

whom he is responsible and not to the people. There is nothing more certain than this: you cannot remove the responsibility vested in a Minister of the Crown on to another's shoulders. It is impossible for any one who as a Minister of the Crown in this country has a great responsibility imposed upon him by statute—it is impossible for any one, I say, once he has passed out of office to have that responsibility, it matters not what capacity he has. We may have our own opinions on many things, but it is a different thing when heavy responsibility to the people, even though they be of Imperial concern, are being dealt with. Then, I say, especially when such large financial considerations are involved, that only Ministers of the Crown owing a responsibility to the people should, on behalf of the people, attend such a Conference, and, I think I am right in saying, the more so when it is to be a private Conference. If it were an open Conference there is something to be said as to having representation without that responsibility which only the official position of the Minister of the Crown gives him in the representative institution that he belongs to. In this matter, where it is stated by an eminent member of the Government of the Old Land that a new era has been entered on, the parent country calls upon her children beyond the seas to go Home and discuss with her not only matters of Empire concern, but matters some of which cannot be named in a circular invitation. If we want to arrive at a proper judgment later on we must have there some person in authority, from whom on the floor of Parliament we shall have the opportunity of hearing such proposals as he can without breach of secrecy disclose to the Parliament of New Zealand. You must have the opportunity when he comes back of hearing him explain what this Conference desires and what responsibilities are to be imposed upon our own country. And there is this one overriding fact which none can deny: our High Commissioner may be the ablest man in the wide world, or any other person outside the Administration might be the wisest person in the wide world, but there is no person, excepting the Prime Minister, in this or any other self-governing country—or in the Mother-country itself—who can stake the existence of his Government upon what he proposes to submit to the Parliament. Until to-day the only country that has offered to contribute a battleship to the Old Country in recent times—I am not talking about the offer of troops at the time of the South African war—is New Zealand. I am not speaking of the offer from a commercial point of view as far as New Zealand goes, because it is our duty to do what we have done, and the result is that the general question of naval defence of the Empire has led to the convening of the Imperial Conference; and I say that a factor in the matter which no one can deny is that the only person who has the responsibility given to him under the Constitution of staking the existence of his Government is the Prime Minister, and he is therefore the only one who is responsible to Parliament and to the people—that is, he is the only man who can stake the fate of his Ministry.

Mr. MASSEY.—That makes it a party question.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—Pardon me. What I was stating is absolutely correct, and it is the only way in which the voice of the people in a matter of this or any other of great importance can be heard. The honourable gentleman will see that it is not a party question. It is, in my judgment, entirely above party. Supposing some irresponsible person who was not vested with the power of a Minister of the Crown were to go to that Conference and agree to proposals which could not be disclosed, what would you say? I ask those gentlemen here who take exception to the proposal, what would they expect that man to do? Could you expect the representative who is not a Minister of the Crown to cable out to the Government asking what he was to do?

Mr. MASSEY.—Mr. Asquith says the Conference will be purely consultative.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—Mr. Asquith says the New Zealand offer of a Dreadnought was to be considered at that Conference. Whether I am going to that Conference or not, it is for the Parliament to say whether we are represented there or not. We believe that we are representing the wishes of the country in this matter. The constitutional aspect of the question can be discussed independently. We believe we are representing the feelings of the people in regard to what we consider is a serious emergency, which has since been publicly confirmed in the House of Commons by a responsible Minister of the Crown; it has been confirmed by others, and we have put it above party feeling. We took the step we did at the moment when the danger appeared to us to be vital, and we wanted our offer not only to have a moral effect, but a practical effect; and we wanted the whole world to realise that we had grown to a position as a part of the British Empire when we should help the Old Country to defend itself against the acknowledged aggressiveness of a very powerful country, and from the information we had we believed that we had reached, as I have already said, a point when we should be ready to take a hand. We believe we did right, and we believe so still.

Mr. T. E. TAYLOR.—Will you submit the country to any expenditure if you go Home?

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—I recognise that I have great responsibilities, and I am not going to make any tied statement as to what I might do, or might not do, but I will just do what I have been trying to do up to now: I have tried to exercise common-sense, and I have tried to do what is right, but beyond that no one can say as to what may be the outcome of a Conference of that kind; and if I go to it—of course, it is not settled—it is impossible, nor do I think it would be fair for any one to expect me to make a declaration as to what might be the outcome of such a Conference. But it is a certainty that whatever may be done at that Conference, or whatever the representative of this country agrees to, it cannot be binding until the Parliament of New Zealand is consulted and approves of any proposals that may be made. I fully recognise my responsibilities. I know what they are, both to the Parliament and the people of my own country, and I can be depended upon to do that which I believe to be right and best, and to submit any proposals for the judgment of the representatives of the people here. They will have either to accept or reject them. That is the safety-valve as far as this country is concerned. If Parliament adjourns I recognise that, according to my lights, with which the whole of my colleagues concur, I have a duty in this matter to our own country, and there is a duty also imposed upon