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—AND—

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RADIO AND POLITICS.

THE situation developing in Australia in connection with the radio service is of outstanding interest to New Zealand listeners concerned with the future of our own national broadcasting system. Some two years ago the Australian Federal Government took charge of the broadcasting service by becoming owners of the broadcasting stations, and letting by tender the provision of programmes to the Australian Broadcasting Company, an organisation specially formed for that purpose. It was announced by the then Prime Minister, Mr. S. M. Bruce, that the Government, in addition to becoming the owners of the "A" class stations, purposed erecting some 16 subsidiary relay stations in various parts of the continent, in order to effectively cover the population with a full national service. It was arranged that of the listener's 24/- licensee fee 12/- should go to the Australian Broadcasting Company and 12/- would be retained by the Government to cover the cost of maintaining the transmitting stations and providing for the erection of the supplementary stations mentioned.

THE scheme thus promulgated was duly inaugurated. The Australian Broadcasting Company was formed, and has been receiving 12/- of the listener's license money for the provision of programmes, management, etc. Incidentally it is interesting to note that the old company, prior to the inception of Government control, received 20/- of the listener's fee, of which approximately 3/- was absorbed, it is estimated, for maintenance, and 2/- for copyright fees, leaving approximately 15/- available for the costs of management and the provision of programmes. Under the new arrangement the Australian Broadcasting Company has received from the Government 12/-, of which 2/- has been absorbed by copyright fees, leaving the

sum of 10/- available for programmes; so that in actual fact the present company has had less money pro rata to spend on programmes than the old-time concern.

FROM these figures, also, it will be noted that, whereas the old company maintained its stations upon an estimated sum of 3/- per licensee, the Federal Government appropriated 12/- of the listener's fee for transmission equipment and maintenance. Certainly from this sum the Post Office Department paid royalty fees to Amalgamated Wireless for patent rights, as well as maintaining the stations. The intention also was that this sum should provide for the erection of some sixteen secondary stations, but according to a statement made by the Postmaster-General, Mr. J. A. Lyons, in the Federal House recently, when reviewing the situation, the department had not embarked upon the provision of the sixteen stations mentioned in the original undertaking, but so far, in the space of approximately two years, had completed only one, with hopes of building three more in the course of the next nine months, leaving unspecified the fate of the remaining twelve, although the term originally specified for their completion has but eighteen months to run. It was also announced by Mr. Lyons that the sum of £70,000 had remained in the Government's hand, after meeting all current obligations, and that this sum had been paid into the Federal Treasury.

LISTENERS in Australia are naturally very concerned at the situation thus revealed. The plain fact is that, following on the change of Government from the Bruce administration to Labour, the policy in respect of broadcasting inaugurated by Mr. Bruce has been, if not departed from, at least prosecuted very apathetically. Listeners do not regard with equanimity the statement that £70,000 of the funds provided by them for the provision of an adequate broadcasting service should remain in the Government's hands, and apparently be appropriated to the general funds of the Treasury. That creates the situation that radio listeners are being subject to a special tax for the benefit of the General Treasury. Much concern is being shown at the situation, and representations of protest are to be made to the Federal authorities.

THIS situation has its moral for New Zealand. It shows that once the broadcasting service is left in the hands of the Government, without definite contractual commitments to an outside company or other authority for the administration of the service, the quality of the service is subject to the vagaries of the political mind and political exigencies. There is no commitment upon one Government to prosecute with vigour and effect the obligations entered into by a preceding Government. In our situation here in New Zealand one Government might, for instance, embark upon such a policy as was outlined by the Hon. J. B. Donald. A subsequent election might put into power a different Government. That Government, naturally enough, would have its own views upon the broadcasting service and, as in the case of Australia, might by variation of administration, follow such a course as in effect to break faith with the listening public. Where a service is left to the vagaries of political fortune, the listener cannot have stability of service. In addition, if the service is to be left wholly or in part subject to direct Government control, it will prove impossible in actual practice to prevent the irruption of political influence or favour. We contend, in the light of Australian experience, that where a body of people such as radio listeners are paying a definite fee toward the maintenance of a definite service, the administration of that service should not be a matter of indefinite political promise, but a matter of definite contractual obligations with some organisation charged with the duty of administration. Listeners in New Zealand would be well advised to ponder the situation now revealed in Australia, and recorded in fuller detail in a news article elsewhere in this issue, and reflect upon the possibilities of a similar situation arising in New Zealand in the future unless adequate safeguards are provided for their protection.

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