

Another feature of the industrial situation, though not exclusively concerned with the problem of apprenticeship, was the fact that in all the older countries where industrial work was developed on a large scale there had been a tendency for the confinement of industrial life to detrimentally affect the physique and even the mentality of the people. The great problem which New-Zealanders should constantly bear in mind in dealing with matters connected with industrial development and the training of the young people was not only to see to it that they were thoroughly taught their business, but that the new creations of industry as they came along were such that those detrimental defects that existed in other countries should not be allowed to prevail here. In that way they must create in their industries within New Zealand such living and working conditions as would, as far as possible, increase the wealth and prosperity of the country, but never to such an extent as to affect the general well-being and physical conditions of the people.

He felt quite sure that the business of the Conference would not be approached from the point of view of one class attempting to secure an advantage over another; accepting membership of that Conference was accepting a national responsibility to give the Government the best advice they could from the point of view of their own expert knowledge, not for the benefit of any section of the people, but for the common good of all the people and the general advancement of the whole Dominion.

He did not propose to make any suggestions to them as to the conclusions he thought they should arrive at; that, he thought, would be quite a wrong thing for him to do. He had invited them here to give him their advice, and he certainly was not disposed to begin by offering advice. He wanted the Conference to have a free hand and to express its opinions without fear or prejudice, and assured them that any opinions or recommendations that were sent from the Conference to the Government would receive careful consideration as the honest opinions of a group of men who had acquired a great deal of experience in the administration of the Act.

As the delegates would remember, when that Act became law the circumstances were quite peculiar and unusual. It came on at the very end of a session when it was doubtful whether it would be possible to get the Bill through the House at all; it came along as a result of a Conference between the representatives of labour on the one hand and employers on the other. They had come to an agreement, and they recommended Parliament to pass a measure; Parliament agreed and passed it without discussion. They either had to pass it in that way or not at all; and, seeing that the parties chiefly concerned had agreed upon the measure, the House accepted it without comment. There was one very considerable weakness that arose in a case such as that. As they knew, parliamentary procedure provided for certain discussions and investigations, and when these were passed over in the interests of urgency they sometimes found that certain weaknesses existed. The manner in which the Apprentices Act was passed justified this Conference. It had now been law sufficiently long to enable the committees to have quite definite opinions as to what amendments of that law were needed at the present time, and that was the chief thought in the back of his mind and in the mind of the Government in asking the Conference to meet.

He did not think it would be necessary for him to say any more at that time. He was only occupying the Chair until they had elected their own Chairman. He proposed to remain in the Chair while the roll was being called; that would establish every one's right to vote; having done that he would ask them to appoint a Chairman from their own number, and when the Chairman had been appointed he would hand the control of the Conference over to him feeling fully confident that they would give the Government the best advice that they were able to give in the light of their very considerable and varied experience on apprenticeship problems.

On the motion of Mr. Mitchell, seconded by Mr. Fletcher, Mr. T. Bloodworth was unanimously elected to the Chair.

Mr. A. FLETCHER said that he would like to hear something from the Minister, and also from Mr. Rowley, in connection with the matter of the payment of apprentices during training in camp.

The Hon. W. A. VEITCH, in reply, said that he thought it would be rather a wrong thing for him to give the Conference a lead on a matter like that. He had quite a definite opinion on the matter, but whatever the Conference recommended would be very carefully considered, and he thought he knew what the Conference would recommend. He did not think, however, it was desirable that the Minister should attempt to lead the Conference in any direction in connection with any matter that was on the agenda paper, but he could assure them that any recommendation from the Conference would be very seriously considered. As for Mr. Rowley's view on the matter, Mr. Rowley was the Secretary of the Department. His business was to carry out the Government's policy; and he (Hon. Mr. Veitch) considered that it was not quite the usual thing to ask the head of a Department to make a declaration of policy; it might have been the practice in the past, but it was not going to be the practice under the present Government, which was going to have its own policy and carry it through. He would certainly not give the Conference a lead in any direction at all. It was not right for him to ask a group of responsible gentlemen to confer and make recommendations on a particular subject and then attempt to dictate to that Conference as to the decisions it should arrive at. He was sure it would be recognized as quite a wrong and unconstitutional thing for a Minister to do.

If there were no other questions he would ask Mr. Bloodworth to take control of the Conference.

Mr. BLOODWORTH thanked the Minister and the Government for calling the Conference together, and also thanked the delegates for having appointed him to the Chair.

He said that tremendous changes in industry had taken place in their lifetime, and were still taking place. Prominent industries thirty or forty years ago had been replaced by entirely new trades, and the problem of apprenticeship therefore required very careful consideration. He hoped that when the Conference had arrived at definite and useful recommendations, as he felt sure they would be able to do, the Government would view them sympathetically and favourably.

A motion to adjourn the Conference until 2.30 p.m., so that the workers' delegates could have an opportunity to meet and discuss the agenda paper, was lost.

The Conference then proceeded with the agenda paper.