

single suggestion that anything in connection with the Dreadnought offer or with the Naval Conference called for secret despatches; yet the Premier admits that there have been such despatches, and he says we are not going to have them. Now, I should have liked to have asked—and I would have asked if I had had any chance of getting an answer—whether any of these concealed despatches were couched in such terms as to force from the Imperial Government a personal invitation addressed to the Premier to attend the Naval Conference. I am asking that question because of the fact that in the invitation to the Naval Conference the author of it, the Right Hon. Mr. Asquith, went out of his way to make it clear that he did not want to be embarrassed with Premiers at this particular Conference. It is a subsidiary Conference. The fact that the Imperial Conference will be due in 1911 was referred to. It is true the suggestion was that the Minister of Defence should go, but immediately after this paragraph in the invitation Mr. Asquith in his despatch was careful to say that “it is, of course, entirely a matter for the Government”—I am quoting the same despatch now—“to determine what the character of the representation should be.” I am sure that we ought to have had the whole of the despatches. There is another feature of the discussion which has been forced on us to-day that strikes me as being almost ludicrous. We are told that Parliament must decide who is to go to this Conference. Now, that is a very remarkable concession to Parliament. It is comforting to know that there are some things that Parliament has a right to decide, and that it is not yet regarded by the Cabinet as a superfluity. It was perfectly superfluous when the Dominion was being committed to an expenditure of from two to four millions sterling, but the whole Parliament can be assembled when the minor matter has to be determined as to whether the Minister of Defence, or the High Commissioner, or who else shall represent this Dominion at a subsidiary Conference for the discussion of technical and quasi-technical questions connected with Imperial defence. I look upon it as being a most extraordinary position that in the one case Parliament was completely ignored, and in the other case the whole of the Parliament is being assembled to deal with a matter that I hold should be dealt with by the Cabinet without any reference to this meeting at all. Do you mean to tell me, gentlemen, that the mere appointment of a delegate is a matter that the Cabinet has no power to deal with? It is an absolutely trivial matter, and we ought not to be assembled here to deal with that question. The Government have power to make all appointments, whether they are to the Civil Service or whether they are to a conference. Is there a member on either side of the House who will assert that there is any excuse for Parliament being assembled for the present purpose, while not a single attempt at consultation was made when we were being pledged to contribute four millions sterling to the cost of war-ships? There are one or two other questions that I will ask, though I do not know whether I will get them answered. I want to know why this telegram to the editors of newspapers was marked “Private and strictly confidential.” And there is one point about this telegram that I want to call the Premier’s attention to. Until I said I had this telegram there was not a word said by the Premier to-day that the Cabinet had any information that justified the Dreadnought offer other than what had been disclosed in the public Press of this country; but the very moment this telegram became a matter for comment, then the Premier said suddenly there was one matter he knew of—a very grave matter—that had not been published that justified the offer. Now, what is that very grave matter? There was not a single fact or suggestion disclosed in any despatch read by the Premier to-day which has not already been published by the daily Press. Was any particular fact as to Britain’s danger conveyed to this Ministry that was kept back from the Canadian Parliament or from the Commonwealth Ministry? I venture to say that there was no evidence in possession of this Ministry when the offer of the Dreadnoughts was made, other than what had been published in the ordinary newspaper columns of this country. If you want to get some evidence on that point you may take the utterances of Mr. Asquith. Here is a cable dated the 23rd March. Mr. Asquith said he protested against “the absurd and mischievous legends regarding Britain’s unpreparedness. A more unpatriotic and unscrupulous representation of the actual situation never came to his knowledge.” That rebuke to the panic-mongers was uttered a day after our Dreadnought offer. Now, I am able to say that the Australian Commonwealth Government had no communication from the Imperial Government indicating that Britain was in grave danger of being attacked by Germany or any other Power before the New Zealand Government made that offer, and I am convinced that no intimation came to our Government from the Imperial authorities at all. In Australia all they had to go upon was the published newspaper cables. If the Imperial Government have taken the New Zealand Government into their special confidence, all I can say is that the Imperial Government have done a very remarkable thing. I mention this because I do not believe there is a parallel in English history for such an action as the Cabinet was guilty of in pledging this country, because it is all nonsense to say we are not committed to this four millions of expenditure. I do not believe we shall ever have to find the money; but we have to discuss this matter now as though the offer had become a tangible liability. My firm conviction is that the Conference will shunt the Dreadnought offer, and I believe the Premier has that conviction himself if we could only get a confession from him. But the fact remains that that offer was equal to drawing a draft on this country for four millions of money, and that draft was drawn without the authority of this country. Now, when the House assembles next week, and this matter is discussed I shall be pleased to hear a single instance in connection with parliamentary practice where a Cabinet has pledged the country to such an extent without consulting Parliament. I know well enough, in reply to some criticism from the leader of the Opposition, the Hon. the Premier claimed that in making this offer in the recess the Cabinet was the attorney of Parliament. I should like to have some proof of that. In my judgment, an attorney is one who may do in the absence of any party all that that party could do in his presence; and, as a matter of fact, no Cabinet can legislate in the absence of Parliament. It cannot modify or impose taxation, and yet this offer of four millions of money without the authority of Parliament is practically equal to a burden of taxation upon our shoulders of £160,000 a year for forty-