

3rd Day.]

DECLARATION OF LONDON.

[1 June, 1911.]

Mr. BATCHELOR—*cont.*

Foreign Office saying Declaration of London has been signed by all Powers represented International Conference, and Imperial Government about to address non-signatory Powers with a view to their accession, legislation being prepared giving effect to Declaration and Convention for establishment of International Prize Courts. Hope to pass through Parliament after Christmas, also that as its terms are satisfactory to naval authorities, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs feels under circumstances of the case cannot advise His Majesty to withhold ratification as quite impossible to introduce amendments at this stage."

Now that could hardly be considered a satisfactory position for us to be in. The first intimation we get is from a Blue Book after the whole thing has been concluded; a matter in which we are vitally concerned has been concluded without the slightest consultation with us in any shape or way. Modifications, as a matter of fact, were suggested by the Attorney-General in Australia, but were not sent on because of this intimation from the Secretary for Foreign Affairs. I want to say, therefore, that I think we are not asking anything unreasonable in asking that under such circumstances this sort of treaty or this sort of arrangement altering conditions, even if in the opinion of the naval authorities the alterations may be wholly in our favour, should be brought in good time to our notice, and it appears to us that we can with some confidence urge upon the Government that in the future under such circumstances or anything approaching such circumstances the self-governing Dominions should be given the opportunity of expressing the view they hold as to the way their interests are affected.

Of course, there must be, as has been quoted pretty frequently, only one foreign policy in the Empire, and there must be one final authority. I do not want to canvas that—I agree with that absolutely—but that does not preclude the possibility of some consultation, as far as practicable. We do not want to put forward any impracticable proposals, but where it is practicable we think the suggestion we make is only reasonable. This is a case where the negotiations were going on for some considerable time; it is just two years ago now since we first heard of the matter and it has not yet been ratified, and if so long a time can elapse between the signing and the ratification, possibly some time existed prior to the signing during which we might have been consulted and have put forward some suggestions as to how it would affect us.

I do not want to say any more upon that point. As regards the proposals to which Australia has taken exception. Article 24 under which foodstuffs are conditional contraband, and Articles 48 to 54 with regard to the sinking of neutral vessels, and the other objection that has been taken in Australia, although there is no article dealing with it—that is, the conversion of merchantmen into vessels of war: I do not want to go into them, because all arguments for and against have been so tremendously threshed out and I am sure everybody is thoroughly conversant with them, and that I can throw no additional light on the subject.

I want to say that I think we really hold the view as regards the foodstuffs that while on the whole the alteration made may be an advantage as against the conditions at present existing, still, when concluding a convention, when setting out rules where no rules previously existed, it would have been very much better if the terms had been somewhat less vague. For instance, what is "a contractor"? What is "a matter of common knowledge"? How are we to know at the other end of the world as to whether a trader usually supplies the Government?

The PRESIDENT: Which article are you on now?

Mr. BATCHELOR: Article 34.

The PRESIDENT: You do not object to the provision that food should be treated or can be treated as conditional contraband instead of being treated as absolute contraband?