

Mr. FISHER.—You were discussing at that time the proposal by Lord Tweedmouth.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—I was discussing the proposal which was urged on behalf of this country that we should establish a local navy, which we could not do.

Mr. FISHER.—You were discussing at that time—I do not want to misrepresent the honourable gentleman, and if I have done so it has been quite unintentionally—the proposals of Lord Tweedmouth, and in them was one concerning the construction of an Australian navy, and it was on that matter the Premier was speaking.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—I was opposing the construction of a New Zealand navy, and pointing out why——

Mr. FISHER.—There was no proposal in connection with a New Zealand navy.

The Right Hon. Sir J. G. WARD.—It was on that question of our breaking the agreement with which Australia and New Zealand were concerned, and of allowing them to declare for an Australian navy.

Mr. FISHER.—Whether Australia or New Zealand was concerned I do not think affects very much the position so far as this quotation is concerned. This is what the Prime Minister said:—

“It is because of the fact that we have these great undertakings that may take years to fulfil in the future that we should hesitate to impose upon ourselves the burden of the construction of ships of war, or of any great liabilities connected with the maintenance of ships of war, or any great financial responsibilities other than we actually commit ourselves to in a defined agreement.”

Are we in a better position to-day to embark upon the construction of ships of war than we were in 1907? I admit the condition, so far as affairs at Home are concerned, are slightly different. The naval question has become the paramount question at Home, and to that extent the position is changed; but so far as we are concerned in this country we are not as able at the present time to make that contribution as we were in 1907, and at that time the Prime Minister was against it. For my own part I do not think this is a small matter, because this conference has to remember that in the years to come—and I believe, myself, the time is not very far distant—members will have to face their constituents and deal with this question. I believe that now is the proper time for members of this conference to place their views upon record. I make no apology so far as I am concerned. I represent an important and a large district, and I have held the same view all along. I am quite prepared to do anything so far as a reasonable contribution to Imperialism is concerned, but I do object to being led into a compromising promise made by the Prime Minister without consulting Parliament at all, and which may impose a burden of debt upon the people of this country for the next ten or fifteen years. That is what I object to. And, although the Prime Minister may urge as a reason that he is imbued with a spirit of Imperialism that is a credit to himself and to the country he represents, we must not forget that he is establishing a precedent for some successor who may come after him to commit this country to expenditure of some other sort—one who is not so cautious as the honourable gentleman, who is not imbued with the same spirit of Imperialism, and who is probably tinged with other motives altogether. And I say, before we make a breach of constitutional precedent in this respect the Premier would have been wise if he had consulted members of the House as they are being consulted now. I was disappointed with the speech of the Prime Minister, because I remember when the offer was made I was asked, with other members of the House, to express an opinion for publication upon the action of the Government, and I said then that I would not express an opinion, because I would leave it to the Prime Minister when he met members of the House to justify, by the information in his possession, his action at the time; and I must confess I have looked forward to to-day with a considerable amount of interest. I must confess that the Prime Minister has given no good reason for his action. Unquestionably his action in presenting the Dreadnoughts was based solely upon the cables that appeared in the newspapers, and that in itself is enough to condemn it. In regard to the Conference itself, I believe every one recognises the importance of it. Although it is a subsidiary Conference, nevertheless it is an important one, and I would suggest to the Prime Minister, as it is stated in the despatch that this Conference is going to be one of a technical or quasi-technical nature, he should take advantage of the assistance of some military expert if he is going to represent New Zealand adequately. But the honourable gentleman knows full well that at the last Conference he had to admit that in reading the reports of the experts at the War Office he read them as a layman, that he did not profess to be able to understand them clearly; and, although he did not say so, he intimated that it was a very difficult matter for him to arrive at a conclusion. It was candid of him to do so. This is a subject that requires the knowledge of experts of years of training. I would suggest to the right honourable gentleman that if he does go—whether the House adjourns or whether it does not—that he should take advantage of a military expert. Now, as regards the question of the High Commissioner, I am only going to say this: that it seems to me that the High Commissioner could represent us at a conference of a technical nature almost as well as any layman that we could send Home. He is there for that purpose. He has only been Home since last January. He is acquainted with the public sentiments of this country and with the aspirations of the people, and in my opinion he could represent this Dominion as well as anybody else. He is sent Home to represent us when we want him, whether he likes it or not. I repeat that I feel confident that if he were selected he would carry out his duties as well as any layman that we could send. I hope, so far as the Conference is concerned—I do not know what it is going to do—but I hope that it will be guided by the precedents that have been established in the past. Illustrations were mentioned this afternoon of Prime Ministers who left the country when important matters were under consideration and yet the House did not adjourn. To those illustrations there is one exception, that being in the case of the Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. But that was unique, and an incident that had no