

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE.

MR. WALTER J. HOWELL: If the Conference will allow me, I may say that this subject is by no means new in this country; it has been under the consideration of successive Governments and Parliaments for at least 10 years. In 1878 a private member of the House of Lords called attention to the alleged insufficient ballasting of ships, and the Board of Trade got together what evidence they could and argued against that resolution, and it was withdrawn. In 1898, 1901, and 1902, Bills were introduced into the House of Lords, and on each occasion they were withdrawn. But when the latter Bill was withdrawn, the Government promised that the whole matter should be referred to a Committee, and a strong Committee of the House of Lords, under the chairmanship of Lord Spencer, was appointed to go into the matter. That was in 1902, and it began its sittings in February, 1903; and after hearing a large number of witnesses, reported in May of the same year. The report was presented to Parliament, and copies are, of course, available for members of this Conference. I will read one or two short extracts from it. The first is this—

HON. W. M. HUGHES: What report is that?

THE CHAIRMAN: It is a report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords to inquire into the question of the light load-line. They went into the matter very fully, and a large number of witnesses were called, and Mr. Howell is now going to read one or two extracts from that report.

MR. WALTER J. HOWELL: "Although for various reasons the practice of sending ships to sea in ballast seems to be increasing, the Committee find from the evidence which they have received, and from the Board of Trade statistics, that there has been no serious loss of life on ships in ballast, as compared with such loss in the case of vessels with full cargoes, and that accidents to the machinery in such ships are decreasing." Further on they say: "The Committee are informed by Mr. Howell, C.B., an Assistant Secretary of the Board of Trade, on the authority of statistics produced, that of the total tonnage which cleared at the various ports in the United Kingdom in 1902, 32½ per cent. was in ballast, as against 67½ per cent. with cargo; and that whereas of the vessels totally lost in the 17 years ending on the 30th June, 1901, 17 per cent., as against 83 per cent., were in ballast; of the tonnage totally lost, 13 per cent., as against 87 per cent., was in ballast; and of the seamen lost, 10 per cent., as against 90 per cent., were lost from ships in ballast. The average annual number of seamen lost from all kinds of merchant vessels belonging to the United Kingdom in the 17 years ending on the 30th June, 1902, was 988, and the average number of lives lost from vessels in ballast was 99. During the last year there has been a decided diminution in the number of lives lost from vessels in ballast, and only three vessels in ballast have been missing during the last two winters. It cannot, therefore, be said to be proved that vessels in large numbers are unseaworthy because wanting in ballast. While such vessels are undoubtedly difficult to manage in rough weather, the number of accidents seems to be smaller in proportion than to ships in cargo." After making several other comments and recommendations, the Committee went on to say, in paragraph 13 of their report: "The Committee are, therefore, unable to recommend the adoption of a light load-line, because, in their opinion, there has been no loss of life, such as was proved to exist when the deep load-line became law, sufficient to justify legislation of this restrictive character, which would of necessity press hardly upon shipowners." In the concluding paragraphs of their report, the Committee observe: "The Committee have received important evidence from Mr. W. J. Howell, C.B., an Assistant Secretary of the Board of Trade and Chief of the Marine Department, and find that the Board, whilst strongly opposed to any fresh legislation at the present time, believing that the evil of underballasting is being done away with, yet consider that it is possible to make further improvements in the ballasting of ships. The Committee, therefore, confidently rely upon the Board of Trade to use the powers already conferred upon them by Parliament to prevent the improper or insufficient ballasting of ships. It will be the duty of the Board to apply at once to Parliament if at any future date they consider any extension of their powers necessary in the public interest." Now, in accordance with the recommendations of the Committee, the Board of Trade issued instructions to their detaining officer and surveyors as to their power to detain ships if

unsafe by reason of insufficient, improper, or improperly secured ballast. At the same time, warnings and cautionary letters were issued broadcast to all concerned, urging the necessity for the exercise of great care to secure proper ballasting. A paper showing exactly what was done was presented to Parliament in July, 1903. I am glad to be able to add, in conclusion, that nothing has happened since 1903 that would justify the Board of Trade in applying to Parliament for further powers. The fact is, that the statistics of loss of life on ships in ballast have been even less serious in recent years than in those reviewed by the House of Lords Committee. I find that the total number of seamen lost from vessels in ballast during the period from June, 1901, to the present date has been 321, as compared with 773 in the six previous years, and of these deaths only 87 occurred in steamers in the latter period, as compared with 197 in the former. I will only add that, in my opinion, these facts show the wisdom of the course adopted in this country with regard to the matter referred to in the resolution before us. With full powers of prevention and punishment in their hands, His Majesty's Government has felt, as the Committee of the House of Lords felt, "that it would be unwise to put any further legislative restrictions upon British ships which could not equally be applied to foreign vessels, unless it could be proved that such restrictions were absolutely necessary for the safeguarding of human life." I think I have told the Committee enough to show that this subject has had great attention paid to it in this country, and although it is being still carefully watched, there can be no doubt that loss of life has been decreasing and a remedy is being found.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE: I understand you have been very careful or more careful than you were before, which has caused a decrease of loss of life in certain periods. That is in consequence of that report. I suppose, first, by careful inspection, and, secondly, by not allowing those ships to go to sea unless they were seaworthy.

MR. WALTER J. HOWELL: I think the improvement can be attributed to many causes. Stronger propeller shafts is one cause, and then another is the increased care of shipowners themselves to issue instructions to secure proper ballast, and the third is, of course, the increased vigilance of the Board of Trade.

SIR WILLIAM LYNE: That seems to me to have something to do with the increased strength of the propeller shaft.

MR. WALTER J. HOWELL: With regard to the propeller shaft, it will be interesting if I tell you what the Committee of the House of Lords said under the circumstances. The Committee attribute this decrease in accidents to the machinery in steamers very largely to the action taken by Lloyds' Register, on the recommendation of a Special Committee which sat some three years ago, to devise means to prevent the large number of breakages to screw shafts which were alleged to be due to the underballasting of ships. On the advice of this Committee, Lloyds' altered their rules with regard to the size and strength of propeller shafts. The results of this policy seem to have been most satisfactory, judging from the large decrease in the number of accidents to propellers and shafts since 1899. I think it is only fair to mention that, although that has been a cause, but there have been other causes.

HON. W. M. HUGHES: I would like to ask this, whether in effect the regulations or inspection that the Board of Trade makes of vessels in ballast—how the officials determine whether a vessel is or is not fit to go to sea, whether this does not, in effect, amount to a light load-line?

MR. WALTER J. HOWELL: Every ship has to be considered on its merits by experts.

HON. W. M. HUGHES: As a matter of fact, don't those experts look at the depth to which the hull is submerged? Doesn't that amount practically to a light load-line?

MR. WALTER J. HOWELL: Not to marking a light load-line.

HON. W. M. HUGHES: But marking is not the point at all. It is submerged to a point the expert considers sufficient.