

1st Day.

PUBLICITY OF PROCEEDINGS.

[23 May, 1911.]

Mr. FISHER—*cont.*

jects coming before this Conference which it would be out of place and unreasonable to permit discussion upon openly. One of the weaknesses of this proposal is, that if this Conference is open to the Press, except when the subjects are confidential, the subjects are all known to the Press, and immediately you reach a confidential and critical one, some one will have to move that it is one not fit for public discussion. That will emphasize it, and may give it undue prominence.

I have hopes, if it is my great privilege to be here at another Conference, that it should be possible so to arrange the Agenda that certain subjects that are to be discussed might be separated altogether from general subjects and be discussed in open conference, apart altogether from the more serious subjects that we will have to deal with in secret. By that means some useful work may be done here without offending in any way or lessening the power of this Conference for good.

I understood from Sir Wilfrid that there was some idea of a précis of considerable length being issued from day to day.

The PRESIDENT: Perhaps I might mention here that Mr. Harcourt has procured the services of a trained summary writer, who will attend here and will be prepared to give, at the conclusion of the day, matter, roughly speaking, which will occupy a column, or something like a column, of the "Times"; and it is proposed that members of the Conference shall have an opportunity of seeing this in the afternoon (it will not appear until the next morning), and, of course, making any corrections which they think necessary. I think that really meets the full requirements of the case.

Mr. FISHER: I think that is a great improvement on what was done previously.

With reference to the important matter mentioned by Sir Joseph Ward, that there was some difficulty in his people getting any information at all four years ago, while the Australians got it, I am afraid we are under a grave disadvantage in our part of the world in the information that reaches us about events happening on this side of the world. That is a matter which will arise later on, and be discussed on another motion.

General BOTHA: Mr. President, I am sorry to say that I cannot see my way to support this resolution. I consider that we would be taking a very wrong step indeed in admitting the Press to our proceedings. Our discussions must necessarily be to a large extent of a confidential and conversational nature, and they should remain so, in my opinion, if we expect to attain any satisfactory results. Although I am as much as any one in favour of the greatest publicity, I do feel that there are occasions when such a course is most inexpedient. In South Africa, at the time when our National Convention began its deliberations, the same question, of course, had to be settled, and we decided that the discussion should be carried on absolutely with closed doors. During more than four months questions of the greatest importance to every part of the country were discussed in the National Convention, and I may say that practically nothing transpired outside of what took place within. I think it is most unlikely that if we had adopted any other policy we should ever have attained the Union which we enjoy to-day. I think our difficulties would be increased enormously.

Of course, I do not maintain that the objections against publicity are so strong in the case of this Conference as they were on the occasion of our National Convention. I do feel, however, that it is most inadvisable for us to admit the Press; and I think that the public can have no reasonable cause for complaint if we follow the procedure which was adopted at the last Conference. My opinion is that everything should be recorded that takes place; that a précis of the proceedings be issued daily to the Press after revision by the members of the Conference of the portions which concern them, and that towards the end of the Conference we should decide when and how far publicity should be given to our discussions.