

3rd Day.]

DECLARATION OF LONDON.

[1 June, 1911.]

Mr. FISHER—*cont.*

the chain of our common interests. Since we are now a family of nations, has not the time arrived for the oversea Dominions to be informed, and whenever possible consulted, as to the best means of promoting the interests of all concerned, when the Mother Country has decided to open negotiations with foreign Powers in regard to matters which involve the interests of the Dominions? We do not desire in any way to restrict the final arbitrary powers of the Mother Country; that is not our desire at all, but we do think and we shall press upon you, Mr. Asquith, as representing the centre of the Empire, the Government of the United Kingdom, which has in many matters the management of the whole of the affairs of the Empire, that it would be advisable for you wherever possible, at any rate in important matters which concern us, such as this, to take us into your confidence prior to committing us.

You will see, therefore, that we hold that it is not sufficient for you even to make a good treaty affecting us and then to tell us after it has been made. The fact that this Declaration of London has been taken exception to has given a most suitable opportunity to discuss this matter. What would have happened, may I ask you, if this Declaration had not been made by you and all the other Powers concerned at a time just prior to the meeting of this Conference? Supposing it had been immediately after a Conference, there would then have been four years of discontent, misunderstanding, and, I have no doubt, a little asperity between the Dominions and the Mother Country. It is fortunate, I think, that this opportunity has been given to us almost immediately after the question arose.

As to the details, the second part of the resolution is important enough. We felt at the time that Article 24 was hardly defensible and that Articles 48 to 54 would seriously damage the prestige of the British people and Governments, but that is a matter we do not wish to dogmatise upon at the present moment. I leave it to my honourable colleague to give the reasons why we have taken exception to these. I do hope and I do ask that you, Sir, will give the most serious and favourable consideration to our proposal. At least I hope this Conference will carry the first part of it, and that is down to the words, "Declaration of London," and that if carried it shall have this meaning: that the Dominions shall be advised and consulted, not only during the course of a Treaty or the negotiation of a Declaration of any kind affecting us, but that you shall keep us acquainted with the views of the Mother Country. We shall then recognise this fact, to go back to my old statement, that we are a family of nations working in unity and amity under one Crown: and when you approach other countries you approach them, if not actually in the name of the Dominions, with the assurance and confidence that in all essential matters you represent their views.

We have avoided raising party issues in bringing this question before the Conference. If the discussion leads to fuller information being given to the Dominions I venture the opinion that the step taken will never be regretted.

Mr. BATCHELOR: Perhaps it will be convenient if I add a few words to what Mr. Fisher has said, because this matter has, more or less, I suppose, become a party question here in Britain.

The PRESIDENT: I do not think it can be quite said to be a party question, but it has got into the arena of party politics.

Mr. FISHER: Quite unconsciously, I suppose.

Mr. BATCHELOR: We desire to give no support to any kind of party view on a matter of the kind, and we want to divorce ourselves altogether from any party interest. The questions involved in this Declaration of London, of course, are of such tremendous import that they affect the well-being of every citizen of the Empire. We feel in Australia that we are specially affected by any arrangements which may be made which will control the operations of the Navy when at war, or control the commerce of the Empire when other nations are at war, and I want to say right off that the issues are tremendous, and that there is a necessity for a full understanding of the whole position, for a very close study of the past history of naval campaigns, and a knowledge of the conditions