

23 May, 1911.]

PUBLICITY OF PROCEEDINGS.

[1st Day.]

Sir EDWARD MORRIS : Mr. President, I would like to say that, whilst I can quite appreciate the motive of Sir Joseph Ward and sympathise with him for many reasons, at the same time I think that to have this Conference open to the Press would make it almost impossible to have a full and free and frank discussion. I do not think it would be in the interests of the Empire for many reasons, because many matters would have to be disclosed with all the reasons why, and in relation to all the subjects that would come up; and it is well to remember that there are many persons who would be admitted who are not in sympathy with the work of the Conference. On the other hand, many of them would be interested in defeating it. I think that nearly all can be given to the Press in the way indicated; but to have a system by which the Press would be excluded from time to time would have the effect of creating alarm, as if there were some very important reasons why they should be excluded; and you would have a discussion going on that might not lead to any good.

I think, on the whole, the system that has been followed in the past, referred to by Sir Wilfrid Laurier, will probably meet all the case and accommodate Sir Joseph Ward too.

The PRESIDENT : After those expressions of opinion probably Sir Joseph Ward would not be disposed to press his proposal to a division. I quite appreciate the reasons which have induced him to bring it forward, but I think the argument the other way is overwhelming in its force. This Conference is not, of course, in the nature of a public meeting. Its whole value would be destroyed if we could not with perfect freedom and with complete confidence express our views upon each and all of the topics which successively arise; and I myself see enormous and indeed insuperable difficulties in trying to discriminate in advance between topics which ought to be regarded as confidential and of supreme importance, and those which could be fairly treated as belonging to a different category. I think we should find ourselves constantly in very serious difficulties; and, as has been pointed out by more than one of the speakers, the moment the Press is excluded its curiosity, as we all know, becomes intense, and we might have all sorts of the most alarming pictures drawn of fictitious conflicts going on within the secrecy of these four walls, simply because the Press is not admitted to our proceedings.

I think, on the whole, we should do much better to follow the precedent of the last Conference, although I agree that the précis which was then submitted was not always quite adequate; but Mr. Harcourt has taken steps which will secure that on this occasion the public will hear from day to day all that the members of the Conference think it right they should be told. I therefore suggest to Sir Joseph that he should not press his proposal to a division.

Sir JOSEPH WARD : Mr. Asquith, in view of the expressions of opinion from the gentlemen around me, it would be foolish to press the motion with a view to having myself recorded as being the sole supporter of it, and I recognise that the proper thing to do is to withdraw the motion. I merely wish to remark, with all due deference to my friend Sir Wilfrid Laurier, that if the people of New Zealand had received the same information as was sent elsewhere on the last occasion, I would have had no fault to find; the difficulty was that it was regarded as being of much greater importance to cable out information that suited the readers of a great number of papers in the great Australian Commonwealth rather than what was applicable to New Zealand as a separate country. It is a matter of no special consequence to any one else, and, although I may have made mistakes at the last Conference, and may make mistakes here, the people of New Zealand are at least entitled to know what their representative is doing. For some time after the commencement of the last Conference, though I took part in all the important discussions at the time, my existence was not known as far as New Zealand was concerned. I think if that had occurred to Sir Wilfrid Laurier in Canada, or to General Botha in South Africa, they probably would feel that their people had the right to know