

*2nd Day.]*

RECONSTITUTION OF THE COLONIAL OFFICE.

[25 May, 1911.]

The PRESIDENT : Perhaps I may say I have received a message from the King, which ought to be communicated without delay, I think, to the Conference, in these terms : " His Majesty the King desires to thank the Imperial Conference for their assurance of the devoted loyalty of all portions of the Empire represented at the Conference. The King is well aware of the affectionate feelings of his subjects to his Throne and Person, and he has received the resolution with particular pleasure, being, as it is, the first act of the Imperial Conference at its first meeting. The King was delighted to welcome the Prime Ministers on their arriving to join the Conference. He is keenly interested in its deliberations, and he trusts the Prime Minister will convey to the peoples of their respective Dominions an expression of His Majesty's deep regard for their welfare and a hope for the continued prosperity of their lands."

Mr. HARCOURT : I will send that to the Press this afternoon.

The PRESIDENT : Now, Sir Joseph, we should like to hear your views.

Sir JOSEPH WARD : I would like to explain why I felt it necessary to give notice of this motion, and I want to state for the information of those who, perhaps, may have forgotten what took place at the last Conference, in 1907, in relation to this first resolution, that Mr. Deakin at that Conference urged that the Dominions should deal direct with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The objection to this proposal, which was pointed out at the time, was that the Prime Minister had already infinitely too much to do. What would appear to affect this proposal is embodied in Resolutions Nos. 1, 2, and 3. For the purpose of dealing with the view put forward by Mr. Harcourt, I would rather like to deal with the three together.

Now the main object of the resolutions that I have given notice of is to seek to obtain the creation of some form of organic machinery sufficiently representative of the self-governing Dominions to discuss and advise upon the various questions of growing importance which relate to those Dominions in relation to the Empire. Now I understand from Mr. Harcourt that, if strongly pressed, to use his own words, by the Conference, he is willing to accept the change suggested in Resolution No. 1. In deference to Mr. Harcourt's knowledge of his own Department, and in the absence of the necessary detail, without which one would not be presumptuous enough to set up his opinion against Mr. Harcourt's, I would not press for divided control if Mr. Harcourt states it is necessary to have single control as at present. I fully recognise that you must have one sufficiently superior officer, and I recognise the disabilities created by a political head being put in the position of a permanent officer. He is subject to change, and the new political head would be put in the position of a beginner. As far as the oversea Dominions are concerned, I see the disadvantage pointed out in that respect. The important aspect, to my mind, is that pointed out by Mr. Deakin in 1907, and I think some different machinery is necessary. In the oversea Dominions we feel that upon very important matters, though without any fault whatever upon the part of the Colonial Office—and I want to bear out the South African representative's position in that respect—frequently in our country, though well informed from the inside, we are not in a position to arrive at what I would call clear definite views in deciding matters in New Zealand that affect our own interests and affect the Empire as a whole. The proposal is to have a Standing Committee of the Secretary of State, the Political Under Secretary, and the Permanent Under Secretary, with the High Commissioners—a point upon which I wish to be quite clear—who in connection with that Standing Committee have no power. I infer that to be so though Mr. Harcourt did not say so. I infer they are there simply for the purpose of giving information to the Standing Committee.

Mr. HARCOURT : No; I considered that we were all equal, and if it came to a vote we should all vote. We have no power of enforcing decisions, but we should be all equal there.