

25 May, 1911.]

IMPERIAL COUNCIL.

[2nd Day.]

Mr. FISHER—*cont.*

We rely—I think I can say for the Commonwealth of Australia—on the wisdom of His Majesty's Government of the United Kingdom safeguarding all the interests of the Empire as regards the Navy. We rely on the powers given to the Commonwealth under the Commonwealth Constitution to deal with Naval and Military Defence of that portion of the Empire in our own way, in co-operation as far as we can with the Mother Country, both for the preservation of our own immediate country and the preservation of the centre of the Empire and all the other parts of it.

I cannot, speaking on behalf of the Commonwealth, support the proposition as put forward. I can say with Sir Wilfrid that even as it appears on the notice paper it would not have been concurred in by myself and my colleagues, the Ministers of the Commonwealth, nor do I believe by the people of the Commonwealth. But I am not going to say that there are not possibilities of having an Advisory Council of some kind associated with the Imperial Government, who would be able to be in close touch with them at all times, especially in times of crisis and emergency, so that certain communications might be made by them to representatives on the spot directly responsible to the Governments of the Dominions, and we should be informed. On those lines I think something might be done. There are so many matters of grave importance involving the whole re-constitution of the political government of the Empire that it is too great a question to be considered immediately and to be decided off-hand. Therefore, with great reluctance, and expressing my appreciation of the pains that Sir Joseph has taken to put his views before this Conference, I cannot think that it would be wise for us to adopt such a proposal at the present time.

General BOTHA : Mr. President, I have listened with the greatest interest to the speech which has been delivered by my friend the Prime Minister of New Zealand, and, although I highly appreciate the spirit in which he has brought forward his proposal, I am sorry to say that I cannot agree with him.

I am sure that every one of us is equally anxious to knit the various parts of the British Empire together as closely as possible, and that any practical scheme to attain this object would receive our most cordial support, and our Imperial Conferences are held with that object.

We must not, however, look upon these Conferences as affording, in the first place, an opportunity for the passing of a number of resolutions which will be carried into effect throughout the Empire—if we do this I am afraid that we shall be disappointed—I look upon these Conferences with very different views. I consider that they are of the greatest possible value in periodically bringing together the Governments of the Empire and enabling them to discuss matters of common interest.

Even if we were not formally to pass a single resolution, I should be very far from saying that our Conference had been a failure. We would all return to the several parts of the Empire having heard each other's views on most important questions, and we would all be able to work towards the attainment of one common ideal.

These Conferences have already been of the greatest value, and I am convinced that they are in a great measure responsible for the greater unity of the Empire which we have undoubtedly already attained since they were first organized.

These Conferences are undoubtedly an important step in the right direction, but I have grave doubts whether an Imperial Council such as proposed would bring us nearer to our object.

I have asked myself whether this proposal which has been brought forward is a practical one. No one can feel more than I do, that as often as the British Government has to deal with matters which may affect a particular part of the Empire, it is essential that the particular Dominion concerned should have an opportunity of being heard and of expressing its views. After the most careful consideration, however, I have come to the conclusion that this object cannot satisfactorily be attained through an Imperial Council such as proposed in this resolution. How is such a Council to be appointed? Who will decide what matters must come before it? What authority is to be vested in it? To what representative body is such a Council to be responsible? These are only a few of the questions which crop up immediately, and it seems to me that no satis-