

23 May, 1911]

OPENING ADDRESS AND REPLIES.

[1st Day.

The PRESIDENT—*cont.*

and flexibility in our Imperial organization, or of the importance of maintaining to the full, in the case of all of us, the principle of Ministerial responsibility to Parliament. Of a cognate character are the questions raised as to the future constitution of the Colonial Office, and in particular as to the segregation and concentration of the work appropriate to the Dominions from the other work of the Department. Under this head I trust that His Majesty's Government may be able to put forward suggestions, which will be acceptable in themselves, and prove fruitful in practice. I will refer to one other topic of even greater moment—that of Imperial Defence. Two years ago, in pursuance of the first Resolution of the Conference of 1907, we summoned here in London a subsidiary Conference to deal with the subject of Defence, over which I had the honour to preside. The results achieved—particularly in the inauguration of the policy of Dominion Fleets adopted by Canada and Australia—are of a far-reaching character. The recent visit of Lord Kitchener to Australia and New Zealand has given a further impetus to the spirit of self-reliance in matters of Defence in those two great Dominions. We adopt different systems in the raising and recruiting of our defensive forces in the different parts of the Empire. Everywhere and throughout, the object is not aggression, but the maintenance of peace, and the insurance against loss and destruction of the vast social and material interests of which we are trustees. It is in the highest degree desirable that we should take advantage of your presence here to take stock together of the possible risks and dangers to which we are or may be in common exposed; and to weigh carefully the adequacy and the reciprocal adaptiveness of the contributions we are respectively making to provide against them. I shall propose that (following the precedent created in 1909) these matters should be discussed in the Committee of Imperial Defence, with the assistance of the advice of its expert members, at meetings at which the Dominions will be represented by their Prime Ministers, and the Ministers directly concerned in naval and military defence. At the first of these meetings (which will, of course, like all of them, be of a confidential character) Sir Edward Grey will attend, and will speak to us on the international situation, so far as it affects the Empire as a whole.

Gentlemen, I have purposely, in this brief introduction to our proceedings, left out of account a large number—the largest number—of the topics which will be submitted for our consideration. There are sitting at this table to-day six Prime Ministers, all holding their commission from the same King, and all deriving their title to its exercise from the voice and vote of a free democracy. We are all of us, I suppose, in our own Parliaments party leaders, holding and using power by virtue of the confidence of a party majority. But each of us when he entered this room left his party prepossessions outside the door. For us to-day, and throughout this Conference, there is, I believe, one spirit and one purpose—to make the Empire, in all its activities, and throughout all its parts, a more complete and effective instrument for the furtherance of our corporate unity and strength along the old, well-trodden, but ever lengthening and widening road, of British liberty.

Sir WILFRID LAURIER: Mr. Asquith and Gentlemen—Those whose privilege it was to take part in the Conference that took place here four years ago have a very vivid remembrance of the very kind words which your illustrious predecessor in the high office you now fill, Sir, addressed to the representatives of the King's Governments in the Dominions beyond the seas. The warm words of welcome which you have just addressed to us exhibit the same spirit of kindness. There are evidences not a few, indeed there are evidences in abundance, that the words which you have spoken do not reflect alone the sentiments of the King's Government, but also the sentiments of the King's subjects in these Islands of whatever origin or creeds they may be.

The only fitting return which I think can be made to this warmth of welcome, thus extended to us by the people of the United Kingdom, is to assure you, Sir, and, through you, His Majesty the King and His Majesty's subjects, of the warm and ever growing attachment, if I may say so, of the populations of the