

Fourteenth Day.
9 May 1907.

BRITISH
INTERESTS IN
THE PACIFIC.

Sir WILFRID LAURIER: By whom?

Mr. DEAKIN: By order of the British Government. Immediately afterwards one-half of that very territory which we had just been assured was not going to be touched was appropriated by the German Government. Then, because under pressure of public opinion that Minister for the Colonies was forced to take over the fraction left, that is cited to us years afterwards as a proof of the spirited policy pursued by the British Government. What is true of this island is true of the Solomon Islands and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. Whatever losses there are in the Pacific—and there have been others—have been due to neglect here. Every single gain has been due to pressure from Australia and New Zealand. Consequently, whatever credit is due for the acquisition of these islands rests on the other side of the globe and not on this. Is it, therefore, to be wondered at that a feeling has been created and still exists in Australia—an exasperated feeling—that British Imperial interests in that ocean have been mishandled from the first? It is more by good luck than by good management that we retain even the islands that we possess. That is to be remembered, in coming to the consideration of the recent developments to which these remarks are a prelude, because, unless you understand that, from the point of view of Australia, we once had the Pacific within our grasp, and have retained nothing of it without constant protest and exertion, while we have lost a great deal which we might have secured, our sentiment, which is apparently quite unappreciated by the press and public men of this country, will never be understood. Here we are represented as a grasping people who, settled in Australia, a territory still too large for us, are reaching out in a grasping spirit to add to it merely because we are in Australia. That exactly reverses our point of view. We practically had these islands, or most of them, almost as much as we had Australia in the first instance. It is not a series of grasping annexations that we have been attempting, but a series of aggravated and exasperating losses which we have had to sustain. There you have our two absolutely opposite points of view, the point of view of our part of the world and the point of view in this country, and it is only because it is necessary, as it appears to me, to make that fundamental contrast of attitude understood, that I have ventured to detain the Conference by referring to it.

Let me now approach the latest illustration of our misfortunes in the New Hebrides. Ever since I have been in public life this group has presented vexed problems to Australia. It was only after a very long struggle that in 1887 we were able to obtain a means by which the titles of British settlers there could be officially recognised. We wished some foothold given to those early and enterprising men. In 1887, as is now well understood, when the first of these Conferences assembled, the project quite favourably regarded by the British Government included the surrender of whatever rights were possessed in that group. It was only on account of the very vigorous opposition to that suggestion offered by Australasia that the islands did not then pass entirely under the French flag. That was another experience which has not been forgotten, and is not likely to be forgotten. The intention in 1887 was that some arrangement should be arrived at with the French Republic in reference to the future of these islands. When the Conference of 1897 met, the only reference to them that I remember, states that no decision had been arrived at. For ten years the matter had been allowed to rest. In 1904 an agreement between the British and French Governments was signed which provided for a settlement of matters in dispute between them all over the world, in Morocco in particular, in Africa generally and elsewhere. Again the New Hebrides only appeared in a footnote indicating that something was still expected to be done. It requires to be remembered