

Fourteenth Day.

9 May 1907.

UNIVERSAL
PENNY POSTAGE.
(Mr. Buxton.)

elastic condition at the present moment, and the various claims upon our finances are considerable just now. I am afraid it must be understood in our accepting this resolution that we do it as an indication of policy more than any promise to carry it out at any early date. The whole matter is really one of finance. We should desire to do this at any moment we may have the funds; but I should like to point out to Sir Joseph Ward and the Conference that the adoption of this proposal would mean a very considerable charge on Imperial funds. We have made certain postal improvements, as Sir Joseph knows, under the Postal Union—changes which come into force on 1st October next and which will cost us about 190,000*l.* a year. The adoption of universal penny postage would mean an addition to that of about 450,000*l.*, so that this resolution in its entirety would involve a charge of something like 650,000*l.* a year, which is, of course, a very serious sum. I am afraid we could not look with any hope, within, at all events, a number of years, of making up that loss by increased facilities leading to increased commerce, because in reducing it to a penny post, the margin of profit is almost infinitesimal on each item. I am glad to think that at the Conference of the Postal Union, at which Sir Joseph Ward was a representative, a very considerable step was made in advance in regard to foreign postage, at the instigation of the British delegates, supported by the Colonial delegates, under which, after the 1st October next, the charge for foreign postage will remain, unfortunately, still at 2½*d.*, but that will frank a letter not of half an ounce as previously, but of a full ounce, and the second charge for two ounces will be only 4½*d.* So that the upshot of the matter will be this, that under the new regulations which have cost this country about 200,000*l.* a year, in future a letter weighing an ounce, which before was 5*d.*, will go for 2½*d.*; a two-ounce letter, which before would have cost 10*d.* will now go for 4½*d.* I think the Conference will admit that is a considerable step in advance in improving postal regulations with foreign countries. I do not know whether Sir Joseph has quite enough taken this point into account. As he will know as a delegate at that Postal Union the other great countries interested were by no means anxious to adopt penny postage; indeed, it was with great difficulty they were induced to adopt these changes which I have mentioned. Therefore, I am afraid even if we were ourselves prepared, and had the funds at disposal at the present moment, to suggest a penny postage to the other countries it would not at present be received with much favour. But I will say it is a matter with which the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as well as myself, have expressed sympathy, which, if and when the funds permit we shall certainly desire to adopt, taking into account this fact that in regard to all postal reforms they unfortunately cost money, and we have to look round when Post Office funds are available to see what, on the whole is the best investment for that service. This would, therefore, have to take its opportunity with other matters in competition, many of which are pressed upon us from time to time. I entirely agree with Sir Joseph Ward that it is a matter of great importance and one which I, for one, would like to see adopted at some early date.

There is just one point in connection with it which I might mention with regard to Imperial Penny Post, and that is that that also is benefited by the Postal Union Convention, to which I have referred. Up to now, under the Imperial Penny Postage, a letter of half-an-ounce went for a penny, but after the 1st October next a letter of a whole ounce will go for a penny; so practically what used to cost 2*d.* under the Imperial Penny Postage will only in future cost a penny.

I venture to suggest to Mr. Deakin when we are talking of inter-communication between various parts of the Empire, and subsidies, and so on, whether the time has not come that Australia also should fall completely into accord with the rest of the Empire in regard to this matter.