

15 June, 1911.]

CHEAPENING OF CABLE RATES.

[9th Day.]

Sir JOSEPH WARD—*cont.*

recognises that, but in these times, when there is great development going on throughout the Empire, I say as regards these cables between the Old Country and the overseas countries, it is not satisfactory that we should, from year's end to year's end (and I have been at it 20 years personally), be always in the position of fighting and battling against what we believe to be a system of combine, and is injurious as far as the people using these cables both in Great Britain and in the different parts of the overseas countries is concerned.

I want, without taking up the time of the Conference unnecessarily, to express the very strong hope that there might be something done by this Conference which would bring about an improvement in the direction of making those cables more available for the public generally. The big mercantile concerns are not the only people to be considered; they have to carry on their business, and they do not object to paying the existing cable rates, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred they make somebody else pay them, but the outside world cannot use these cables at all, unless they are fairly well-to-do. I beg to move the resolution.

The PRESIDENT: I think it would be convenient that the Postmaster-General should now make a statement.

Mr. SAMUEL: This is a resolution with which the Government of the United Kingdom very cordially sympathise, and which they will be very glad indeed to support. This Conference has discussed already many matters of great importance, but possibly there are few which are of more real permanent importance to the Empire at large than this question of the cheapening of cable communication. Geographically scattered as the Empire is, it is obvious that few things are likely to contribute more to its political unity and commercial development than the establishment and maintenance of a cheap and effective system of intercommunication. Some progress has been made, as Sir Joseph Ward has said. If you compare the cable rates now with what they were, say, 15 or 16 years ago, you will find that, except as regards the trans-Atlantic rates, they have as a rule been about halved. More important, perhaps, than the actual rates themselves is the alteration that has been effected in consequence of the resolution of the International Telegraph Conference of 1903, which permitted the use of artificial code words, the effect of which has been to enable people, business people especially, who use cable codes to pack in a single code word an astonishing number of plain language words, and this has resulted in a further cheapening of cable communication. Since the last Imperial Conference, the Press rates to Australia have been reduced, largely as the result of the Imperial Press Conference, from 1s. to 9d., not only to Australia but also to New Zealand and South Africa and India. But I quite agree with Sir Joseph Ward that such progress as has been made is quite inadequate, and that the present rates in many respects are burdensome, and that a further reduction is eminently desirable, and I should like to inform the Conference of the steps that have been taken, and are being taken, by the Post Office of the United Kingdom to bring that about.

In the first place, a suggestion was made some time ago, originated, I think, by the Australian Government, but supported by the Postmaster-General of Canada, and by the Pacific Cable Board, that a special reduction of rates should be made in the case of telegrams that are not in code but in plain language, and which without disadvantage could be susceptible of deferment—which were not urgent telegrams like many business telegrams are. Plain language telegrams are obviously far more costly than code telegrams, and persons who are not in the position to use code are very heavily burdened by the existing cable rates. Many telegrams of a social character are not of such an urgent nature that the delay of a few hours would really matter. The messages are not such as can be sent through the post, and thereby suffer a delay of possibly weeks, but a delay of twelve or fifteen hours is not vital in the case of a great number of messages.

On the other hand, the cable companies for many hours in the day have their channels of communication by no means filled, and it is to their advantage to attract traffic which could be handled by them at times convenient to them. This