

Eleventh Day.
6 May 1907.

PREFERENTIAL
TRADE.

(Mr.
Lloyd George.)

controversy! Sir Joseph Ward, the Premier of New Zealand, in the important speech which he delivered in this debate, has brought before the Conference two or three propositions to which it would in my judgment be well worth our while to devote our most careful consideration. He made, as far as I can recollect, three important suggestions: one was the improvement and the cheapening of cable communications with this country; the second was the appointment of commercial agents or consuls in the Colonies, whose business it would be to assist British trade; and the third—and this is undoubtedly the most important and also the most difficult, if I may say so, of the three suggestions which Sir Joseph Ward made—was the improvement of the communications for the transport and passenger traffic between the Mother Country and the Colonies. As to the first, it would be an undoubted advantage to the traders in all these countries if they could communicate their orders quickly at rates which would not be practically prohibitive. Our main object ought to be to shorten the distance between ourselves and our Colonies by every means at our command. It is the distance that handicaps colonial trade in competition with foreign countries which are more favourably situated. As to the second suggestion, a good deal has already been done; but I am not at all satisfied that we have by any means done all that is in our power to do on this point. I think we have proceeded on much too frugal a scale. If Canada, Australia, and New Zealand had been foreign countries, we should have appointed first-class consuls at a remuneration which would make it worth their while to attend to the business of our merchants in those countries. It would have enabled us to secure first-class men. But seeing that they are British Colonies, we have satisfied ourselves with running our trade intelligence in these vast territories, with their endless possibilities, on the cheap. That, I agree, is a flaw which has to be repaired.

I am doubly glad that the Prime Minister of New Zealand raised this question while the Chancellor of the Exchequer was present to hear his observations. I am not blaming the Treasury, and I certainly am not blaming the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who has invariably—and if I may add, ungrudgingly—acceded to every request made to him by the Board of Trade to spend money in improving the equipment of our Commercial Department, and he has answered our appeals on a very generous scale in the course of the past year, when much greater demands have been made upon him than for many years past. But it shows the advantage of initiating discussions about practical proposals, that Sir Joseph Ward's reference to this subject has encouraged us to go to the Treasury again.

Mr. ASQUITH: Already?

Mr. LLOYD GEORGE: Yes, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer has arrived in this room at a most opportune moment. We have approached the Treasury for the purpose of asking them to grant us more lavish assistance in organising our system for obtaining more complete commercial information in the Colonies, and for assisting our traders there. All we want them to do for us is what they are doing for us already in foreign countries. We do not ask for more at the present moment. We are now considering the question of appointing what I may call "Imperial commercial travellers," if I may put it in that form, whose business it will be to move about in the Colonies to investigate trade conditions and requirements, and to see especially where our trade rivals are getting advantage over us, and to report fully on these points to the Commercial Department of the Board of Trade. From that Department the information will be confidentially disseminated in the proper quarters. They will also visit the great industrial centres of this country, and will ascertain what kind of produce