

Speech of the Railway Member

introducing the

Railway Budget for 1932-33.

It is once more my duty to present to the Assembly the Railway Budget estimate for the coming year. On this occasion no change has been made in the form of the papers to be placed in the hands of Honourable Members of sufficient importance to require separate notice. In the preparation of the budget I have, as always, received the greatest assistance from the Chief Commissioner, the Financial Commissioner and the Members and staff of the Railway Board. A special word of thanks is also due to the members to the Standing Committee on Railway Finance for the help they have given us throughout the year.

2. I have no doubt that, as on former occasions, Honourable Members when giving notice of motions for reductions in the demands will indicate briefly the questions they wish to raise. The advantages of this practice are so obvious that I need not dilate upon them.

Financial results of 1930-31.

3. The anticipations we formed a year ago as to the financial results of the working of the railways in 1930-31 were very nearly fulfilled. We expected that the loss on all the railways, both commercial and strategic, would be 5½ crores, and that it would be necessary to withdraw nearly 11 crores from the reserve in order to pay the contribution to general revenues. The actual sum taken from the reserve exceeded the estimate by only 6 lakhs, but it is fair to add that the working expenses were nearly a crore above the figure taken in the revised estimates, this excess being counterbalanced by an increase in the arrear adjustments with the depreciation fund.

Revised estimate for 1931-32.

4. If my estimate of the financial results of 1930-31 proved to be very near the mark, the case is far otherwise with the current year. We budgetted for a heavy reduction of expenditure as a result of the economy measures which railway administrations had already started, and here our expectations have been more than fulfilled, for our working expenses are likely to be less by nearly 3 crores than the budget figure. But this result, satisfactory in itself, is far more than counterbalanced by a substantial decline in our earnings. The figures I shall give in order to explain the position are those for the commercial lines, for the loss on the strategic railways at 2 crores is very close to our estimate, and it is unnecessary to refer to them further.

5. When I presented the budget estimates for the current year to the House, I anticipated an improvement in the gross traffic receipts of about 6 crores. Of this sum, 2 crores was expected to accrue from minor alterations in rates and fares, and for the rest it was assumed that the latter part of the year would show some improvement in traffic. As Honourable Members are no

doubt aware from the statement of traffic earnings which we publish weekly, our hope that the cold weather of 1931-32 would be marked by an upward tendency in trade and some relief of the prevailing economic depression has not been fulfilled. I had always believed that a change for the better might begin towards the end of September, but although that month was certainly marked by changes of a somewhat startling character—changes which may contain within them the seeds of a real trade improvement in the future—I fear it cannot be said that they have as yet resulted in any appreciable advantage to the railway revenues. Instead of being about 6 crores higher than the previous year, our net traffic earnings are lower by more than 8 crores. Both goods earnings and passenger earnings have fallen off by about $8\frac{1}{2}$ per cent., and every class of traffic has been affected. It is evident that both the severity and the duration of the economic crisis through which the world is passing were underestimated a year ago and that I was over-sanguine in anticipating that the current year would find us already on the up grade.

6. The position, as disclosed in the revised estimates, compares with the budget figures as follows. We placed the total receipts at 101 crores and the total charges at nearly 98 crores, leaving a surplus for the year of 3 crores. Of this latter sum, about 2 crores would in any case have been required to meet the loss on the strategic railways and a balance of about 1 crore would have been left towards the contribution. It was recognised, therefore, that the reserves would have to be drawn upon to the extent of 4 crores in order to pay the contribution. Actually, our total receipts are now estimated at $86\frac{1}{2}$ crores and our total charges at 94 crores, so that instead of a surplus there is a deficit of $7\frac{1}{2}$ crores. This figure is raised to $9\frac{1}{2}$ crores by the loss on the strategic railways, and it becomes necessary to exhaust the balance of the reserve fund, not in order to pay a contribution to the general revenues but to meet a part of the deficit. The amount in the Reserve Fund does not exceed 5 crores, and, in order to balance the accounts, the only expedient open to us is a temporary loan of $4\frac{1}{2}$ crores from the depreciation fund. In effect this means that after paying our obligatory interest charges, the balance remaining falls short by this amount of the full allotment for depreciation.

Budget for 1932-33.

