

support of the people of all classes, and with the support of members of Parliament. And he went, Parliament adjourning until his return. That was, as this is, the first session of a new Parliament, under the leadership of a Prime Minister who had been before the country more than once, and who had come back from the polls more than once. The Parliament of the country under these circumstances practically unanimously voted that he should go to England to represent New Zealand, and that during his absence the business of Parliament should be deferred. Later on, in the concluding session of a Parliament, with the same Prime Minister, when he desired to attend on a second occasion, the course followed was the right one. An acting-leader was appointed in his absence, and the business of the country went on. Parliament in 1902 established a precedent, and, from every standpoint, rightly so. It is said that the leader of a party who, returning from the country, has not had an opportunity of meeting his own followers who have just been elected to Parliament under the banner of the side which he leads—the proposition is made for the first time in connection with the history of this country that that leader, when circumstances of vital consequence to the Empire have arisen—circumstances known to every one in this country as entirely beyond his control—should go to the Conference, and that in his absence an opportunity should be given to his opponents to stand up and move resolutions affecting the leader and the policy he has formulated and which his party supported. And they call that “playing the game,” and ask that, when the exigencies of the Empire call for that leader to be in the Old Land, where the business transcends in importance anything at present otherwise affecting New Zealand, the business of Parliament should go on in his absence, when the whole policy he has been to the country upon would be discussed and he not there to take part in the discussion. This is not a fair proposition. If it were so, why was it not done in the case of Mr. Seddon?

An Hon. MEMBER.—It was done.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—The first time he went away, in 1902, under exactly similar conditions to what we are placed in now, Parliament adjourned until after his return. If he had been treated as it is proposed by the Opposition to treat me, he would not have gone; and, what is more, I say without reservation that it would have been grossly unfair to have expected any member of his Ministry to act in the position of acting-leader in the absence of the Prime Minister. There is such a thing as fairness to the man who takes your place, and what fairness would there be to an acting-leader who is not responsible for the policy of the Government, and who was not at the head of the Administration when that policy was affirmed? What would be the position of that acting-leader who, immediately after his leader's return from the polls, is asked to defend not only a policy for which he is not responsible, but, for instance, a reconstruction of the Ministry itself? He is part of the Administration, it is true, but he is not actually in the position of leader of the party; and it is palpable unfairness, I contend, to ask that a man as acting-leader should be left behind and be expected to be responsible for the policy. No man who knows anything about the history of the country could gainsay the statement I make. It would be unfair in the first place to the country, to whom I am responsible in my official position, for me to go away from that party which has been returned under my leadership—and, remember, returned for the first time under my leadership—with a number of new members to whom I have only had the opportunity of saying “How do you do?” and new Ministers on these benches concerning whom there may be criticisms—

An Hon. MEMBER.—Cannot they defend themselves?

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—They can, but none of them are responsible for my action in this respect. I am alone responsible for it. I may say every colleague of mine agrees with what I am putting before members to-day. It is not reflecting in any way on any of them—quite the contrary. You cannot get away from the fact, as a matter of common-sense procedure, that no matter how able another Minister may be, to call on him to act for an absent Prime Minister who is responsible for a policy does not give him a fair show. To expect him to act in the absence of his leader under such circumstances would be grossly unfair, and I say it has never been done in New Zealand; and if I am called on to represent this country at this Conference, which men on both sides of politics in the Old Land have said is of vital importance, and which we in this portion of the British dominions recognise as being of a most important character, we all realise that it is impossible for all that is to come before the Conference to be disclosed. We recognise that no British Government would put up an invitation to the Governments of the overseas dominions the details of matters to come before the Conference, such as those of defensive organization, or strategical matters, or an extension of the arrangements between the Old Land and the outlying possessions. They could not be expected, unless they were devoid of common-sense, to divulge what is to be brought up in a private Conference of this kind. It is my belief, and it is the belief of many other people better able to judge than I am, that in the history of the Old World never since the days of Nelson has there been an epoch of such gravity to the United Kingdom and its outlying possessions as we have arrived at now. We have already as a community shown our faith in a practical way in the offer by the Government of New Zealand on behalf of the people in support of the navy. Then, surely it must be admitted as a corollary and consequence of it that we must as a community be represented at the Conference; and, if represented at all, we should be represented by a responsible man, who could come back to Parliament and explain such proposals as are necessary for Parliament to consider in connection with this all-important question. Let me say one word for the purpose of removing any wrong impression that may exist in the mind of anybody regarding the High Commissioner, who has creditably filled important positions in this country, and who I am sure will fill his present important position in the Old Country with satisfaction to the people generally. The suggestion has been made that he should represent New Zealand at this Imperial Conference. I want to say that I do not believe if Mr. Hall-Jones, recognising the responsibilities of Ministers of the Crown to Parliament and the people, were asked to represent New Zealand he would do so unless he were instructed by the Government to do it, to