

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE.

of Commons and elsewhere that the Lascars are British subjects. Now, I want to say emphatically that a large number of the Lascars, perhaps half of them, who sign on British ships, are not British subjects at all, but subjects of foreign countries. That I am certain of. The same thing applies to the Chinamen. We are told that the Chinamen are British subjects. That I emphatically deny.

MR. COX : Enormous numbers are.

MR. HAVELOCK WILSON : I know, but I am quite aware of the fact that a large number of Chinamen are said to hail from Hong Kong who do not belong to Hong Kong. Men are entered on the ship's articles as Hong Kong Chinamen who were perhaps never in Hong Kong in their lives. That is done as a matter of convenience. A large number of Chinamen and Lascars, I say, do not belong to the British possessions at all, but are men belonging to foreign Governments. I do not exclude any men. I never have advocated the policy of excluding any man on the ground of being a Chinaman, or a Lascar, or a foreigner. What I have always contended for, and what I strongly contend for now, is this : if a shipowner prefers to employ a Lascar or Chinaman, let him give them the same conditions that he gives to an ordinary British subject. Now I want to tell the India Office this : that there is no proper supervision of the engagement of the Lascars in ports of India. The Lascars are very often compelled to sign agreements of which they do not understand a single line. The result is we have a good deal of trouble in English ports when those Lascars refuse to proceed on a voyage somewhere where they never agreed to go. Frequently those Lascars are sent to gaol because they refused to fulfil an agreement that they did not understand and knew nothing at all about. If the Government would say that if a Lascar is employed on a British ship he shall have the same amount of accommodation as a white man then we are getting near the mark, and I should say also that the Government who are giving out mail contracts should say to the shipowner who is getting a big subsidy from the Government (and one company is getting over £400,000 a year, not engaged in the mail service alone, but cargo-carrying boats) that they must pay the English rate of wages. Now I know the answer to that has been given more than once in the House of Commons, namely that the Lascars are engaged at ports in India. But I again deny that, and say that very often the Lascars are engaged in ports in the United Kingdom. It is true that they are brought from India for ships in ports in the United Kingdom. I advocate before this Conference that whatever legislation may be passed, either in our Parliament or in the New Zealand Parliament or in the Australian Parliament, it should be laid down that the Lascar must have the same conditions that are given to other seamen on British ships. I can quite understand the case with regard to Lascars being engaged on ships registered and owned in India; there I see the Indian law applies : but that ought not to apply to ships owned and registered in this country, or in Australia, or New Zealand.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE : Did I understand it was said that the arrangement was that Lascars were not to go beyond 38° N.?

THE CHAIRMAN : Yes, in the North Atlantic.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE : Why does not that apply to the South?

CAPTAIN CHALMERS : I think there is a regulation about Cape Horn: they are not allowed to go round there.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE : I find they are going far below 38°—to Hobart. They are doing that now, and it is very cold there. I am a Tasmanian, and I know it is very cold. I only raised this question to be quite sure; I am very glad indeed to know it. It will be a help in some things that I would like to do.

CAPTAIN CHALMERS : This is ruled by the isothermal line. What the Government has done is to take the isothermal line—the equal heat line—in each hemisphere. For instance, if you take the latitude of New York, it is about 43° North, or something like that, and the line of average temperature in winter there will go right up North of Norway.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE : I am very glad to hear that there is a provision that they shall not go too far North, and I hope they will not be allowed to go too far South.

MR. HAVELOCK WILSON : That is what I should like to see carried out.

THE CHAIRMAN : I am going to appeal to Mr. Belcher not to press this motion. In so far as trade on the coast of New Zealand and the Commonwealth is concerned, although I do not say that they have specifically the right to exclude British subjects of any colour (which is a matter that I do not want to express any opinion at all upon; it is a constitutional question which I would rather not say a word about), still they have the power of excluding Lascars by other means—by means of wages, manning, accommodation, and food scale.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE : I am glad to hear that you agree with what I said. Somebody did not agree with me.

THE CHAIRMAN : That is so far as the coasting trade is concerned. There is no doubt that they can insist upon certain wages being paid, upon certain accommodation being provided, upon a certain minimum manning scale, and a certain food scale also being imposed, which would have the practical effect of excluding Lascars. So far as that is concerned, it is a matter entirely for themselves and not for this Conference. But this motion goes very far beyond that.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE : It goes over the universe.

THE CHAIRMAN : Especially as interpreted by Mr. Belcher, and I could not possibly accept it. It is not merely the representatives of the shipowners, but the Imperial representatives would certainly vote against it. I do not know what would be thought in India of the British Government if they assented to a proposition of this sort, which would exclude Indian sailors from the benefit of a trade which we have captured from them. The Lascar is a sailor; he is an hereditary sailor since the Flood. He used to have all the coasting trade of India. Now, we have taken it away. Our steamers call there, and have practically destroyed the Lascar trade there, and the only opening they have got for sailing, for seamanship, is in our steamers. They are all hereditary sailors. Mr. Havelock Wilson says they are not all British subjects. That may be so. I daresay, for instance, if you go on some of the steamers, you will find natives of Goa, who are really Portuguese. They are stewards.

MR. HAVELOCK WILSON : And firemen too.

THE CHAIRMAN : You cannot sift them and insist upon certificates of origin. But in the main they are British subjects. They are much better paid than they ever were in their own trade, and much better treated. They are extraordinarily well satisfied. They have begged and prayed and petitioned the House of Commons not to interfere with their accommodation or their food scale. They say it is exactly what they want.

MR. BELCHER : Who did?

THE CHAIRMAN : The Lascars.

MR. HAVELOCK WILSON : The shipping companies.

THE CHAIRMAN : The Lascars have already sent a petition to the House of Commons. I know that Mr. Havelock Wilson has doubts about the way it was got up, but they came and gave evidence themselves. There is no doubt that they are very much better paid and better fed than they used to be in their own trade. I do not suppose anyone will doubt that at all. That is the position. Suppose we were to assent to a proposition which would be a very grave reflection upon them? In the first place, they are very touchy on the question of colour. I remember a great row because the late Lord Salisbury referred to a learned and distinguished Hindoo, Mr. Naoroji, as "a black man." That created a tremendous feeling throughout India. We are responsible for the government of 300 millions of these people, and therefore we could not possibly assent to it, and I ask the Colonial representatives not to ask us to do so.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE : I am not asking you.

THE CHAIRMAN : I would rather not, if they can see their way. We are not interfering at all with their legislation.