7. For the year 1932-33 we estimate that our total receipts will be $88\frac{1}{2}$ crores and the total charges $94\frac{1}{2}$ crores. The loss on the commercial lines is therefore $5\frac{1}{2}$ crores, and to this must be added the loss on the strategic railways of 2 crores, the total deficit for the year being $7\frac{1}{2}$ crores. As there is now no balance in the reserve fund, the whole of this sum has to be made good by a temporary loan from the depreciation fund. I ought to mention at this point that, by a change in accounting methods, both the earnings and the expenditure are higher by about $1\frac{1}{2}$ crores than they would have been under the system previously followed. This fact should be remembered when any comparison is made with the figures of the previous year.

8. Our estimate of earnings is based on the assumption that the volume of traffic will be about the same as it has been during 1931-32. The enhancements of rates and fares that have been introduced this year by particular railways and the general surcharge on coal freights should increase our earnings by about 1 crore, and it is only to this extent that we expect any improvement in our revenues. Both in 1930-31 and in 1931-32 our estimate of receipts proved unduly optimistic, and on this occasion we have felt it necessary to take a conservative figure. To attempt to estimate the earnings of any commercial system under the world conditions which now prevail is largely a matter of

guess work, but while on the one hand I can see no definite reason for thinking that during the next twelve months the volume of business will show much expansion, on the other hand there is equally little reason for anticipating any further marked deterioration. In these circumstances, it is hardly possible to do otherwise than to take the current level of earnings as the basis of our estimate.

9. If allowance is made for the accounting change to which I have already referred, our working expenses next year are expected to be nearly 2 crores lower than in this year. Out of this sum $1\frac{1}{2}$ crores is due to the emergency cut in pay, which will be in force for the whole year instead of for part of the year only. The balance is not far short of 50 lakhs, but account must also be taken of an automatic increase of 25 lakhs in the amount required for depreciation, and an increase in fuel charges by 37 lakhs owing to the surcharge on coal freight. When allowance is made for both these factors, the reduction in working expenses, apart from the cut in pay, is raised to about 1 crore. If this result is achieved, the position will not I think be unsatisfactory. It is to be remembered that by the end of the current year 400 miles of new lines will have been opened, and there is also an automatic increase in expenditure caused by the annual increments earned by the staff. These are items which raise our costs whether we will or no, and they have to be set off against the reductions in items fully under our control. But I should like to make it plain that, while we have not considered it safe to anticipate a larger reduction in expenditure as compared with the present year, there is no intention that the economy campaign should be relaxed in the slightest degree. Only the most rigid control of expenditure and insistence on economy, wherever economies are possible, can ultimately restore full solvency to the railways, and every effort will be used to bring about this result.

Capital Programme.

10. The activities of the railways on the capital side have been subjected to as close a restriction as on the revenue side. The financial circumstances of the time are such as to leave us no option, and the programme of new works has been ruthlessly pruned. The total sum provided is only $9\frac{1}{2}$ crores, of which the major portion is debitable to the depreciation fund. To cut down our development work to this extent is only possible by limiting the sums allotted for new construction to 1 crore, which will enable us very nearly to complete all the lines now under construction. By the end of next year the Sagaing bridge over the Irrawaddy will be the only unfinished item, and it will be very near completion, as the sum required for it in the following year is only 13 lakhs. So far as open line works are concerned, the only works for which any large provision has been made are the rebuilding and strengthening of certain important bridges where the work could not be postponed any longer consistently with the safety of the public. By the end of next year therefore the capital expenditure to which Government stands committed will be reduced to a very low figure, and capital expenditure can be limited strictly in accordance with the financial exigencies of the time.

11. This brings me to the end of my review of the figures included in the revised estimates for the current year and the budget estimates for 1932-33, and I have deliberately made my survey of the figures as concise as possible. It has been customary in the latter part of the budget speech to enlarge on one or other of the more important aspects of railway policy. On this occasion it will perhaps be better to keep more closely to the financial position of the railways, and to examine from a broader point of view what that position is,

There is the more reason for adopting this course, because a policy of retrenchment necessarily curtails and limits any attempt to pursue an active policy of development and improvement in any direction, and for the moment many of our plans are at a standstill. It is a matter of particular regret to myself that our schemes for improving the conditions of service of our lower paid staff have been grievously retarded, but indeed the slowing up has been general and felt in all departments.

