

2 June, 1911.]

DECLARATION OF LONDON.

[4th Day.

The PRESIDENT—*cont.*

it is a thousand pities to throw away this chance, which you would do if you refused ratification now." There is nobody here who does not wish to see the Declaration ratified, even Mr. Fisher himself, although he would wish to see it amended in particulars. In ratifying the Declaration now we do not in the least prejudice our freedom of action in the future to advocate further advance. Some of the points which have been adverted to in the course of this discussion, in particular that very important point of the conversion of merchant ships into ships of war, are matters in which we do not pretend that we have reached a final or on the whole even a satisfactory result; but there is nothing in the ratification of the Declaration which will prevent us by persuasion, by argument, and ultimately by negotiation, from inducing or getting the other Powers to assent to the introduction of amendments and improvements in it. But there it is, a milestone, if ever there was a milestone, on this road of progress; and I confess I think it would be a very great satisfaction to the Empire at large if such a representative body as this were to say: "Yes, you would not be doing right, but doing wrong, and throwing away a really great opportunity, if at this stage you did not ratify what has been done." That, of course, does not involve any abandonment of the position which Mr. Fisher takes up, and with which I have a great deal of sympathy, that the Dominions might have been consulted at an earlier stage, as they are going to be consulted in the future, and that, I think was the main head and front of his resolution, and the motive of it. That having been cleared out of the way by our unanimously assenting to the proposal he has just made, which will obviate the possibility of any such complaint or misunderstanding in the future, I think we might unanimously agree that the right and only proper course at this stage is to ratify the Declaration of which in spirit and substance we all approve.

Mr. FISHER: The point I raise is this: The Declaration of London has not been brought before this Conference for approval. It was an act of your own Government, which we commend, and commend very clearly and definitely. We commend the policy of it. We commend the whole trend of that policy and the wisdom of the Minister or those responsible for drafting it. Having said all that, we, as a self-governing Dominion, received it when it was practically ready for signature, and we were told that it was beyond amendment; but we make no complaint of that part, because the responsibility must rest with some one. Sir Edward Grey said here yesterday that it could not be amended. If objected to it would have to be abandoned. The only thing that he could do and intended to do was to define definitely the meaning of certain words and terms which would not invalidate in any way the agreement come to.

My contention is that the motion which has just been passed on the withdrawal of our resolution of inquiry, and attack, if you like, met with absolute approval, because no opposition had been offered. But now a proposal is made that we approve where we, as a Government, have said we disapprove. I have said in my remarks again and again, and I say now, that the weight of advantage in having a declaration or treaty or convention of that kind is such a great step in advance in international agreements that it would be, I think, a pity to throw it away. That, however, is a different thing from making a clear and distinct statement here that we approve of the whole of that treaty.

The PRESIDENT: Allow me to say I should quite agree that would be a resolution that the Conference could not be asked to adopt. All that Sir Joseph Ward proposes is not to approve of the Declaration, but to approve of the ratification at this stage of the Declaration—a wholly different thing. That gives you perfect freedom of opinion as to particular questions.

Mr. FISHER: My lay mind cannot perhaps grasp it, but Sir Edward Grey said this Declaration is settled and final.

The PRESIDENT: No, not final.