

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE.

MR. BELCHER: I am very pleased that Mr. Hughes has mentioned this matter, because I have had occasion to read very carefully the blue books referring to this subject; and the conclusion I have come to is this: that the British shipowner has undoubtedly used more than a due influence with the Board of Trade. We are here engaged in passing a resolution which we think is highly necessary for our own convenience; and we have a perfect right, when we come here, to expect that no obstacle shall be put in the way, and that the subject should not be hung up for two or three years before it can be passed. We have a perfect right to express our opinion, and to resent very strongly indeed the interference of any private traders with any Government which has the power of putting a veto on our legislation. We Colonials want to make that clearly understood: that we do not want, and are going to resent, the interference of private individuals. We have no voice in any legislation you pass here; you can pass whatever legislation you like; and the Colonies are never asked whether they think it right or wrong, good, bad, or indifferent.

THE CHAIRMAN: I do not understand Mr. Belcher to take the view that His Majesty's Government should be restricted in the advice they should take as to how a particular statute will affect the interests here. Obviously, the Government must go to the best sources and to the only people who can tell them.

MR. BELCHER: But I notice in all the despatches and communications here that they are purely from ship-owners.

HON. W. M. HUGHES: Look at this letter, the letter from the Colonial Secretary on page 82, to His Excellency the Governor of New Zealand, Lord Plunket; in the 9th paragraph it says: "Your Government will understand that His Majesty's Government have no desire to withdraw from the consideration of Colonial Parliaments such questions as those raised by the New Zealand Bill. But in considering the subject they have been forced to the conclusion that if the merchant shipping of the Empire engaged in the overseas trade is to prosper in the future as it has done in the past, it must be governed by a code as nearly uniform throughout the Empire as the diversity of circumstances will allow, and that it is impossible in practice to work towards such a code unless the principles and the more important details can be definitely settled in concert by the Imperial and Colonial Governments. Such a settlement so far from impeding the labours of Parliaments and Governments in the Colonies will, in the opinion of His Majesty's Government, ultimately lighten them. It is as a first step to the attainment of that object that His Majesty's Government now propose a Conference with the representatives of Australian shipping." And in the same letter, paragraph 6, it says: "The practical inconveniences which may arise from divergent or opposed legislation in different parts of the Empire are indicated in the second memorandum of the solicitor to the Board of Trade, and in the memorandum of Messrs. Hill, Dickinson and Co. His Majesty's Government must not be taken to indorse all the criticisms made in these documents; but it would appear from both memoranda that British ships trading between this country and New Zealand may conceivably comply with the requirements of the Law here, but nevertheless find on arriving at Colonial ports that the Law to which they were there subject demands of them compliance with conditions differing in important respects. I have already said that in the opinion of His Majesty's Government the time has come to reconsider the whole situation. It is impossible to discuss and settle by correspondence questions of the magnitude and complexity which such a reconsideration involves," and so on. Now, we come here because the proposals we set forth in that Bill, or rather the proposals which the Government set forth in that Bill, are not suitable, in the opinion of the shipowners, and in the opinion of your Government, for the Mercantile Marine. We come here, and you say—Mr. Lloyd George suggested it himself—that you do not propose to alter your law for the next 10 or 20 years. I venture to say that that is one of the most astounding statements I ever heard in my life. To ask men to come 10,000 or 12,000 miles to discuss questions with reference to uniformity of legislation, and then calmly to tell them that you are all in favour of uniformity but that, for

your part, you are not going to alter your laws for 10 or 20 years, strikes me as a most extraordinary procedure.

MR. COX: My recollection differs somewhat as to what Mr. Lloyd George said; I think he laid stress upon the extraordinary difficulty of getting Acts through Parliament in this country. I do not think he meant that, providing we came to the conclusion that alterations were desirable, we would not be perfectly willing to do our level best to bring them about. What he meant was that there were practical difficulties standing in the way.

HON. W. M. HUGHES: I have no doubt of that; but, at the time when Mr. Lloyd George introduced that Bill into Parliament he knew very well that this Conference was going to meet; we had been invited here to discuss certain anomalies in connection both with your own Act and with ours; and we had anticipated that all attempt to do anything more than introduce stop-gap legislation was to be postponed until this Conference had decided upon some *via media*. Instead of that, you pass something into law, and then you tell us, "That is all we can do for the next 10 or 20 years." It is quite immaterial whether you are willing to pass an Act but cannot get it through, or whether you are not willing to pass it and can get it through; the fact is that for 10 or 20 years you propose to do nothing.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE: It seems to me that what we are mainly considering is, whether or not there will be unanimity as far as the Colonial legislation is concerned, and whether we will have control over British ships at the time they come into Colonial waters. If the Imperial Act is not altered, I do not take it that any alteration we make will be attempted to be overridden by the Imperial authorities; that is to say, that if we come to an understanding or an agreement we shall get the advantage of a New Zealand Act, as we desire to have it in reference to everything that comes within our control.

HON. W. M. HUGHES: But we have that already.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE: No, we have not got the Act passed.

HON. W. M. HUGHES: Oh! you mean the King's assent. But you are not going to say that His Majesty's assent is to depend upon what this Conference does?

SIR WILLIAM LYNE: I do not think that as far as the British shipping on the coast of England and in other parts of the world is concerned, it would be a good thing to have it. Uniformity, if we can get it, or as nearly so as possible, is desirable; but that does not particularly appeal to us if we get what we want.

HON. DUGALD THOMSON: What I understand is this: We are here to try to obtain uniformity of legislation. The representatives of the United Kingdom say, "We wish you would make your 'legislation'—that is Australian and New Zealand legislation—uniform with our Acts, the original Merchant Shipping Act and the amendment of that Act which we passed last year." But they have said, in connection with this manning and some other things, "In view of your representations, we acknowledge the difference of your circumstances, and therefore, so far as your shipping is concerned, we agree to the resolution which has already been passed, that your conditions shall have force in connection with your shipping." That is all we can expect; and if we go into the larger question of what is to be done in Great Britain with the Merchant Shipping Act, there will be no end to it; it is a bottomless pit.

THE CHAIRMAN: I think we ought to get before us a substantial motion; but I feel some diffidence, in Mr. Lloyd George's absence, in dealing with the matter.

HON. W. M. HUGHES: Under the circumstances, I quite see the difficulty; and I will defer what I have to say till the President of the Board of Trade is here.

THE CHAIRMAN: I think you may take it that what he said was not in any way an expression of intention, but only in anticipation of the difficulties.

HON. W. M. HUGHES: Quite so; but what I said was drawn from me by Mr. Thomson mentioning that certain things had been decided as to what we were going to do, and I felt justified in explaining exactly how it