

eight years, or until the debt is liquidated. Mr. Balfour, on the 23rd March, in the same debate from which I have quoted Mr. Asquith's statement, said, "No one would deny that the country was safe now." It does not look as though there was much ground for the Tory naval scare which Mr. Asquith had just a few minutes before described as a mischievous legend and an unscrupulous and unpatriotic representation of the actual situation. And then Sir Charles Dilke, one of the most gifted and best-informed men in the House of Commons, in the course of the same discussion said "he deprecated unworthy panic." I am not going to discuss the question of whether or not the British navy is in as high a state of efficiency as it ought to be. It is not a question for this Parliament to decide. I believe the Naval Conference is called so as to secure some unity of action as between the different countries, and to, if possible, prevent any interference in the future with the course of British politics such as the offer of a Dreadnought constituted. Now I come to this telegram to the editors. Why should a telegram have been sent to the editors at all, and no telegram sent to any member of this Parliament nor to the leader of the Opposition? That question has been asked before publicly, and no answer has been made to it. But I claim that this telegram contains one statement that is about as far from the truth as a statement could possibly be. I must confess that, in view of all that has happened since the Dreadnought offer was made, it seems to me that there was a desire that the nature of this communication to the newspaper editors should not be made public. Then, too, the tone in which it was couched led a large number of papers to indorse the Dreadnought offer that would otherwise have been very critical of the offer. Had it not been for the terms used in this telegram, I am quite sure that the constitutional aspect of the Dreadnought offer would have been treated with the consideration it deserves; but an appeal was made to the sense of power possessed by the newspaper Press of this country, and they were loyal in nearly every case to the appeal. I am in possession of the wire sent to the newspapers simultaneously with the cable making the Dreadnought offer being despatched to the Home Government, which the Premier gave me permission to read.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—You must accept the responsibility.

Mr. T. E. TAYLOR.—I take the responsibility.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—Who did you get it from?

Mr. T. E. TAYLOR.—I have never in my life betrayed a man who gave me his confidence, and no public servant who ever told me anything that he was sure the public ought to know ever found himself embarrassed as a consequence. There are undoubtedly times when for the protection of the public carefully arranged plans of secrecy ought to be broken through. This telegram that I am about to read is very involved, and there is only one paragraph in it that I consider of very much importance. I think it is clear that the Premier intended it to go to every newspaper in the Dominion. The following is the telegram:—

"March 22nd, 1909, Wellington.

"Editors of all papers where message about battleship is sent.

"(Strictly confidential.)

"I HAVE sent you an important telegram for publication in connection with the British navy. I would like to impress upon you that the situation is much graver than is generally supposed or has been published, and the offer that the Government has made is one which we know will greatly help Great Britain in the present crisis, chiefly by virtue of the moral effect and as illustrating to Germany that the British dominions will rally round the Mother-country in the time of imminent danger, as is apparent at present in such a situation.

"I have felt that narrow consideration of pounds shillings and pence should yield to our plain duty to Great Britain where national existence is threatened, as the matter transcends party, and therefore feel it my duty to tell you confidentially our motive and desire to avoid publication of anything alarming, and hence have made this strictly confidential.

"J. G. WARD."

Note the sentence, "The situation is much graver than is generally supposed or has been published." I believe that was the sentence that succeeded in gaining an indorsement of the Press for the Government's violent defiance of parliamentary rights. The editor would be justified in saying, "The Imperial Government have communicated with the New Zealand Government in this matter. Evidently a much graver condition of things exists than has been made public through the Press." Nearly every newspaper editor would sink all influences of party. It may not have been intended that it should have that effect. I am quite prepared to believe that the Hon. the Premier was excited when making his historical and hysterical offer. I am prepared to believe that the Premier's mental condition was not quite normal, and that this telegram was not drafted with that deliberation which it would have received under ordinary circumstances; but the statement that the Dreadnought offer was based upon grave information not then published doubtless won for the offer a reception it would not otherwise have received at the hands of the Press of this Dominion. I think the Premier has established a most dangerous precedent by this editorial consultation. He consults the Press of the country, and he treats with utter contempt the Parliament of whose Executive for the time being he is the head. What justification can be made for that conduct? I cannot conceive of any; nor do I believe that when the people themselves speak on this question, as they will do in due course—the rank and file of the electors of this country—that they are going to indorse such a departure from constitutional procedure. I want to ask one or two questions. What information to justify the Dreadnought offer was not published but was known to the Government at the time the offer was made? I am bound to believe, in the absence of any information, that there was no information in the possession of the Government of this country other than what every man in the country had access to through the newspaper Press, and that there was no information other than what the Dominion of Canada and the Commonwealth of Australia also had in their possession, and they had no such secret information. We judge that by the utterances of Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the Prime Minister of Australia. The speech of the