our business, although we speak of it as privately owned, is really owned by the public. The American Telegraph and Telephone Company has 54,000 stockholders.

Although we speak of it as privately owned, the regulation of telephone companies by the various States and by the Interstate Commerce Commission insures a thorough control of the enterprise at every vital point in the public interest. Telephone companies are subject to the regulation of the Interstate Commerce Commission and of State Commissions in 41 out of the 48 States in the Union.

Although the line between the privately owned public service corporation subject to public regulation and the governmentally owned and operated utility is by no means so hard and fast as one is first apt to think of it, there remains, of course, the essential difference which justifies the two terms.

But however the telephone business is to be conducted, the public is entitled to expect the same treatment—that is, good service at the most reasonable rates, with a liberal policy as to extension; and these three things depend, first, upon an efficient, alert and, as near as may be, unchanging management and force of employes; second, the command of sufficient money promptly to make needed extensions.

Of the first, Mr. Goethals, in his letter of January 14, addressed to Mayor Mitchel regarding the Police Commissionership of the City of New York, points out the vital weakness of trying to obtain results without the power to compel service. He states it thus: "Attractive as your offer is, I would be obliged to decline it so long as the present law remains in force by which removals from the police force are subject to review with decision based on legal evidence. In public work of any kind efficiency can be secured only when the service of those engaged in it is satisfactory to superiors, and while I fully believe in the right of every man to have a hearing, the decision of the superior as to the character of the man's service should be final. In cases where a man whose services have not been satisfactory can be reinstated by a court of review, the effect on discipline and efficiency is most injurious. It undermines authority, leads to insubordination, tends to destroy the loyalty and co-operation which the executive authority must have to secure results and makes his authority of office impossible."

This fault is inherent in the management of all Government enterprises and would itself be sufficient to wreck the service of a Government-owned telephone system.

Of the second, one of the most important and vital problems of the telephone or any other business is the securing of money to be used in purchasing and building the permanent equipment necessary for conducting the business. In the telephone business this problem is a continuing one. In most other lines of business the investment once made requires no addition, or additions comparatively small in amount, but in the telephone business the construction account is never closed, and there is the continuing need for new money. During the construction of the Panama Canal the Bell System expended more on the extension of the telephone system than the Government did on the construction of the canal. Sixty million dollars will be required this year in the companies of the Bell System.

Under Government ownership, if the city or territory served by the Government-owned plant grows after its first installation to a point where there are additional territory and consumers clamoring for extensions of the service, these cannot be made except by a special appropriation. Consequently, it has been the experience that under public ownership extensions are not made with nearly the liberality or the promptness that exists under private ownership.

It has long been the opinion of great economists that public utilities calling for a more or less high degree of technical ability and the employment of a great many men, such as transportation, telephone, telegraph, etc., can best serve the people when privately owned and publicly regulated.

We all know that the United States is the best country to live in and that our form of government is the best form of government. But at the same time we know that the Government has never been remarkable for its ability to do things economically, and if it can furnish the telephone-telegraph service of the country cheaper than private enterprise can furnish it, it will be the first time that the Government accomplished such a thing. And, too, our Government is no more forehanded than most governments in its appropriations for the needful things.

In so vital a matter as the public defense we find the admission by Secretary of War Garrison to a Congressional committee several days ago that the withholding of appropriations by Congress had brought about a condition where it would take, with every available facility and unlimited money, two years to get, the ammunition and armament stock of the army to a point where we could go to war.

Another point for consideration is the question of taxes. During 1913 the Bell System alone paid $12,000,000 in taxes to the Federal Government in the various States and municipalities. The Government pays no taxes even on its real estate. Government ownership would mean that the $12,000,000 now contributed by the Bell telephone companies alone to the Government in the various States, cities, towns and villages would have to be raised by additional taxation of the whole people, whether they are telephone subscribers or not.

Take roads. It is the common experience of almost all of our States in road building, where the State itself has charge of the building of the roads, that the waste has been enormous and that there is hardly a time when the necessary repairs to the road are done at the time they are necessary, but actually after the road is worn out.

There is no more justice in comparing telephone conditions and telephone service and the telephone problem in this country and in Europe than there would be in comparing the service of a street railway of 25 years ago, with horses for motive power, with the service of our New York subways.

We are told that the experience of the Postoffice Department with respect to the parcel post is proof positive that that department would be equally successful in handling the telephone and telegraph business. I submit to you it is no proof at all.

What has the Postoffice Department done in creating the parcel post? Has it done anything more than announce a new rate for certain classes of mail matter and then supply the necessary force for handling the increase of mail matter resulting from the establishment of the new rate? It has not entered any different line of business; it has not gone into a highly organized technical business; it has simply increased the amount of business it formerly transacted, and I am told that it has done this so far without even arranging for adequate compensation to the railways which are handling the increased tonnage.

Now, if you want a real comparison it seems to me you will have to consider that the Postoffice Department had decided to take over the railways necessary for handling the postal business, to equip them with engines and mail cars, and then to operate such roads by running the trains. The Postoffice Department has done nothing approaching that.

Let us look at a case on this side of the water. On January 1, 1908, the Province of Manitoba, in Canada purchased the privately owned telephone system. At that time the Hon R. P. Roblin, Premier, and Attorney General C. H. Campbell promised better service at half the cost. What happened:

March 1, 1908—Rates in Winnipeg for certain classes of service were increased 25 per cent.

February, 1909—Inferior party line service was introduced and a slight reduction made.

