

*2nd Day.]*

RECONSTITUTION OF THE COLONIAL OFFICE.

[25 May, 1911.]

Mr. MALAN—*cont.*

The second point of the discussion is the question of the organization of the Colonial Office here. About that we also feel that the arrangements which have been made are satisfactory so far as we are concerned. If any alteration is to be made we think that it is a departmental question which could safely be left to the Minister in charge of that Department, and it is not so much a question for this Conference to go into.

The third question which has been discussed here now is the question of the Committee, which would sit more or less continuously or be in existence continuously from one Conference to the other. As regards this Committee, we feel that there are very serious practical difficulties. Take the constitution of that Committee. It has been suggested that the High Commissioner or somebody else should be on this Committee. As far as the High Commissioners are concerned, we feel that they are not selected as political agents in the first instance, but very largely as business men. The High Commissioner for the Cape, for instance, has to buy a great deal of material for our Government—railway material and other material. It would interfere with the selection of the High Commissioner if you have to look not only at the qualifications which we now look to in the appointment, but to the additional one of his being a semi-political officer to meet the Secretary of State here, together with representatives of the other Dominions, in conference, to discuss matters of high policy. Secondly, what question will go before this Committee, and who will decide it?

I understand first of all that the resolutions that have been passed by the main Conference will go before this Committee for giving effect to them, and other subsidiary matters; but who is to decide which questions are of vital importance and which are not? The President has said that no questions except those of general importance will go before this Committee—questions touching all the Dominions. Now, a question may touch all the Dominions at its initial stage, but as you go along a difference may arise with a particular Dominion. Take the example that has been taken as to the law of emigration: that is a question which touches all the Dominions, but when a draft Act has been put forward it is quite possible one Dominion may take objection to one clause and another Dominion to another clause, and there is that difference. If you submit that to a Committee are you prepared to override the opinion of your own Dominion Government by the advice of the others who may differ on other points but agree on this point? So that when you start you may have a question of general importance, but as you go along it may become only a dispute or difference of opinion between the Imperial Government and a particular Colony or Dominion, and then the argument raised by Sir Wilfrid Laurier very strongly applies. For these reasons we feel that we cannot improve on the present condition of affairs. You have in the Colonial Office a Secretariat dealing with questions touching the Dominions generally, and as time goes on if, in giving effect to the resolutions, any difficulty arises in connection with any particular Dominion, the High Commissioner is consulted on the spot, but he is then in communication with his Government, and acts on the instruction of his Government. We do not think it would serve the interest of the Conference or of the Dominions in particular by having any change made in this sort of way.

Sir EDWARD MORRIS: The position we take up is that we are quite satisfied with the existing means of communication.

The PRESIDENT: I may point out what I think you already understand—that in putting forward the suggestion His Majesty's Government did not in the least wish to press it upon the Conference unless it meets with general approval, and unless it is felt to satisfy a real want. I am bound to say that after listening to the discussion the conclusion I have come to is that, so far as the majority of the Dominions are concerned, they do not desire to have any substantial change in the matter of organization or in the present arrangements. I quite realise the importance of what Mr. Fisher has said as to the position of the High Commissioner, and as to his having opportunities of more