

2nd Day.]

RECONSTITUTION OF THE COLONIAL OFFICE.

[25 May, 1911.]

Mr. FISHER—*cont.*

local matter. It was raised by Sir Joseph Ward to-day, as to the control of the Pacific. Certain of the islands of the Pacific are under the direct control of the Imperial Government. The interest that they have in looking after them is common with us, but we are, of course, more nearly affected by anything that may be done than even the Mother Country is. That is a matter where we might be able to make representations through the High Commissioner, or it might be through a Minister of the Dominion who was at a particular time here on other business or on a particular question. Without making it a question of contest between the two Governments, long before we disagreed on any point you would have the matter fully considered and sifted by personal discussion by men well informed on both sides, and if there was a difference it could be brought down to the exact point where the difference arose, and could be more easily settled.

Mr. Asquith has said that we are here representing the views, to the best of our opinion, of the Dominions. At the same time, all our decisions are subject not only to the consideration of the Government, but also to the consideration and approval of our own Parliaments, and therefore it carries us no farther than that—a stern, deliberate opinion of the members of this Conference that such a channel might very well be approved and experimented with. Of course, the whole Constitution, under which we so happily meet together to-day, has been developed on those lines. Therefore, while I agree with much of what Sir Wilfrid Laurier said as to the whole Constitution having worked very well until now, at the same time he represents a great Dominion which has not hesitated from time to time to make innovations and suggestions. I think he might very well give us the lead in this matter in endeavouring to, at any rate, give the High Commissioners or other persons, by resolution of this Conference, some definite and distinct authoritative power to enter into these negotiations and discuss them as an officer of his Dominion, responsible to the Government of the Dominion, with His Majesty's Minister for Foreign Affairs, say, or the Prime Minister. In my short experience of inner official life I am apprehensive of the difficulty of defining what should go through the representatives of the King and what should go through the High Commissioner. All matters strictly official seem to belong to the one, and all new matters requiring urgent discussion and immediate decision, I think, may very well be recommended through the High Commissioners. Perhaps my colleagues would like to say a word on this question. It is a matter we feel strongly about, and I should be glad if they may be allowed to express their views on it.

The PRESIDENT: Certainly. Whilst I have listened with great interest to what you have said, I do not know whether I am drawing a proper inference or not, that you do not look with very much favour on the constitution of this Committee. You have not said a word in its favour.

Mr. FISHER: I think I pointed out that I did not desire that this advisory Committee should be a deliberative body. Certainly I do not desire that it should have any record.

The PRESIDENT: But do you think it will serve any useful purpose?

Mr. FISHER: Yes. I think that a consultation here by representatives of the Dominions is a very effective means of discovering the ideas and views of the Governments, which you have not time to discover, because you cannot visit the Dominions and go to the Governments themselves. The High Commissioners are nearly always men who have recently come from oversea Dominions, and are more in touch with the views and affairs which immediately concern them.

The PRESIDENT: I only wanted to know whether you smiled or frowned or were absolutely indifferent to the idea of the Committee, or think it would do any good.