

OUR BLUNDERING RAILWAYS
(To the Editor)

Sir.—A letter in your paper recently suggested to hand over our costly railways to the Federal Government, and the other letter next day, said, No, pass an act of Parliament to prohibit buses and motor cars.

Two drastic measures. One, certainly, is typical to Australia, and no other country in the world; the other one would be not improbable in Turkey, but I don't think anywhere else. If I had to choose between two evils, I would naturally favour the native Australian measure, but with a reservation.

When our present Premier, at the beginning of his office, appealed to the Federal Government for help he received the answer to this effect, Put your house in order, and when we see you have done your best we shall consider the question of helping. There was some "putting house in order," and there was some help. But have we really put our house in order? Not as far as our railways are concerned. And if we ever appeal to the Federal Government to take over our railways it would be dishonest of us to do it before we "have put our railways in order."

One of the greatest evils in our railways is the apparent absence of strict rates for goods sent by train. It admits wide abuses that drive customers away. I mentioned in my last letter that I paid 2s 9d railage for 20 lbs. of seeds for 17 miles. And from the distance many times greater, from Devonport to Edith Creek, the railage of 20 lbs. of seeds is only 1s 3d. It looks as though everything depends on the whim of a stationmaster. The other day a neighbour of mine, Mr. P., ordered from Burnie one pound of boot nails to be sent by train to Edith Creek. He paid for railage 1s 2d, the sum that would pay exactly for 5 lbs. of nails, if sent by post. How can they expect people to patronise railways, if they charge rates several times as big as postage? The harm done by this sort of rates is greater than it appears. It is not only the railway that loses customers and suffers for it. Country and town are losers as well. Many articles that the farmer wants are not valuable enough to be ordered by post, like our ill-fated boot nails. And with reasonable railage, the railage below postage, the intercourse between town and country would necessarily become livelier and benefit someone. If the railway charged 2d for a pound of nails, it would be quite sufficient and tolerable punishment for a man who dares to live in the country, to pay 2d above a town man. As things are now, the railway wants not only to punish a countryman, but to drive him away from the country altogether.

My knowledge of the whole railway system is only superficial, though I know more intimately a part of it, the Stanley-Trowutta line. But if this part typifies the whole railway system, the story of it must be very instructive.

From the beginning this line was a paying concern. After linking Smithton to it, it became quite a busy railway, carrying timber and farming produce to Stanley port, country folk going for shopping to Smithton, parcels from Smithton to the country. I don't say it couldn't be improved upon. Less whimsical rate for parcels and stricter adherence of trains to time-table would do much good. It is still remembered when a loaf of bread sent from Iriss Town to Edith Creek, five miles, was charged for railage one shilling, and

Town to Edith Creek, five miles, was charged for railage one shilling, and two hours' variation in train arrival was not conducive to patronising it. A dairyman could not afford to go to Smithton without being sure that he would return in time to milk his cows. Yet the train was sufficiently patronised, and people, though sometimes grumbling, were on the whole contented. This state of things lasted till the time of the late Commissioner. With the new regime the most pronounced change was the increased variation in train arrival. While previously speaking of Edith Creek, the train used to arrive any time between 6 and 8 p.m., after the change, the time of the train's arrival was between 6.20 and 11.30 p.m. Naturally, people stopped using the train for going to Smithton, and parcels, particularly bread and meat, were not sent any more by train to the country. The consequence was both sad and amusing. The Commissioner, noticing almost complete disappearance of passengers and parcels between Smithton and the country, but failing to grasp the reason, abolished passengers' carriage on the line and severed direct communication between the country and Smithton. I travelled myself in a goods truck when I had to go up the coast, and they were modest enough not to charge me for the first-class. The communication with Smithton became so intricate that if one wanted to go from Edith Creek to Smithton, 10 miles, by train and return, it would take two days, and the considerable part of these two days had to be spent neither in Smithton nor at Edith Creek, but in train between two places. Another "improvement" of the late Commissioner was the introduction of night train on Tuesday. He prohibited sending cattle with ordinary trains changed Tuesday's train from day to night, and set it apart for cattle. It was not only annoying; it was tortuous for farmers. Stanley-Trowutta line was ruined. People were driven away from the railway, and had to devise other means of communication with towns. But there was one thing that still remained in full abuse of the railway: it was mail.

Would comfortably accommodated town people understand how we were served our mail? Listen!

