

The New Zealand Radio Record

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Home Journal

(Incorporating the "Canterbury Radio Journal.")

Published Weekly. Price 3d. Subscription Post Free in advance, 12s. 6d. per annum.

RADIO PUBLISHING COMPANY OF NEW ZEALAND, LTD.,
P.O. Box 1032, WELLINGTON.

WELLINGTON, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1931.

THE PROPOSED RADIO BOARD.

IN the Broadcasting Bill now before Parliament listeners see in detail the proposals regarding the constitution of the Board and the powers to be entrusted to it. The proposal involves a complete reorganisation of the basis of broadcasting. The machinery proposal is simple enough. The Minister, on expiry of the present contract, will purchase the existing stations from the Radio Broadcasting Company on the basis provided in their agreement. Then he will immediately require the New Zealand Broadcasting Board (to be constituted) to take them over from him "at such prices and upon such terms and conditions as he thinks fit." The Board is to be appointed entirely at the discretion of the Government, without representation to or consultation with any section of the people interested in radio.

COMMENT already made in Parliament shows that the Bill will not have an easy and untroubled passage. The intrusion of the State into another sphere of activity is not welcomed by many, for obvious reasons. It is answered that this proposal does not involve State control; that the Board to be constituted will be absolutely free and independent. Theoretically that may be so. In actual practice, the personnel is to be appointed by the Government, both initially and subsequently; and, while the present Postmaster-General will honestly endeavour to fulfil his promise that the appointments will not have a political flavour and will be made only on the basis of merit for the task in hand, the same cannot be guaranteed of future appointments under different Ministers. In spite of all assurances, the danger of political influence and subordination to political desires does exist and always will exist, and it is upon this method of electing the Board, we imagine, that the most attention will be concentrated by listeners. Criticism of the Company system was frequently based upon the fact that the listener who "paid the piper" had no opportunity to "call the tune." The proposals of the Bill offer no improvement in that respect, and it is, to say the least, amazing to find a representative of the Listeners' League, after all that has been said by that body about "the rights of listeners," approving of the disfranchisement of all listeners in this way. Mr. Howard was on sound ground when he urged in the House that listeners, whose interests are paramount, should have an influence upon the personnel of the Board. On behalf of listeners we urge the same thing; otherwise, why all the agitation and bother of the past months? In view of the major charge of lack of listeners' influence, this Bill, designed to correct all faults, should definitely provide for elective contact between the listener who provides the funds and the Board which spends those funds.

ON this further point it may be recalled that the proposals submitted by the Radio Broadcasting Company for the formation of an enlarged popular company made provision for those listeners who were sufficiently interested to make a modest investment in the company to elect directors on a territorial basis. That was democratic. For the State, without itself supplying any part of the funds, to arrogate to itself such complete and arbitrary power of appointment in respect of a Board maintained by listeners' revenue, is to our mind quite wrong.

THE powers given to the Board are extensive, intensive, and all-embracing. It is charged, in brief, with the development and control of the whole broadcasting service. These powers will include the oversight of the "B" class stations. The solution of a proper co-ordination between "A" and "B" class stations will dominate the early activities of the Board. The Board will need to decide whether it is to pursue the policy of erecting co-ordinated relay stations of its own in main provincial centres, or whether it will adopt the system of subsidising approved "B" class stations in suitable centres for their extra coverage and alternative services. The Radio Broadcasting Company had complete plans in prospect for the erection of the necessary supplementary stations. Those plans could have been initiated nearly three years ago. Since then the situation has changed materially by the development of "B" class stations—of which there are now 30 in existence—and their future conduct needs a speedy policy ruling.

THAT there will be no lack of aspirants for office on the Radio Board was confessed by the Minister when he indicated that already he had received applications from something like two hundred, who were prepared to consecrate themselves to the cause of radio. Having regard to the future welfare and dignity of the Board, we are sorry this fact slipped out. The salaries proposed are to our mind little enough for the standard of capacity desirable—indeed essential—in the Board. We take it, however, that the Board will be primarily a policy Board, and that in determining the lines upon which the service is to operate, the actual administration will be entrusted to a general manager. The qualities necessary for this post are many, and we venture to suggest that a desirable course would be to invite applications from men with overseas experience in modern broadcasting. Since the B.B.C. is to be adopted as a model, some of its young executives might be available for this country.

TWO significant comments in Parliament should be noted by listeners. When Mr. Campbell was protesting against the cost of additional State services, Mr. Barnard interjected: "But there is money in it for the country." Does this mean that Parliamentarians envisage the possibility, sooner or later, of raiding the listeners' funds to an extent greater than is done already? In England, of the listener's 10/- license fee, the B.B.C. actually receives under two-thirds on which to maintain its service. It is to be noted further that the present Bill does not say how much of the license fee is to be available to the Board. It is laid down simply that the Board, after having been appointed, "may enter into agreement with the Minister for the payment to the Board of portion of the fees received in respect of licenses in relation to wireless telegraphy." Under that clause it is open to the State to appropriate a larger sum than is now allocated. It is to be noted, also, that a Labour member frankly advocated complete Government control of broadcasting, even to the extent of making it part and parcel of the Post and Telegraph service. With all respect to that Department in its field, we say definitely that that would be a huge mistake. Plainly, however, once this contemplated legislation is on the Statute Book, it will be open to any Government to introduce amendments increasing its own power and control of the service. Mr. Jones predicted that it will be impossible to separate the Board from the Government in the popular mind, and that complaints about radio will intrude themselves upon the floor of the House. Listeners may find it necessary to be even more on their guard against State expansion than against so-called "private monopoly," and it is to be hoped, in their own interests, that the contemplated change will not be found ultimately disadvantageous. If the Bill as drafted is approved by Parliament, then the success of the scheme will depend entirely upon the capacity of the personnel chosen.

THAT in essence is the weakness of the proposal. As matters stand, no party is likely to be wholly pleased with the Bill. Listeners have no say in representation whatsoever; the trade has none. The Bill is a request for a blank cheque. No policy is laid down for the Board, and we have been led to believe that the Government desired to institute a progressive policy of more stations and greater service. No such policy is embodied, although the Board is charged with "developing" the service. The Board may adopt the policy desired; as matters stand, there is no guarantee. In the field of finance provision is made for State advances with the consent of the Minister. No limit is set. Parliament is entitled to know the prospective commitments, as also are listeners. What is to be guarded against is the establishment of a bureaucracy divorced from the people.