

i make no apology for quoting the most material passage in it.

The Committee wrote :

In considering the constitution of the Defence Committee itself, we are fully alive to the vital necessity for having as its invariable President the Prime Minister of the day. Under our political institutions, based on the authority of a Parliament like ours, no body of experts, however highly trained and qualified, would carry sufficient weight and authority to give practical effect to their conclusions unless the Prime Minister, in whom governing power is vested, were present at their deliberations and personally committed to their policy.

If, therefore—and we assume this to be an essential condition—the Prime Minister is to preside over the Defence Committee, we fully recognise the importance of leaving to him absolute discretion in the selection and variation of its members; but we would venture to suggest the vital importance of giving to that institution, yet in its infancy, as powerful a sanction for continuity and permanence as may be consistent with the retention by the Prime Minister of perfect freedom of action in regard to its component parts.

The Committee of Defence, thus constituted, is the “co-ordinating head of all the Departments concerned in the conduct of and in the preparation for war,” and it is to “fulfil the main functions of a General Staff as they are now understood all over the civilised world by statesmen who have considered the necessities and conditions of Empire.” But it is clear that the Committee, under the form of constitution just described, is, in spite of the high scientific and professional duties which it has to undertake, a “Pocket Committee” of the Prime Minister. Herein lies the great danger of the experiment commenced by Lord Esher and his colleagues. In the supremely important matter of Imperial Defence, everything depends upon the respect which the Prime Minister feels for the opinion of his naval and military advisers, who may be urging him to take action which is unpopular with the party he leads and opposed to his own political purposes. If he determines to disregard the authority of the experts, he has only to vary the composition of the Committee until it is such that it endorses his wishes. There is always a most serious danger that under our political system the desires