

25. I would suggest that the Imperial Government should be consulted as to the advisability of holding a Conference in London, at which representatives from Canada, the Cape, New Zealand, and Australia might be asked to discuss and, if possible, arrive at a conclusion as to the views herein set forth, or any others that may be submitted having for their object the strengthening of the naval defence of the Empire, and that the conclusions arrived at should be then forwarded for the consideration of the Governments and Parliaments concerned.

JOHN FORREST,
Minister of State for Defence.

The Admiralty had furnished the memorandum appended for the information of the Conference, and the First Lord attended at the second meeting and made the following statement in further explanation and support of the considerations which govern the policy of the Board of Admiralty in regard to the control and distribution of the naval forces of the Empire :—

“Mr. Chamberlain and gentlemen, the Admiralty has circulated a memorandum (Appendix IV.) which I think you all have before you. We endeavoured in the memorandum to confine ourselves to setting forward the nature of the problem which the Admiralty has to face on behalf of the Empire, and to indicate the extent of the burden which is thrown on the Mother-country. I need not say that I shall be happy to answer any questions that any of the colonial Premiers here present might wish to ask in elucidation of the general principle, and the facts stated in the memorandum. I would propose, if Mr. Chamberlain and the Premiers agreed, that when the Admiralty come to a detailed discussion with any colony or group of colonies, that those discussions should be held separately. The Admiralty is entirely at the disposal of Ministers if they will be kind enough to visit us and discuss the problem with us so far as it concerns their own colony. To-day I will merely endeavour to lay emphasis on two points which are contained within this memorandum. The first, on which I would lay the greatest stress, is the reason why we have eliminated from this memorandum any allusion to the word ‘defence.’ There was a time in this country, not so very long ago either, when naval strategists regarded the naval problem mainly from the point of view of defence. That, I submit, is altogether heretical. The real problem which this Empire has to face in the case of a naval war is simply and absolutely to find out where the ships of the enemy are, to concentrate the greatest possible force where those ships are, and to destroy those ships. That is the only possible method of protecting this Empire from the efforts which other navies may make to damage her commerce or her territory. It follows from this that there can be no localisation of naval forces in the strict sense of the word. There can be no local allocation of ships to protect the mouth of the Thames, to protect Liverpool, to protect Sydney, to protect Halifax. If we make any such attempt of the kind we should only be inviting disaster. It follows also that whatever local distribution of forces may be advisable and feasible in time of peace, in time of naval war there must be only one authority with full power and responsibility to the Empire to move the ships, to concentrate them where they can deal the most effective blow against the forces of the enemy; and that any separation of responsibility, any diminution of the power of that central authority, any risk of hesitation or delay in making a conjunction of the squadrons where they can deal the most effective blow, might have disastrous consequences.

“The second point on which I wish to lay special stress is this: At present there is only one agreement between the Imperial Government and any group of colonial Governments in respect of naval affairs, although we have received generous—and independently proffered—aid from the Cape and from Natal—I allude to the Australasian agreement. Now, gentlemen, I attach great importance to that agreement, because the statesmen who negotiated it and signed it have led the way in what I may call the Imperial consideration of this question of naval policy. But, like every document that commences a policy, it has faults, and to my mind there is no greater in it than this: that the relations of the Australasian Governments to the Imperial are simply that of the man who pays to the man who supplies. The Australasian Governments pay us a certain contribution; for this contribution we supply them with a certain article. Now, this is good so far as it goes, but it does not, to my mind, go far enough. It does not give our New Zealand and Australian fellow-countrymen the sense of personal interest, of personal possession, in the British navy which I most of all desiderate for the future, and I want not only the colonial Governments to understand that on the naval protection of the Empire, exercised through a wise naval strategy, depends our future existence as a united Empire, but I want them to regard the navy as their own, at least as much as ours; and with that object I wish to see in the navy more colonial officers and a contribution of colonial seamen. I want, in fact, if I may use such a term, to increase the maritime spirit of the Empire. After all we are not in this country all sailors, yet we are all imbued with the maritime spirit. Here you have the great colonies covering vast geographical tracts of country: is there not a danger that in the far interior, unless we take precautions, the maritime spirit may be lost? I want to bring Australasia, Canada, and South Africa to understand, in the sense that the average Englishman understands it, that the sea is the one material source of our greatness and our power; the main bond of union; the real source of our strength—if I may use such a mixed metaphor—that the sea is to the Empire as the breath of life; but it cannot be done, I opine, so long as we are only receivers of money. I want to see from all parts of the Empire a personal contribution to the navy, so that it may not only be an abstract Admiralty to govern the navy, but an Admiralty that has won the confidence of the colonies, because the colonies understand its policy, and because in each colony there are officers and men belonging to the navy—an integral portion of the navy. Those are the two points, gentlemen, on which I wish to lay special stress, and I can only conclude, as I began, by saying that I am here at your service to answer any questions which you may wish to address to me.”

The Secretary of State: Do you propose to lay any definite suggestions at this stage of the Conference?