

1927.

NEW ZEALAND

SINGAPORE AND NAVAL DEFENCE.

(STATEMENT BY THE RIGHT HON. THE PRIME MINISTER.)

Laid on the Table of both Houses of the General Assembly by leave.

THE Government have for some time past been giving careful consideration to the future naval policy of New Zealand, and I am now in a position to make a statement on the matter.

It will be remembered that New Zealand's first assistance towards the naval defence of the Empire was by means of a monetary contribution to the Royal Navy, and for a considerable period this arrangement proved satisfactory. It enabled the people of this country to assume in some small degree the heavy cost of the Royal Navy, and a significant development of this method of contribution was the timely gift in 1909 by the Government, led by Sir Joseph Ward, of the battle cruiser "New Zealand." This gift was a practical exemplification of the Imperial spirit of our people, and the ship proved of material assistance in the dark days of the war.

As New Zealand's conception of the part she was to play in the affairs of the Empire expanded, however, it became clear that in some respects this method of contribution did not entirely meet the position, and with the outbreak of the war the vital necessity of providing for ships and personnel in our own waters was brought home to the people of New Zealand. The war showed us that if and when it became necessary to transport New Zealand troops in an Imperial emergency to any part of the Empire or to any quarter of the globe it was imperative that there should be at hand naval protection for this purpose. Indeed, it may be said that the war taught us clearly and for the first time the geographical situation of our country. We realized that New Zealand is the furthest outpost of the Empire, completely surrounded by the sea, peopled by descendants of a stock that has for centuries been essentially a maritime race, and that with a large export trade built up on the fertility of the soil and the industry of the people our whole prosperity as well as our prospects of rendering assistance to the Empire in time of need depend entirely upon the safety and adequacy of our sea communication.

That this fact is accepted and acknowledged to-day by the vast majority of our people is undoubted, and it was for this reason that the Government of the late Mr. Massey instituted the present naval policy of New Zealand—namely, that we should maintain in New Zealand waters a unit of British ships, supplied by the Royal Navy and maintained at the expense of New Zealand.

Though the cost of this unit was to be paid by New Zealand, it was considered at the time, and is still considered to-day by the present Government, to be essential that the unit should be in every respect an integral part of the Royal Navy, manned, trained, and maintained according to the methods of the Royal Navy, and available automatically for use in time of emergency in the same manner as any other unit of that Navy.

An important feature in the policy adopted was that these ships should as far as practicable be manned by young New-Zealanders, with the object of developing in this country a spirit of pride and attachment to the ideals of the parent Navy and of providing a means of deepening the sea-sense characteristic of the people from whom we had sprung. It was felt also that the presence of ships of war in New Zealand waters would bring home to our people the fact that the growth in the wealth and population of our country was inevitably accompanied by an increase in her responsibilities and obligations in world affairs.

In the institution of the New Zealand Division of the Royal Navy we were greatly indebted to the advice and assistance of Lord Jellicoe, to whose guiding hand the Division as it exists to-day owes much. His visit and report in 1919 enabled us to proceed with confidence and despatch in the difficult early stages, and made it possible for us to work out in detail the steps that we intended to follow. It will be remembered that in the initial stages one cruiser was provided.

The expansion of New Zealand's programme on these lines was, however, somewhat complicated by the decision of the British Admiralty to provide a first-class naval base at Singapore. This decision was made after most detailed consideration and on the advice of the competent authorities.

Once this decision had been arrived at it was felt in New Zealand that it would not be proper to allow the British taxpayer to pay the whole cost of the base, and accordingly during Mr. Massey's government Parliament was asked to vote, and did vote, a first contribution of £100,000 towards the cost. A similar feeling was expressed in Australia, and there can be little doubt that assistance would have been forthcoming in that quarter also; but before payment of the New Zealand contribution was made a change of Government in Great Britain led to the postponement of the Singapore project, and in the meantime nothing further was done in that direction.