

*2nd Day.]*

RECONSTITUTION OF THE COLONIAL OFFICE.

[25 May, 1911.]

Sir WILFRID LAURIER : It is not yet ratified. Therefore all the objections you have to the Declaration of London could be stated by Sir George Reid on a suggestion of yours.

Mr. FISHER : No. If you will allow me to say so, that is perhaps the weakest argument you could bring forward. We, rightly or wrongly, hold the view that it would be wise — indeed, that it would be an advantage — if the Government before they entered into a treaty involving the interests not only of the United Kingdom, but of all the Dominions, made the Dominions acquainted with what was in their minds and what they were proposing to do, and not wait for opinions until after they had entered into negotiation and practically completed a treaty with a dozen or twenty other Governments, some of them small and unimportant, who certainly knew all about what was going on in that negotiation, while we knew nothing until the matter was completed, and we have nothing to do but accept it or leave it. That is not a time when the Commissioner can go to the Government and say, "Here is a treaty; you should not ratify it," when it has already all the weight of the Government of the United Kingdom, acting in the best interests of all. We consider it ought not to have been done until we had known something about it and had an opportunity of representing our interests. That is where the High Commissioner should come in. If the Secretary for Foreign Affairs had communicated with the High Commissioner in a confidential way he could then have represented the views of the Dominion, in the most secret way, to the Government. By that means we would get over many difficulties which are now presented to us.

The PRESIDENT : That goes to say that it might be done, and in your view ought to be done, at an earlier stage; but it is too late in the day to bring the High Commissioners in.

Mr. BATCHELOR : In dealing with the Declaration of London I wish to point out that in August, 1909, the Australian Government made representations as to the feeling of the Commonwealth against being committed to the Declaration without consultation, but a reply came from the Secretary of State that it was then too late to make any alteration. That was the first intimation Australia had that certain arrangements were proposed to be concluded and had almost reached the stage of ratification. The Australian Government were prepared to put forward suggestions for certain alterations, but in view of the reply that it was too late they were not forwarded. However good or bad the suggestions might have been, or however they might have commended themselves to your Government, it was then too late. That was our position, and we felt that, under the circumstances, the Dominion Governments were not adequately considered.

The PRESIDENT : I should like you to mention this point, if you will, when Sir Edward Grey is present, because I do not carry in my mind, as you may well imagine, all the details. No doubt you are perfectly accurate, but I should like you to make the point to him. I see your point, which is that you ought to have been taken into counsel, or had an opportunity of making your feelings felt at an earlier stage.

Mr. FISHER : In the most secret and confidential way.

The PRESIDENT : I quite understand.

Mr. BATCHELOR : There is another point of view in addition to consultation with the Imperial Government, and that is the consultation that would be possible under the suggestion Mr. Harcourt has thrown out. If this Committee were to meet each other—the representatives of Canada and Australia and New Zealand—they would also better understand the difficulties which one or other of them might have in regard to some of these suggestions. At present the only way we can learn the view which Canada takes on any matter is by Canada communicating straight to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and it being sent on to our Government.