

8 June, 1911.]

STANDING COMMITTEE.

[5th Day.

Sir JOSEPH WARD—*cont.*

country. In the interval between the meetings of the Imperial Conference the practical work we want to see threshed out may never arrive on the statute-book. We want to see an opportunity given for the necessary details to be threshed out and discussed by some one representing our countries in touch with the administration, so that the Secretary of State may be advised with the view of uniformity being agreed to, and then, in turn, the Secretary of State for the Colonies will inform the oversea Dominions, and each of the oversea Dominions will still hold its power and right to say aye or no to any proposal. As a matter of fact, if we were not in that position, how could we expect to be able to make an attempt to legislate upon matters which are of considerable importance to the whole of us, leading in the direction of uniformity?

When we go away from this Conference I undertake to say that the most brilliant man you could find in any of our countries could not be asked to put into shape legislation for circulating amongst the different countries we represent with any hope of having that legislation put upon the statute-book without all the details being threshed out by some important Committee beforehand. We ought to have skeleton legislation of that sort fashioned into a concrete piece of work in order to do what is required for all the Dominions, and that is why I hold very strong views about the absence of machinery for the purpose. I am not saying this because the work at present is not well done by the Secretariat, or that the best and closest attention is not given to the oversea Dominions by the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and by the Department, because it is. I am not putting it forward because of any supposition of that kind, but I know there is no machinery in operation that is going to help New Zealand or the Government of Australia, or, in my opinion, the other Governments, to carry on this work which we come here to promote to a point at which we can take it up intelligently four years hence and have it pushed forward with a view to legislation.

One of the arguments of Sir Edward Morris I most heartily endorse. He argued that only important constitutional questions could probably be settled under existing conditions as far as a resolution of this Conference is concerned. That is my opinion also. I agree with Sir Edward Morris that that is the case, except in regard to matters of detail work required for carrying on the decisions of the Conference. I stated distinctly, when I was dealing with the proposition with regard to an Imperial Council, that in the absence of some such machinery, or some such organization, there was, in my opinion, no machinery in existence at present that can do other than he has said. I concur in that; and the difficulty presents itself to us all the time. General Botha says he wants closer union, and I know he does, and I agree with him. He says he wants a Minister to represent his country upon the Conference. I agree also. If so, why should he or I object to the representatives of the people, through the Governments, giving effect to what is unanimously referred to such a Committee by the Imperial Conference?

The Dominion Governments, through their Ministers, come here every four years. Logically this takes him and me back to this position: after all, the representatives of the people, through their Governments, are to be upon the Committee, where they will be in a minority and not in a majority, according to the proposals contained in the Secretary of State's memorandum, which provides for the permanent officials connected with the different Departments here being upon it. Then where is the fear of a Committee of this kind being, in some incipient way, a precedent for the establishment of an Imperial Council? As a matter of fact, if that other proposal is ever to be given practical effect to, which I believe it will be, it can only be done by the public of our respective countries supporting it; and it cannot be anticipated or prejudiced by anything which we are doing here. Nothing is proposed here but advisory power being given to such a Committee. Nothing is given to it in the shape of initiative in any way, and the Committee will have no power of action. All the power rests entirely with the Governments represented at this Imperial Conference.

I should exceedingly regret anything being done in a matter of this kind which would prevent a bridge being formed between one Conference and the next. I say that, with all deference to the opinion of other gentlemen who have spoken, and I do not think any one can prevent it under the existing system,