

then the responsibility is not mine. The responsibility will rest with the House, and I shall be entirely relieved from any personal responsibility. I have to thank the honourable members who support the Government for their consideration in abstaining from speaking to-day. They knew that by doing so it would so delay matters as to render the decision of this meeting being so protracted as to make it useless. Time is essentially of great importance, and they have recognised it, and for this recognition I am obliged.

Mr. FISHER (Wellington Central).—Sir Joseph Ward and gentlemen,—I do not propose to allow this opportunity to pass without placing on record the views I hold in regard to the actions of the Government during the past three months and the resolution that is at present before the conference. I want to say that, whilst it was suggested by the Prime Minister that he had been unfairly treated owing to the fact that honourable members proposed to speak on the second part of the resolution, we have been more unfairly treated, because we have been asked to deal with a resolution that involves the consideration of important despatches which I hold the Prime Minister should have had printed and placed in the possession of every honourable member of this conference before we sat. I believe that if we had been able to consider the despatches which took the right honourable gentleman some three-quarters of an hour to read this afternoon, the probability is that we should have been able to give a more intelligent discussion to the motion that has been moved. However, I want to ask, in the first place, what the result is going to be so far as the Dominion of New Zealand is concerned if this conference asks the Prime Minister to represent the Dominion at Home and adjourns the session as a consequence. In 1907, at the Colonial Conference which the Prime Minister attended as the representative of this country, there was laid before the Prime Minister a paper by Mr. Haldane, the Secretary of State for War. This paper was prepared by the military and naval experts of the British Government, and in that paper it was laid down that as between Great Britain and the oversea dominions there was only one line of Imperial defence that could be adopted with benefit to the whole British Empire. And how was that set out? Mr. Haldane read the results of the deliberations of the military experts, and they are summed up as follows—I want the members of this conference to note the order in which the decisions are arrived at: First, organizing the troops for home defence—that is, the Territorial army; secondly, a striking force—an “expeditionary force” is the proper phrase; and, thirdly, a navy capable of maintaining command of the sea. I want to draw attention to these propositions for this reason: that, although our Prime Minister was representing us at that Conference in 1907, and although he came back with the knowledge fresh in his memory of the requisite action that was demanded by the Imperial authorities in the interests of Imperial defence, I say he has neglected his duty to this Dominion, inasmuch as he has never attempted to place before this Parliament any defence policy which would be regarded as a part of that Imperial scheme to which I have referred. If honourable members think that the mere passing of a resolution embodying the proposal to expend two millions or four millions of money in battleships is going to discharge the obligations of this country to the Empire, then all I can say is that their conception of Imperialism is of a very low order. For the past twelve or fifteen years we have been expending money at the rate of about £200,000 a year on defence, and when the right honourable gentleman was at Home he told the Colonial Conference that the wool-kings and the kings of commerce in New Zealand were encouraging Volunteering, that the Volunteers were at the height of efficiency, and that the men were volunteering so rapidly that the Government were unable to cope with their offers. That is what he told the Conference in 1907.

An Hon. MEMBER.—Who told them that?

Mr. FISHER.—The Right Hon. the Premier, Sir J. G. Ward.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—You had better, however, read correctly my speech, which you have been so carefully going over in preparing your remarks for the last six weeks.

Mr. FISHER.—No, I have not been carefully preparing for the past six weeks. Here are the words of the Prime Minister from the report of the Colonial Conference:—

“All over our country we have the very best class of men offering to join our Volunteer corps. They are encouraged by men in every responsible position you can name in the country. Our captains of industry, our kings of commerce, the members of the Administration of the day, and the officials connected with our important State Departments, and the rank and file of those Departments realise that it is upon the popular basis of a Volunteer system that we have to provide for the internal defence of our country, and in the event of trouble arising they are our source of internal defence, and we encourage it in every possible way.”

Will the Prime Minister say now that a single one of these statements is correct?

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—It was at that time, so far as I know.

Mr. FISHER.—If the subsidiary Conference to which he has been invited, and for which it is suggested Parliament should adjourn, is going to result in statements of that nature being made, it is better by far that the Premier should remain in this Dominion, that the House should sit, and that we should render efficient service to the Empire by placing ourselves in the position that has been suggested by the Imperial authorities over and over again—a position suggested by Sir Edward Grey, and suggested more lately by Lord Charles Beresford—that we should place ourselves in a position of independent defence. As far back as 1897 a proposition was made to this Dominion and to the other colonies beyond the seas that we should remedy our defects and insure an independent position in regard to defence. It was also urged that the best service that we could render to the Empire was to have a force of well-trained men in our own country who would be available for Imperial service abroad. That suggestion has never been adopted. And I say now that the mere passing of a resolution or a vote of two or four millions as a contribution towards a battleship is not a contribution that is worthy of this Dominion. It is nothing more or less than a spasm. I differ from the Right Hon. the Premier on this defence question. I differed from him