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## The Journal of Commerce

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## The Imperial Conference

SEVERAL attempts were made in the latter part of the recent session at Ottawa to bring about a discussion of the business of the approaching Imperial Conference, but without success. A Western member announced his intention of proposing a resolution to invite discussion, but in the somewhat unseemly rush of business towards the close of the session no opportunity to move the resolution was found. Incidental references to the subject were made in the last hours of the session, and some fears were expressed that something might be done at the Conference that would prejudice the independence of political action that Canada now enjoys. There is, we are satisfied, no ground for alarm on that score. The Imperial Conference will prove quite harmless. If there are people who attach much importance to it, and look for any practical results from it, they will probably be disappointed.

A Conference called by the Imperial Government at any time can hardly be regarded as unimportant. Opportunities for frank informal discussion between the Imperial authorities and representatives of the Dominions, and between the representatives of the several Dominions, can probably always be turned to some good account. To that extent some useful purpose may be served by the meeting. At any rate, the Conference having been called by the Imperial Government, it is right that Canada shall be represented, and, to this end, it is well that the Premier and such of his colleagues as have been chosen shall attend. But those who look carefully into the circumstances under which this Conference and the one of last year were called will not expect much material good to spring from the coming meeting. The Conference of last year did nothing practical. That was not the fault of the members of the Conference. There was really nothing for it to do.

While these Conferences have been called by the Imperial Government—they alone having the power to issue the call—the truth is that the movement which produced the Conference of 1917 did not originate with them, and there is some reason to believe that if it had not occurred at all the Imperial Government would have been happier. There were in England a number of well meaning and very zealous people who had long persuaded themselves that the British Empire was about to fall to pieces for want of a new constitution. They persistently represented that such was the situation and that the great Dominions were demanding a reorganization of the Empire. So far as Canada was concerned, this was a

complete delusion. Individuals occasionally allowed themselves to share this delusion, but the people of Canada generally, judged by the action or inaction of their Parliament, were perfectly satisfied with the growing status of the Dominion, and asked no change. The English constitution-mongers, however, insisting that something must be done to save the Empire, and that they represented Colonial opinion, scared the British Government into issuing a call for a Conference at a moment when there was no practical work for it. The great Commonwealth of Australia thought so little of it that it sent no representative. If the Premier, Mr. Hughes, found urgent business at home requiring his attention, he had a representative in London, in the person of the ex-Premier, Mr. Andrew Fisher, who could have attended, but evidently was instructed not to do so. Having got their Conference, the enthusiasts of London now had difficulty in finding something for it to do. When its promoters began to talk of rearranging the Imperial constitution, the British Government promptly announced that they would not permit discussion of anything of the kind. Then somebody suggested that the Conference might settle the long standing Irish problem. The mention of such a thing startled the Colonial Office into a declaration that that subject also was tabooed. So, after much delay, the Conference met and passed a number of resolutions of a quite harmless character. Apparently we are to have a repetition of that business this year.

The Conference must not be confused with the British War Cabinet. The latter is a small body, charged with the general direction of the war policy of the Empire. The appointment of the chief Colonial Premiers to this body was a compliment to the Dominions. It could hardly be regarded as much more, for the Colonial representatives could not remain in London to attend the meetings of the War Cabinet. An exception was the case of General Smuts who, in the absence of Premier Botha, represented South Africa. General Smuts remained in England, and there is no doubt that his large military experience enabled him to render useful service.

The Canadian Ministers will find work to do in England. The War Cabinet, on which the Canadian Premier is entitled to a seat, has serious business on hand at all times now. The Ministers who are to conduct negotiations with the Grand Trunk Railway Company respecting the acquisition of the company's property will have much to engage their attention. The Imperial Conference, having no real business that needs attention at a time like this, will have to occupy itself in warning over last year's resolutions, perhaps adding a few new ones of no greater importance.

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