12. From the year 1922-23 up to the year 1929-30 the commercial lines had a surplus in every year and were able to make substantial contributions in aid of general revenues. In the three years from 1930-31 onwards, however, there are deficits, ascertained or estimated, amounting to 3, 7½ and 5½ crores. These deficits can be viewed from one or other of two different points of view. In one aspect what in effect they mean is that the full amount which ought to be allocated to the depreciation fund cannot be provided owing to insufficiency of earnings. This does not mean that the railways have been unable to meet out of revenue the sums actually expended in each year in the replacement of assets, but that they have failed to provide the full sum required to be set aside if the future is to be safeguarded, and our ability ensured to meet fully out of accumulated revenues all sums required for replacements in the future. It is not an uncommon practice for commercial concerns to regulate their actual allocations to depreciation in any particular year not on theoretical grounds but on the basis of the actual results of the year's working. The mere fact therefore that our railways have not been able for three years in succession to meet out of current earnings the depreciation charges in full is not in itself an argument against their ultimate solvency, provided always there is a reasonable prospect that the unfavourable conditions will gradually pass away, so that the losses incurred in lean years may be made good in the more prosperous years which follow.

13. The other way of viewing the position is this. Ordinarily, a company railway in any country in the world would have raised part of the capital invested in the line by means of prior charges such as debentures, and another part in the form of ordinary shares. I will not complicate the comparison by referring to preference shares which might be held to fall in the one class or the other according as the dividend was cumulative or non-cumulative. When trade is depressed and railway earnings decrease, it becomes impossible to maintain the same distributions out of the balance remaining after working expenses have been covered. In that case, the ordinary dividends would first be sacrificed, the provision for depreciation would come next, and the prior charges last of all, because failure to meet them would be an act of insolvency. A State-managed railway, however, is usually in a different position, and certainly this is true of the Indian Railways. The whole of the capital has been raised in the form of what is equivalent to debentures, for the ordinary share capital of the company-managed lines is a negligible proportion of the total. It is true, therefore, to say that, before any allocation can be made for depreciation, interest has to be paid in full on the whole of the capital invested in the undertaking. The point to which I draw attention is this, that so far as the commercial lines are concerned, if only one-fourth of the capital investment were in the form of ordinary shares instead of in the form of fixed interest-bearing securities, it would be possible, in each case of the three deficit years, to meet the depreciation charges in full by means of a reduction in, or the total suspension of, the ordinary dividend. When gloomy views are sometimes expressed as to the solvency of the Indian railways, it is important, I think, to bear this aspect of the case in mind. What

we have to face, even when the country is passing through the severest economic crisis which the world has yet seen, is no worse than that which an ordinary commercial undertaking has to grapple with, when all obligatory expenditure can be met in full but dividends on the ordinary shares can not be paid.

14. I may be asked, however, what about the contributions to general revenues? The obligation imposed on the railways by the Separation Convention to pay an annual contribution amounting to one per cent. of the capital at charge—subject to minor variations in amount according to the financial results of each year—can be viewed as a measure of taxation imposed on the railways, or as being in the nature of an additional distribution of profits which the taxpayer, who is, I take it, the ordinary shareholder of the undertaking, may fairly claim to receive in addition to the recoupment of the interest he himself has to pay on the money invested in the concern. I am not interested at the moment to consider which of these two views is the more accurate one, but whichever view is adopted, it is clear that when trade is suffering from acute depression, it may be impossible either to realise a tax on railway revenues or to earn any additional distribution of the nature of a dividend or bonus. This has always been recognised, and for this reason the Separation Convention provided for the accumulation of a reserve fund out of the profits of the good years, so that when the lean years came, the contribution would have been collected in advance. Three years ago when the balance in the reserve fund amounted to about 18½ crores it seemed that a sufficient fund had been accumulated to tide the railways over even a series of 3 or 4 years of bad trade. But what we have had to face during the last two years, and must continue to face in the coming year, is something much more serious than an ordinary trade depression, namely, a catastrophic decline in prices accompanied by the greatest slump in trade which the world has yet seen. It is impossible for the railways of India, or for any other commercial undertaking, to plan its financial organisation on lines which will provide adequate security against conditions of this kind. Such emergencies have to be faced as they arise, and measures taken to meet the immediate exigencies of the moment. They cannot be planned out in advance.

15. On the revenue side we have endeavoured to alleviate our difficulties by making certain increases in rates and fares, where it seemed, likely that by this means additional income could be obtained. The increases made have been mainly in connection with coaching traffic, including both passenger fares and parcel rates, but about six weeks ago a surcharge of 15 per cent. was imposed on coal freights apart from shipment and bunker coal, and this is by far the most important change in goods rates. I refer especially to this increase, because I should have been most unwilling to agree to it, had the financial position of the railways been less serious than it is. I have long held the view that it is in the interests of the railways to keep coal freights at the lowest level commercially possible, because cheap coal is essential to industrial development, and industrial development means increased traffic for the railways. But on this occasion circumstances left no alternative. It could not be doubted that a higher charge, to the extent imposed, could in fact be realised without diminishing traffic, and even with the addition made, our coal freights still remain at a very low level.