March, 1910—Chairman of the telephone commission declared the rural rates inadequate.

May, 1911 — Long-distance rates doubled and time limit decreased from three to two minutes.

November, 1911—Chairman of telephone commission reported a loss for the year of $150,000 without making any provision for depreciation.

December, 1911—Exchange rates for the whole Province practically doubled.

Commenting on this, the Montreal Gazette of December 18, 1911, said: "Some of the advocates of public ownership seem to have thought that having got the Government to take over the service, it would be easy to get cheap telephones by putting a part of the cost on the general taxpayers. It is not well to put the cost of a personal service for some of the people upon all the people."

It is hard to remember statistics, but I want to get this simple fact in your mind because it comes pretty near telling the whole story. In the whole of Europe, out of every 100 communications sent by mail, telegraph or telephone, 26 of the 100 are carried by the telephone. Now what do we find in the United States under private ownership? Out of every 100 messages we find as against 26 in Europe 60 messages sent by telephone. Gentlemen, this hasn't "just happened!"

I want to repeat what I said when I started in to talk about Government ownership. A majority of the citizens of this country are going to have what they want. We are not going to oppose them, but if a real campaign ensues in which this is a real issue we are going to make the public acquainted with such facts as we possess, and then the people must judge for themselves.

Personally, I have no fears or misgivings as to the result of this legislation.

This opinion is based in part on my confidence in the good judgment of the American people, and more particularly on the good work done in the past by each and every employe of the Bell System, and which good work I know you will continue to do in the future.

Through these individual efforts the public has been trained to expect and demand good service, and they will not consent to any change which does not guarantee a continuance of this same character of service.

It is not a question of price alone.

It is a question first of service in the broad sense of that term, and then of the lowest possible price consistent with the rendering of that service.

Whether from the standpoint of development or the quality of the service when compared with any publicly or privately operated organization, the people in these United States are getting the very best there is to be had.

As to the cost, the business and the rates are so generally supervised by Public Utility Commissions that the public may be assured they are getting the very lowest rates consistent with a continuance of good service.

If each of us will do faithfully and conscientiously her and his duty, I feel that we need have no fears for the result.

Gentlemen, I have saved to the last a thought on this subject from a gentleman that we all wish we could have with us here tonight. Last year at your dinner you had the president of the company, Mr. F. H. Bethell, and he has written to say how sorry he is that the press of other matters makes it impossible for him to be here tonight. But he has put in his letter a thought about this very serious matter which I want to leave with you for a closing. You may take it as a message from Mr. Bethell and one to which I most heartily subscribe.

"If I were with you, I would, with your permission, say something on the question of Government ownership of telephone properties. This great question of policy is bigger, much bigger, than the business itself. It is of vital importance to every man and woman in the country.

"The idea of the founders of this nation was that the people themselves should do all things possible for them to do. The principle applied in European countries in just the reverse. There the Government undertakes to do all things possible for it to do. Our nation has prospered as no other nation ever prospered, and the telephone service, developed by private enterprise, has done much toward promoting the general prosperity. That those now at the head of our Government would reverse a policy that has been this nation's policy since its birth without the most careful consideration of the great questions involved seems inconceivable. I, for one, do not believe it possible."

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If we were asked to speak a message into a phonograph in order that it might be preserved as a memorial of us, how careful we should be in the choosing of our words. Yet every hour we are letting fall words which may be stored up in the memory of the hearers, and may last as long as any phonograph record. All experience shows that it is not the words that seem of the most importance that we are the most likely to remember, but chance words spoken thoughtlessly, perhaps only half meant. The most careless word that we utter is as likely to be preserved as if it were graven upon granite. We need often to pray "Keep the door of my lips."

Forward.

"It is a great deal better to live a holy life than to talk about it. Lighthouses do not ring bells and fire cannons to call attention to their shining—they just shine."

Western Christian Union.

I consider a human soul without education like marble in a quarry, which shows none of its inherent beauties, until the skill of the polisher sketches out the colors, makes the surface shine, and discovers every ornamental cloud, spot and vein that runs throughout the body of it.

Addison.

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The cause of your child's ills—The foul, fetid, offensive breath—The starting up with terror and grinding of teeth while asleep—The sallow complexion—The dark circles under the eyes—Are all indications of worms. Kickapoo Worm Killer is what your child needs; it expels the worms, the cause of the child's unhealthy condition. For the removal of seat, stomach and pin worms, Kickapoo Worm Killer gives sure relief. Its laxative effect adds tone to the general system. Supplied as a candy confection—children like it. Safe and sure relief. Guaranteed. Buy a box today. Price 25c. All Druggists or by mail.
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"The Metropolitan Magazine," through its attorney, Charles E. Kelley, of No. 60 Wall street, brought suit against Postmaster Edward E. Morgan, on Monday, for $100,000 alleging libel in his attitude toward the magazine when suppressing the February issue, which was released later by the Washington authorities, and libel in his remarks on the issue. The February issue was held up by Postmaster Morgan because of photogravures depicting Paul Manship's sculptures that won prizes in recent exhibitions. Appeal to Washington by "The Metropolitan Magazine", obtained the release of the issue over the postmaster's objections, but the delay, according to the editors of the magazine, was costly and harmful.

The colleges may not be able to make every student proficient in baseball, but at least they seem disposed to teach them all to dance the tango.

The American people are being blamed for spending $275,000,000 on moving picture shows last year, when if they had stayed at home and gone to bed at 8 o'clock, they would have had so much more money.

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