

16 June, 1911.]

TRADE AND POSTAL COMMUNICATIONS
AND SHIPPING CONFERENCES.

[10th Day.

Mr. BUXTON—*cont.*

nor the abolition of the conference system. They both suggested that an Association should be formed of those interested in the various trades, in order that, as far as they could by negotiation and by conciliation, they should be able to arrive at conclusions which might be satisfactory in getting rid of the disadvantages of these Conferences and these rebates. The majority proposed that in the event of these Associations not being able to come to terms with the Shipping Companies, the Board of Trade should endeavour to bring that about, and where the Board of Trade thought there were good grounds for believing that important national or Imperial interests were affected they should then be able themselves to intervene by appointing persons to inquire into the matter, take evidence on oath, and so on, and report the result of their conclusions.

The Minority Report went further than that, and they suggested that the Board of Trade should be given greater powers, and that, quite apart from any question of whether there were matters affecting important national interests, they should have power to appoint persons to take evidence, produce documents, and so on, where it appeared to them that the public interests were involved, including those of consumers and producers, and also on the representation of a Colonial Government. They were to report the nature and result of their inquiries to Parliament, and they were annually to lay before Parliament returns dealing with these agreements, or alterations in the agreements, on the question of rebates, and so on.

Either of these proposals would have required legislation in order to give the Board of Trade power to take evidence on oath and to deal with the matter from the point of view recommended by the Commission. This was about two years ago, and the initiative in both cases of taking the first steps was rather left to the parties interested. These persons have not up till now shown much desire—the exporters, the merchants, and the manufacturers—have not shown, over here at all events, very much desire to move, nor have they pressed the Board of Trade to carry out legislation in the matter. No active movement having been taken, a little while ago I, wishing to ascertain what their views really were, invited a Conference to meet me at the Board of Trade, representing the parties principally interested in the matter. I asked the Associated Chambers of Commerce, the London Chamber of Commerce, the Manchester Association of Importers and Exporters, the South African Merchants' Committee, and the Australian Merchants' Association to come and discuss the matter, informing them beforehand what it was I wished to consult them about. Besides that we had taken the opportunity, as occasion has arisen, to consult other interests concerned. I am bound to say that the support in favour of legislation, and in favour of any drastic proposals from these various persons interested, has not been very encouraging; and there is no doubt that here at all events there is great difference of opinion as to how far these Conferences and the system carried out by the Conferences are an advantage or a disadvantage to the trade of the country on this side. As every member of the Conference will know, in a matter of this sort, touching an enormous interest like the Mercantile Marine here, it is not very easy to introduce a Bill, at all events it is not very easy to pass it, unless you have behind you a considerable volume of public opinion. Sir David has been fortunate, if I may say so, as far as he is concerned, in having, as I understand, behind him in dealing with this matter a practically unanimous opinion; but I am afraid, as far as my information goes, at the present moment at all events, that is not the position over here.

Then the step has been taken by the Union of South Africa Government to which Sir David has referred, and I am sure he will feel, and the Conference will feel, that it is not the duty of His Majesty's Government to express an opinion in reference to the merits or demerits of that particular proposal, as it was entirely within the competence of the Union Government to carry it out, and there was no question as to their Bill receiving the Royal Assent. I did not at the time it was going through, nor have I since, nor do I intend now—it would not be right that I should do so—express an opinion with reference to the merits of it. Perhaps I might express, as representing the Board of Trade, which is always very much interested in anything which can be brought about by conciliation or agreement, a pious hope that the two sides interested in the matter