16. In my budget speech last year I explained my view that no solution of our difficulties was to be found in any general increase in the level of freights and fares, and all that has occurred since then has strengthened the conviction which I then formed. Conditions being what they are, and the root cause of all our difficulties being the lack of purchasing power of the community

As a whole, any general increase in freights and fares would defeat its own object. The subject which has engaged my own attention during the last year has been rather the converse question whether we might not secure increased revenue from a reduction in freights on certain commodities owing to the expansion in the volume of traffic which might follow. In particular, in accordance with the undertaking which I gave in my budget speech last year, the question of cotton freights was specially examined last autumn and was discussed with the Agents of the lines principally concerned. But I have not yet been able to satisfy myself that a freight reduction in any class of agricultural produce could be effected without a substantial loss of earnings, and as things stand to-day, such a loss could not be faced. The sole experiment we have made in this direction, namely, the reduction in the wheat freight to Karachi which was made in July last, was not so successful as to encourage us to undertake further experiments of the same kind. Owing to changes which took place shortly afterwards in the level of prices within and outside India, the export of wheat became impossible, and no increase in the volume of traffic followed, but merely a diversion of trade within India from one route to another involving an appreciable loss of revenue to the railways.

17. The question of cotton freights, as I have already said, received special attention, and had prices remained at the level which they touched at the beginning of September last, there was great reason to apprehend that the existing level of freights could not be maintained, since it was becoming doubtful whether, without a reduction, the crop would move. The departure from the gold standard, however, in that month brought about an immediate rise in cotton prices, and this tendency became subsequently still more accentuated owing to an unexpected shortage in the cotton crop, especially in the Central Provinces and Berar. With prices as they now stand, Government are satisfied that there is no danger that the cotton crop will not move, and no adequate grounds have been established for the reduction in freight. The general question, however, is one which requires constant and close observation, and I have personally drawn the attention of the Agents of the principal lines to the necessity of seeing that the matter is not overlooked.

18. Throughout the year the one subject on which the time and energies of every one connected with the Railway Department has been concentrated has been Retrenchment. Into the details of the subject I will not enter now, for Honourable Members will find full particulars of the action taken in order to bring down expenditure in the Railway Board's memorandum, and in the special memorandum which has been prepared to show the action taken on the report of the Retrenchment Sub-Committee, and no doubt I shall have opportunities of dealing with the subject when the cuts are moved. In the main, costs have been reduced not by any spectacular curtailment of activities, but by the aggregation of an immense number of small economies in every branch of the administration. This is an aspect of the case to which I drew special attention last year, and I need not dilate upon it again. I should like, however, to take this opportunity of acknowledging the very valuable services of the Railway Retrenchment Sub-Committee and to express my appreciation of the assistance we have obtained from their recommendations. To a very large extent we have found it possible to take action on the lines suggested, and where we have found it impossible to go quite so far as the Committee wished, we have given their views the most careful consideration before departing from them.

19. One of the recommendations of the Sub-Committee was the appointment of an expert committee to go further into the question. That was a

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recommendation which I welcomed, for I am convinced that the railways of India have everything to gain and nothing to lose from a review of their practices and methods by experts with railway experience in other countries. We took all steps possible to bring about the constitution of such a committee which would visit India during the current cold weather. We were disappointed, however, to find that the services of the experts whom we hoped to obtain could not be secured, and we were driven to the conclusion that the appointment of the Committee must be postponed. The object aimed at in the appointment of such a committee is of course something much more far-reaching than the mere enforcement of economy in the ordinary sense, for it may involve very considerable reorganisation of methods, and for this purpose it is necessary that the qualifications of the members should be of the highest kind. It is my earnest hope that it will be possible to arrange for the appointment of such a committee next cold weather, so that our methods of working may be reviewed by those who can speak with authority and from their knowledge of what is done elsewhere.

20. The question may be asked—what is to be the future financial position of the Indian railways and how are they to emerge from the very difficult position in which they now stand? These are questions with far-reaching implications and easier to ask than to answer, but one thing at least is certain, that since the crisis was brought about not by any circumstances peculiar to India but by economic conditions extending over the whole world, a permanent solution of the problem can be achieved only on a worldwide scale. The various countries in the world are now so closely knit together that conditions in any one country have immediate and far-reaching effects on all other countries. It would take me far beyond my proper sphere to enter into any analysis of the world conditions to which I have referred, but this perhaps may be said that, if the statesmen of the world fail to find a solution of the difficulties with which they are faced, the financial position of the Indian Railways is merely one very small item in a long list of commercial undertakings of all sorts whose very existence will be threatened.

