

16 June, 1911.]

TRADE AND POSTAL COMMUNICATIONS AND
SHIPPING CONFERENCES.

[10th Day.

Sir D. DE VILLIERS GRAAFF—*cont.*

I have much pleasure, Sir, in moving the motion standing in the name of the Union of South Africa. I hope it will commend itself to the Conference, and I hope I have said enough to show that for a good many years past the whole of the South African trades and industries have been dominated by a shipping ring the members of which are not responsible to the people of South Africa; in other words, we in South Africa have not been masters in our own home. For the future we hope to be so, and I trust that the resolution which I have just moved will find favour with the Conference and that the resolution will be passed. I move the resolution.

The PRESIDENT: I think it would be convenient that Mr. Buxton should at once make a statement.

Mr. BUXTON: This resolution, as drafted, puts His Majesty's Government in some little difficulty, because, while they would be prepared to support a resolution directed against combines and conferences where they were shown to be in restraint of trade, this motion as drafted practically assumes that all such conferences are necessarily disadvantageous. That is not the view necessarily held here, either by our Mercantile Marine or by our shippers or manufacturers. I think, therefore—because I should be glad if the Conference could arrive in those matters at a unanimous vote—I would suggest, if it met with the view of the South African delegates, to add at the end of the printed motion, “in so far as such conferences operate in restraint of trade.” I should be very glad to give my support to the motion so amended.

I am also somewhat in a difficulty after Sir David Graaff's speech because the Conference has heard the side which, with great ability, Sir David has put, and they are of course at a certain disadvantage in not having the opportunity on the present occasion of hearing what might be said on the other side by those interested in these conferences. It is not my duty nor do I intend either to controvert what Sir David Graaff has said or to argue the matter on its merits. But in agreeing to this resolution as amended, I must not be held as necessarily agreeing, and I am sure that he will be with me there, in all the arguments which he has put forward or the views he holds, nor must it be assumed that I necessarily agree in the solution which South Africa has proposed for this matter as being the best method to deal with the evils to which he has referred. South Africa, it is clear from his remarks, has peculiar hardships in reference to this matter, and especially with regard to freights and facilities. As representing the Board of Trade here, and therefore representing the commercial interests of the United Kingdom as well as the shipping interests, I am bound to look at it from rather a broader point of view, and, as I have already said, the views, or some of the views, which Sir David has expressed are not those necessarily held here. Therefore, I must not be held to accept all his statements or conclusions without qualification.

I think it may be to the convenience of the Conference if I first state in a very few words how the matter stands with regard to our position over here. These rebates, as every one is aware, are not a new thing. They have been in existence for 30 or 40 years or more, and it is more of recent years that complaints have come forward with regard to them and that greater interest has been taken in them by those affected by them. I think 1904 was the first time there was a definite Conference with regard to it, at which the various States and Colonies of South Africa, as they then were, met, and came to the conclusion that the freights were excessive, and that the rebate system was objectionable. In 1905 there was a similar Conference, affecting Western Australia chiefly, which came to the same conclusion. All that time, and subsequent to that, the Board of Trade was very carefully watching the whole question and had given it very careful attention. They did not feel at that time they would be justified in initiating legislation without some further evidence and some further full and exhaustive inquiry into the matter. Therefore in 1906 a Royal Commission was appointed to inquire into the whole matter, and their terms of reference were to this effect: they were “to inquire into the operations of shipping rings or conferences generally, and more especially into the system of deferred rebates, and to report whether such operations had caused, or were likely to cause, injury to