

very thoroughly and exhaustively. Then there is the question of the financial position of the country—the providing of ways and means for public works. I am not quite sure whether that is intended to be done during the session of Parliament that is to meet next Thursday; but it has to be done. And I regret to say that for the first time in my parliamentary career there is also the question of finding employment for the people who have no employment at the present time. Then there is the matter of dealing with that great and important subject in which the whole country is interested, the settlement of the Native-land question. These are only some of the subjects that require to be dealt with, only some of the questions that Parliament should have an opportunity of dealing with during the next few weeks, and which should make the coming session one of the most important that has ever been held in this country. Then, as I have good reason to know, because I am in contact with all sorts and conditions of people, there are many people throughout the country who are intensely annoyed and disappointed at the very suggestion that the business of the country should be postponed for three months in order to enable the Right Hon. Sir J. G. Ward to attend the Imperial Conference. I want to make my position clear—perfectly clear. The right honourable gentleman admitted this afternoon that the Opposition Press had been generous to him in connection with defence matters. I know they have been generous, particularly generous, to the honourable gentleman, and I am proud of it; but I cannot say the same of the Ministerial Press in their treatment of me. Not that I care for that, for it is rather a compliment to receive abuse from certain quarters; but I do not like misrepresentation, and as I say, I want to make my position clear, and also the position of my colleagues. The position we take up is simply and briefly this: We think the colony should be represented at the Conference; there is no difficulty about that; and we are quite willing the colony should be represented by the Defence Minister, who is also Prime Minister. And here I would just wish to quote—and it was quoted, or, at all events, a very similar communication was quoted, by the right honourable gentleman—I shall quote the invitation forwarded by Mr. Asquith to the Australian Government. I am not going to quote the whole, only a few lines. Mr. Asquith begins by saying it is to be a subsidiary Conference. That is not a very important point, because it may be subsidiary and yet called upon to deal with some very important matters. But he goes on,—

“I assume that, as the consultation will be generally upon technical or quasi-technical naval and military matters, the Governments of the self-governing dominions will elect to be represented, as in the case of Canada, by their Minister of Defence, or, failing them, by some other member of the Government, assisted by an expert to advise; but it is entirely for the Government of Australia to decide the precise form of its representation. The Conference will be of a purely consultative character and will be held in private, and its deliberations will be assisted by the presence of members or other expert advisers of his Majesty's Government.”

That is in effect the same invitation as was forwarded to the Government of New Zealand, and which was read this afternoon by the Prime Minister. And there it speaks clearly for itself. It invites New Zealand to send representatives to the Imperial Conference, but it says those representatives are to be the Defence Minister and experts upon military matters. Very well. The honourable gentleman is Defence Minister, and, if he wants to go, I think, after reading the communications with the Australian Government, and after hearing similar communications read this afternoon, he should go. I go the length of saying that I think the Defence Minister, Sir Joseph Ward, should go to the Conference. But is it to be said that every time a Defence Conference is held in London the business of this country must be postponed in consequence? Is there one man who will say so? I sincerely hope any such proposal will not be agreed to. We are anxious, as I said, that the ordinary business of the country should be proceeded with, and I hope that the Prime Minister, before he leaves this country, will give us some idea of the lines he will take at the Imperial Conference, where he will be our representative. But, speaking for myself, and speaking on general lines, I say that it is the first duty of every country belonging to the British Empire to contribute to the maintenance of the Imperial navy in proportion to its population and in proportion to its position. And I say New Zealand is prepared to do so. We are willing to do our duty, and we are willing to do more than our duty. Then, and perhaps not of less importance, there is the question of local defence. We have got to put our local defence into proper condition, as I think, by a system of national training. Let us pay a proper contribution to the Imperial navy. Why, the honourable gentleman incidentally mentioned this afternoon what was done by South Africa. I think we all know that some years ago Cape Colony presented a cruiser-battleship to Great Britain. It was only some seven or eight years ago. And that ship, the “Good Hope,” was at the time one of the best war-ships afloat. She is a long way from being one of the best ships afloat now. But would it not have been very much better if South Africa had made some arrangement of a more permanent nature in respect to the Imperial navy? Most certainly it would. The war-ship will become obsolete before very long, but the payment of interest on the cost of the vessel will go on for all time. The presentation of that war-ship has made it impossible for the Cape Government to make an arrangement with the Imperial Government for the payment of a proper annual contribution to the Imperial navy. There is just one other point, and that is what the honourable gentleman said with reference to the payment of a sinking fund of 1 per cent. That is contrary to the statement the honourable gentleman made some time ago—namely, that it was his intention that the people of this generation should pay for the battleship given to the Imperial navy. How long would it take a payment of 1 per cent. to wipe off the capital expenditure? I have not gone into it carefully, but it would take not far short of fifty years. I think I am right, speaking from memory, in saying that it would at the ordinary rate of interest take forty-four years to wipe out the expenditure at 1 per cent. What is the life of a battleship? Is it forty years? Is it twenty years? Is it fifteen years? I venture to say fifteen years, under existing circumstances, is the outside life of a battleship; and, that being the case, I say it should be our duty to provide a sufficient sinking fund to pay off the cost of the battleship, at the outside,