21. This is the last occasion, Mr. President, on which I shall have the honour of submitting the Railway Budget for the consideration of this House. When I look back on the series of speeches I have delivered, I am somewhat ashamed at the prolixity with which at times I have spoken. On this occasion I have striven to be more concise, but I cannot close without paying a special tribute to all those with whom I have been associated during the last five years in the administration of the Railways of India. To all of them I owe a very deep debt, but I shall name only two, and the first is the Financial Commissioner. Sir Alan Parsons is about to quit these benches and to transfer himself from the Railway Department and the Legislative Assembly to the Finance Department and the Council of State. I sometimes wonder whether in the dignified repose—the *otium cum dignitate*—which we naturally associate with the proceedings of the Upper House he will not sometimes look back with regret on the long series of supplementary questions with which he has had at times to grapple in this House and the genial Parliamentary ferocities with which Honourable Members opposite sometimes enliven our discussions. I do not know how long they will linger in his memory, but in my own they are already tinged with the tender hues of regret, as of 'old unhappy, far off things and battles long ago'. But whatever I may remember, I shall not forget the days I have spent with a very faithful administrator and a very loyal colleague. It is a great satisfaction to me to know that he will have in Mr. Rau a worthy successor who has already proved his capacity.

22. The second of my associates whom I desire to name is the Chief Commissioner, Mr. Russell. To him has fallen what is perhaps the most difficult task of all, namely, to guide and administer the railways during the era of retrenchment. It is one thing to take over charge of a great commercial organisation at the beginning of a boom when money is plentiful, new schemes can be initiated and each scheme in turn seems to lead to satisfactory results, and it is another thing—and here I speak from personal experience—to take charge of such an organisation at a time when the period of prosperity has passed, or is passing, and each month seems gloomier than that which preceded it. In my first budget speech I paid my tribute to the work which had been done by Sir Clement Hindley, and I desire now to acknowledge the value of the services Mr. Russell has been able to render at a time not of success and prosperity but of gloom and depression. Retrenchment on the railways spells discouragement on every side, the abandonment of deeply cherished hopes and ambitions—a construction programme reduced almost to negligible proportions, the indefinite postponement of all schemes of improvement, whether in traffic working, in the provision of increased amenities for the travelling public, or in improvements of the condition of the lower paid staff. It has often seemed to me as if all the work which between 1922 and 1929 was devoted to the improvement of the railway administration of India was being pulled to pieces and scrapped, and when that is the case, to avoid discouragement is not easy. It became necessary, as the trade depression intensified, to inflict real and serious hardship on all classes of railway servants, whether in the form of reductions in pay or reductions in establishment involving many discharges. Nor was it only the immediate loss which the staff had to apprehend, but also the curtailment of prospects in the future, for in every grade the number of appointments has been cut down, and in many cases hopes of promotion have been indefinitely postponed. It is in work of this kind that Mr. Russell and I have been engaged during the past year, a more unwelcome task I cannot imagine.

23. On this subject I am only going to say two things more. If you think of going out to shoot tigers, Mr. Russell is a good man to have as a companion, for if a cool head and an undaunted heart are what you want, he will see you through. The second thing I wish to say is this. If we at headquarters have had an unpleasant time but have striven to meet the crisis in the only way it can be met, what about the great body of railway servants throughout India whose lives from day to day have been profoundly affected by the policy of retrenchment—how have they met the crisis? The answer to that question can be given quite shortly and simply. From the highest ranks to the lowest they have met the emergency in the spirit of loyalty and service, carrying out the policy which circumstances have imposed upon us with unflinching resolution, and frank acceptance of what is inevitable, however unwelcome. If I did not pay my tribute to the way in which the great body of railway servants throughout India have passed through these critical times, I should indeed be unworthy to fill the post which I have held for the last five years. That honour and that trust are now to pass to other shoulders. But so far as I am concerned, I have no doubt at all as to the future of the Indian Railways. We cannot indeed control world conditions, and with other countries we may be involved in a common catastrophe. But in so far as our difficulties can be combated by our own resources, I have complete confidence that so long as our staff are imbued with the spirit they have shown during the last two years, every difficulty will be met and every obstacle overcome until the return of prosperity enables us to resume that active policy of development on which India's economic future so largely depends.