

3rd Day.]

DECLARATION OF LONDON.

[1 June, 1911

Sir EDWARD GREY—*cont.*

Prize Court Convention, to bring them in suddenly with regard to the Declaration of London. Once the whole thing had been launched, and when there was no arrangement in existence for consultation with the Dominions, it would have been exceedingly difficult—perhaps “not practicable” is too strong a word, but difficult and exceedingly inconvenient—suddenly to set up a consultation with regard to the Declaration of London, when there had been none with regard to the Hague Conference. I would take even a larger point than Mr. Fisher took, though I rather understood him to imply it. The point should be not why were not the Dominions not consulted about the Declaration of London, but why were not they consulted with regard to the Hague Conference. If they had been consulted with regard to the programme of the Hague Conference it would follow as a matter of course that they would have been consulted with regard to the Declaration of London. I do not know that I can give any answer to that point except they were not consulted about the Hague Conference which took place before that—a still earlier one. I agree, and the Government agrees entirely, that the Dominions ought to be consulted, and that they ought to be consulted before the next Hague Conference takes place, about the whole programme of that next Conference; and then, of course, they would be consulted automatically with regard to everything that arises out of it.

Mr. FISHER: I only wish to convey to this Conference and to the Government that we desire, as far as it is practicable to do so, not only to be consulted after things are done, but to be consulted while you have ideas in your minds and before you begin to carry them out and commit us to them. As regards this other point, we are only responsible for what we do here, and as it is necessary to begin at some point I shall be very glad if the Government are ready to begin now.

Sir EDWARD GREY: I think what I am going to say will show that the Government not only thoroughly understand the scope of Mr. Fisher's point, but also, in practice, could meet it. The procedure with regard to the next Hague Conference will, I presume, be the same as it was with regard to the last. There is, first of all, an international programme drawn up. That is the first thing. When that programme is drawn up it is received by the Government here, and it will be circulated to the Dominion Governments. It is drawn up some time in advance. What we do here ourselves is to have an inter-departmental conference which considers that programme, and considers what instructions should be given to the British delegates who are going to the Hague Conference, as to the line they should take on the different points. I think, obviously, the time for consultation to begin is when that inter-departmental conference, as we have called it hitherto, takes place, and that the Dominions should, in whatever way they found most convenient, which would be made known through Mr. Harcourt, or the Secretary of State for the Colonies, be represented at that inter-departmental conference, and so be present and be a party to drawing up the instructions which are to be given to the delegates at the Hague Conference. Then, of course, the delegates go to the Hague Conference to carry out the instructions. The Dominion Governments will then be parties to the instructions, but they, like the Government here, of course, have to leave considerable latitude to the delegates to carry out those instructions at the Conference. The delegates will carry out those instructions, but no doubt from time to time while the Conference is proceeding points arise, which have to be answered by telegraph sometimes, and I think then it would be impossible to have consultation on every point that arises, because there is no time, owing to the necessities of the case. As a matter of fact, during the last Hague Conference, theoretically the whole Cabinet ought to have been consulted here on points as they arose, but there was no time. Parliament is not always sitting, the Cabinet is separated, and some individual Minister here, unfortunately the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs generally, has to take the responsibility of dealing with points which arise from moment to moment.