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—AND—

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WELLINGTON, FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 1931.

GOVERNMENT CONTROL OR PRIVATE ENTERPRISE?

THE year 1931 will be important in New Zealand broadcasting history, for in it will be determined the basis of our future broadcasting system. The Postmaster-General, the Hon. J. B. Donald, actuated by commendable keenness to give listeners the best possible service, is considering a change from the present system to one in which Government control will play an important part. The views so far expressed by him favour Government control of the technical side of the service with another authority of a nature not yet determined upon, responsible for the programmes. This change involves such a radical departure from the existing system and is likely to be so far-reaching in its effect upon the future of broadcasting that it is incumbent upon listeners to give the most serious thought to the subject lest their interests be affected.

WHILE recognising the motives by which he is actuated and appreciating his desire to benefit the service, we profoundly disagree with the Postmaster-General in his view that Government control of the service to the extent indicated by his earlier pronouncement would be of benefit. From the technical standpoint alone, the Post and Telegraph Department doubtless could supervise capably enough the actual running of the stations. But to create two authorities to do what one does now, would in our opinion be fatal. The system is not working satisfactorily in Australia. The division of authority is leading to diffusion of effort, a certain amount of waste and inefficiency and, worst of all, a lack of direct responsibility on the part of any one authority for the service. The actual broadcasting is failing to give the listener satisfaction, and comment is general in Australian centres that the "B" class stations give programmes that are in many cases—notably so since recent staff changes—better transmitted and more diversified and entertaining than those of the "A" stations. We believe this complaint to be in large part due to the division of control and the relegation of programmes to a body composed of theatrical and publishing interests rather than to an authority concerned wholly and solely with the task of satisfying

the listener. The necessity of unity in control as a factor in success is emphasised by the fact that the two most efficient broadcasting systems in the world—the British and the American—have been built up on the basis of absolute control by the authority concerned. These two systems are fundamentally different in many respects but they agree in this vital point: each is under the absolute management of the powers that be. Australia, formerly under unified control, varied her system; the result is certainly not an increase in efficiency and is giving much less satisfaction to the listener.

UNDER New Zealand conditions, the major problem in the event of any change on the lines proposed by the Minister, will be the provision of a programme authority. In view of the desire to increase the number of stations the Minister could scarcely contemplate the formation of local companies to supervise local programmes, for that would make confusion worse confounded from the point of view of copyright and co-ordination of items. A single national authority is essential. To throw programmes open for tender, in all likelihood, would place control of our entertainment in the hands of the same or similar interests as now hold the reins in Australia—namely, theatrical or publishing houses or a combination thereof. That would not be to the advantage of the New Zealand listener, for the dominant interest would be financial and personal rather than the absolute service of the listener.

THE financial angle of the proposed change also needs careful consideration. This is not the year in which the Government should seek the investment of new capital in extra broadcasting stations in country centres, nor is it the time to change from private control to Government administration in any service. Experience shows plainly enough that costs rise on the touch of the Government hand. It will not be any different in the broadcasting field. Entry of the Government into the radio field at all will institute a demand for further and further participation in new phases with the certainty of grave curtailment of trading activities, without compensating advantage to the listener—in fact, in so far as the listener and the taxpayer are one and the same, to his definite disadvantage; for losses incurred must be met by him.

THE times call for economy and efficiency. The existing system as a system has proved itself in our conditions. Without cost to the taxpayer, the listeners are providing the revenue for a service reasonably adequate to the needs of the country. In certain directions improvements are desired, but it becomes a question of how far they are economically possible. To seek to provide them by a radical change to Government supervision, in our opinion, would be an unwarranted socialisation of a service which is more suited to private enterprise. Further, it would carry with it the practical certainty of an ultimate burden on the taxpayer, a definite risk to the trader and in the light of Australian experience no permanent benefit to the listener. For these reasons public opinion should concern itself with the future of the broadcasting service.

Not Satisfactory

Australian Government Control

THE policy of the Government in taking over the technical work of broadcasting (as has been proposed in New Zealand) receives a nasty jolt in the following letter by "Off the Air," Ballarat, published in the Melbourne "Listener-In":—

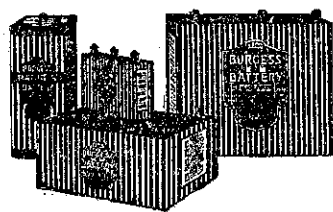
"Dear Sir,—Usually at the commencement of the daily session of 'A' class broadcasting sessions we hear the oft-repeated cry of '3LO or 3AR, the Australian Broadcasting Company supplying the National Broadcasting Service.' Now let us examine the wonderful service we are getting. From station 3LO we get 'mushy reception' most of the

time, and from 3AR, sometimes nothing at all. Are listeners to get service for their £1/4/- per annum, or have they to be contented with 'any old thing at any old time'? Station 3AR has been 'off the air' some five or six times recently, and the latest break was for over 12 hours, and, like Johnny Walker, was still going strong while this was being written. Is it a fact that competent engineers and experts have been displaced, and men from the Postmaster-General's Department, with practically no wireless experience, put into their positions? Perhaps the Director of Wireless can give listeners some reason for the cause of these frequent breakdowns."

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