I think it is a general rule that where there is a railway, it carries mail. So did our railway. But since the conversion of Tuesday's train into a night one, it didn't carry mail, and the next day (Wednesday), the train usually arrived past 10 p.m. So it didn't count either. There remained four days or actual mail service. You may call it service if you like.

Suppose you have to go

two miles or even only one mile for your mail. The train might arrive at 6.20 p.m. But you give a good hour of grace, and reach the post office at 7.30. No train. You go to your neighbour, nearest to the post office, to wait for the train. They are good people and glad to see you, but you are conscious, that you are calling on them something like four times a week, and that might be a little trying even for good neighbours. Half an hour passes—no train. To wait or not to wait? Were you sure that the train wouldn't arrive for the next two or three hours, you would go home at once. But the train might arrive every next minute. You wait another half an hour. No train. You hesitate, and wait again. The time drags

another half an hour. No train. You hesitate, and wait again. The time drags on. Ten o'clock. Your neighbours are preparing to go to bed. You cannot hesitate any longer. You say "good-night" and go home. You have lost three hours and got no mail. And the bitterness of it is accumulating on your heart day after day, week after week, month after month.

Is it any wonder that we protested? We petitioned first the Railway Commission. To say the least of his reply, it was insolent. He pointed out that living in the back country, we had no right to expect more and should be satisfied with existing mail arrangements. We appealed to the Postmaster-General. What passed between him and the Railway Commissioner, we don't know, but as a result of it, tenders were called for private mail service by motor cars between the Circular Head and the rest of Tasmania. We are getting now our mail regularly by motor cars at 6 p.m. every day.

By losing the mail contract the railway lost more than the commissioner's salary. We regret it. Accepting the new arrangements with gratitude, we don't forget that whether the railways are bad or good, they are ours. Railway losses are our losses, railway gains are our gains. He regret particularly that the present commissioner had no chance, and, after accepting the office, had to pay at once for the sins he didn't commit. We regret moreover, for he showed his goodwill towards the Stanley-Trowutta line immediately he got into office, cancelling the ridiculous and hateful night train, and giving right to send cattle by any train. And we hope that, after the expiration of the present mail contract, the mail service will revert once more to the railway—of course, if the railway agrees to perform it not as a joke, but as a serious and important business.

Judging by the new commissioner's activities, it is easy to foresee that there will be further improvements on our line, with the restoration of communication between Smithton and country, and the railway might reach even the former level of success, though, no doubt, it will be harder to restore that success than it would have been to maintain it.

Regarding optimistically the new railway regime, one can't help being haunted by misgivings. In this connection it is well to recall the opinion of that keen and honest observer, Mr. von Alwyn, who thinks that the principal evil of our railways is that they are state-owned. The state fails again and again in its business enterprises. Give railways to private owners, and the railways very soon will become profitable without special Parliamentary acts for protecting them. I am sure of it, at least, as far as the Trowutta line is concerned. It was mooted originally as a private enterprise, but subsequently was taken over by the Government. And if it became private property now . . . Why? Only shopping parcels between Smithton and country would pay running expenses. There are half a dozen out-lets, bakers, and other tradesmen going every day alongside the line with their parcels. None of them wants to do it, but they can't help it. They can't sell, say, bread by train, if they are not sure that the bread will arrive for tea time. A private owner would see to it that they are sure. But it is only the routine part of railway business. The benefit of privately owned railways would be far-reaching. It is well

The benefit of privately owned railways would be far-reaching. It is well known that the Canadian Pacific Railway has done more for developing Canada than all the Canadian state governments combined. It is more than certain, it would never have done anything like that, were it a Government concern. If Trowutta line was privately owned, there would be no good land going to waste on both sides of the line; it would be a busy little centre of English settlers, and Tasmania would take an active part in the Empire settlement scheme, and derive benefit from the Empire cheap credit for this purpose. Private owners of the railway would take interest in the country beyond the terminus of their line, and there would never happen such an amazing act, as the recent act of Parliament granting timber concession in the south of Arthur River, without knowing what they grant. I am just wishing to say a few words on that notorious concession, but I shall leave it for another occasion. For the present I conclude the letter emphasising again that the revision and standardisation of rates for railway goods and strict adherence of trains to time table would go very far towards improving the railway budget.—Yours, etc.

S. SUTCHKOFF.