

great self-governing colonies. It is natural that I should, at this time, recall our previous Conference in 1897. I find that of the twelve gentlemen who took part in that most interesting Conference only four are with us to-day. One of our then colleagues, Mr. Harry Escombe, has since died. The Empire has been deprived of his services, and all those of us who had the opportunity of making his acquaintance and of appreciating his charming personality will join in the regret which was so greatly felt in his own colony. But the main changes in our Conference result from political vicissitudes, and, above all, from the very welcome Federation of the Australian Commonwealth. But, although we are lessened in number from that change in composition, I believe that we are all animated by the same spirit, that we all have the same paramount object at heart—namely, if we possibly can, to draw closer the bonds which unite us, and to confirm and establish that Imperial unity upon which the security and, I think I may add, the very existence of the Empire depends. I say our paramount object is to strengthen the bonds which unite us, and there are only three principal avenues by which we can approach this object. They are through our political relations in the first place; secondly, by some kind of commercial union; in the third place, by considering the questions which arise out of Imperial defence. These three great questions were considered at the last Conference, and I think it is clear they must form the principal subject of our deliberations on this occasion, and, indeed, of those of any future Conferences which may afterwards be held.

POLITICAL RELATIONS.

Now, as to the first point—the question of our political relations. In 1897 the Premiers came to three resolutions. They resolved, in the first place, with, I think, two dissentients, that our present arrangements are satisfactory under existing conditions. They passed a resolution, in the second place, in favour of a federal union of all colonies geographically connected, and we rejoice that that aspiration, at any rate, has been accomplished so far as Australia is concerned, and I think I may say that it is now almost in sight in the case of South Africa. And, thirdly, they resolved that it was desirable that periodical Conferences of a similar character should be held for the consideration of matters of common interest. Well, then, gentlemen, what I put to you is, Can we make any advance to-day upon these proposals? I may be considered, perhaps, to be a dreamer, or too enthusiastic, but I do not hesitate to say that in my opinion the political federation of the Empire is within the limits of possibility. I recognise as fully as any one can do the difficulties which would attend such a great change in our constitutional system. I recognise the variety of interests that are concerned: the immense disproportion in wealth and the population of the different members of the Empire; and, above all, the distances which still separate them, and the lack of sufficient communication. These are difficulties which at one time appeared to be, and indeed, were, insurmountable. But now I cannot but recollect that similar difficulties almost, if not quite, as great have been surmounted in the case of the United States of America. And difficulties, perhaps not quite so great, but still very considerable, have been surmounted in the federation of the Dominion of Canada; and therefore I hold that as we must put no limits to science, as the progress which has already been made is only an indication of the progress which may be made in the future, I hold and say that these difficulties may be overcome, and at all events that we should cherish this ideal of closer union in our hearts, and that, above all, we should do nothing, either now or at any future time, to make it impossible. We have no right to put by our action any limit to the Imperial patriotism of the future; and it is my opinion that as time goes on there will be a continually growing sense of the common interests which unite us, and also, perhaps, which is equally important, of the common dangers which threaten us. At the same time I would be the last to suggest that we should do anything which could by any possibility be considered premature. We have had within the last few years a most splendid evidence of the results of a voluntary union without any formal obligations, in the great crisis of the war through which we have now happily passed. The action of the self-governing colonies in the time of danger of the Motherland has produced here a deep and a lasting impression. We are profoundly grateful to you for what you have done. It has created a sense of reciprocal obligation. It has brought home to all of us the essential unity of the sentiment which unites us and which pervades all parts of His Majesty's dominions. And I am glad on this occasion to recognise the material aid which you have afforded. I propose to lay on the table a document which I think will be interesting, and which shows in a comparative form the assistance which has been given to us, both in men and in money, by the self-governing colonies. It is a remarkable testimony to their loyalty and their devotion to the Imperial interests. But I, myself, greatly as I value this aid, clearly as I recognise the assistance which it has been to us, and the splendid quality of the troops that you have sent, and their splendid behaviour when tested on the field of battle—I attach more importance to the moral support which we have always received from you. That has been a splendid answer, and when foreign countries have competed, as they have done, in a campaign of malignant misrepresentation, it has been something for us who have represented the interests of the United Kingdom to be able to point to the unbiassed testimony which has been given by the free colonies and dominions of the Empire to the righteousness of our cause. I feel, therefore, in view of this it would be a fatal mistake to transform the spontaneous enthusiasm which has been so readily shown throughout the Empire into anything in the nature of an obligation which might be at this time unwillingly assumed or only formally accepted. The link which unites us, almost invisible as it is, sentimental in its character, is one which we would gladly strengthen, but at the same time it has proved itself to be so strong that certainly we would not wish to substitute for it a chain which might be galling in its incidence. And therefore upon this point of the political relations between the colonies and ourselves His Majesty's Government, while they would welcome any approach which might be made to a more definite and a closer union, feel that it is not for them to press this upon you. The demand, if it comes, and when it comes, must come from the colonies. If it comes it will be enthusiastically received in this country.