

[Mr. Thomas.] bounden duty to do it. That is why I have, broadly, indicated what are our views on the constitutional question.

Now I come to the question how best can we develop and encourage trade within the Empire. I rule out the question of tariffs; I will not argue them. I rule them out, because, apart from the difference there may be in regard to Protection or Free Trade, those who hold these different views can in many ways co-operate and unite in trying to accomplish the same end. Nothing is more disappointing when one meets our Dominion colleagues than to hear their expression about their "being robbed." They put it very plainly when you meet them. I met a representative deputation of those engaged in the meat trade in Australia. They said that they wanted to see me because they believed, as I believe, that it would be a good thing to sell Australian meat here, but they could not quite understand how it was that they were only getting 4½d. per pound for the meat that they were selling to us, and yet they saw that meat being sold in the London market for 1s. 8d., 1s. 9d. and 1s. 10d. per pound.

Mr. G. HARVEY: That is the price of the carcase on the hoof.

Mr. THOMAS: That may be so; but these people will not quite appreciate whether it is on the hoof or not. All they know is that there is, in their judgment, something radically wrong. If that is a cause of irritation, surely we ought to deal with it. When we say that we want to help our Dominions and to encourage the buying of Empire goods, that may be, and is, a good slogan for our Colonial brothers, but at the same time they turn round and say, "We are delighted at your encouragement, but we rather deprecate the tendency to give us so small a price, while the consumer is paying so high a price, and we want to know where the difference goes." The hon. Member for Kennington (Mr. G. Harvey) may have given the explanation; I do not know. I am satisfied that it is the duty of the Colonial Office to give an authoritative answer, and to say where the difference lies. It is the duty of the Government to say, "This is a question that ought to be tackled. This is something that we are interested in. This is something that does not affect

tariffs." If an investigation could be made, if an authoritative statement could be made—assuming that the explanation given by the hon. Member for Kennington is correct—it would be something of a tangible answer to those who complain from the other side of the Empire.

Mr. JOHNSTON: Is it not the case that the High Commissioner for Australia has publicly stated in this country that meat is arriving in London at 4½d. per lb.?

Mr. THOMAS: I saw that statement. The High Commissioner for Australia was with me when the original statement was made. It is not for me to indict anybody, unless I know the whole of the facts, and unless I can say: "This is the explanation; here is where the profit goes." If it be true that the price paid for Australian meat is 4½d. a lb., and we know what price our own people are paying for it in the market, surely, when there is common agreement to encourage Empire goods, and to ask our people to buy our own Empire produce, if there is something that tends to cause suspicion, that deprives the consumers of this country of the benefits which they ought to obtain, and that robs the producer, it ought to be investigated, and the Government ought to tackle it.

I have mentioned meat, but there are many other commodities that come within the same category. Let me examine what happened during the War. I understand that the question of Empire marketing will be a subject of discussion at the Imperial Conference.

The SECRETARY of STATE for DOMINION AFFAIRS (Mr. Amery) indicated assent.

Mr. THOMAS: I am acting on the assumption that I am now dealing with something that will be the subject of discussion at the next Imperial Conference.

Mr. AMERY indicated assent.

Mr. THOMAS: During the War, the British Government bought the whole of the wool crop of Australia and New Zealand. They also bought in 1917 the whole of the South African wool crop. They paid, roughly, £100,000,000 for the wool. A Government, supposed to be

composed of bad business men; a Government not supposed to know how to conduct business and always supposed to be fleeced on all hands, bought from three of our Dominions £100,000,000 worth of wool. The total administrative expenses for selling the whole of that £100,000,000 of wool came to one-fifth of 1 per cent. This was done by the Government. They bought wholesale the whole crop from our Dominions, amounting to 100,000,000 tons. The first thing they did was to reduce the price of wool to the consumer 3½d. per lb., and then they made a net profit of £66,500,000. Incidentally, they did the very wise thing of then handing back a number of million pounds to the growers of that wool. I do submit that there is not only a precedent but there is a tremendous moral in that. No one can pretend that our Australian, New Zealand and South African farmers were not delighted with the deal. They will tell you they were not only well satisfied but it was a tremendous encouragement to them. No one will deny that it was an advantage to reduce the price of wool 3½d. a lb., and then, in addition, for the Government to make £66,500,000 net profit.

Sir FREDRIC WISE: Will the right hon. Gentleman say whether that was run by Government officials?

Mr. THOMAS: I do not know. There may have been some Government officials but the power was taken by this House of Commons, and committees were set up and they were responsible to the Government. At all events I am not concerned for the moment in arguing whether Government officials were the best or not. The fact remains that this was not private enterprise. It was the Government. The Government said "we will do this ourselves," and they appointed, as any Government could do and would do, some people to go on with the detailed work. The most remarkable result is this. Take the ordinary man buying a suit of clothes in 1915 and take the same man buying a suit of clothes in 1918. No one will deny that there was at least 100 per cent. increase in the price of the suit of clothes in 1918 as compared with 1914. But by the Government's action in buying this wool wholesale, they were able to clothe the last 100,000 troops cheaper than the first 100,000 in 1914. These facts not only cannot be disputed, but I submit that

they are the basis for the claim that I am now making. We all want to encourage Dominion and Colonial food growing and to encourage trade within the Empire. We all want to see our people benefiting in all parts of the Empire, and surely if there is a practical way of doing it—a way by which both the producer and the consumer can benefit from the action—I submit that it is a legitimate matter for discussion. That is all I propose to say on what I call the Dominion side of the question. I have not spoken, I hope, in a controversial sense. I hope I have put to the right hon. Gentleman some practical and concrete proposals that legitimately ought to be the subject of discussion at the forthcoming conference.

I propose now to turn very briefly to ask him why, when dealing with the two Committees that I set up after consultation with representatives of all parties in the House, why he found it necessary to abolish both the Southborough and the Islington Committees. I know he has repeatedly said that it was because the Mission of the Under-Secretary dispensed with the necessity for their job. I do not agree. I took the view, and I hope it is a view that will be continued by all Governments, that in Colonial matters the delicacy and difficulty that surround the Colonial Office are such that we should, as far as possible, try to follow the policy of the Foreign Office and not make it a party issue. There was no Committee of any sort set up without representatives of all parties being invited to sit on it. I was advised that, in getting together these two Committees, not only was I obtaining the services of practical men, but they would be able to get information that would be invaluable in days to come. To my amazement, within a month of the change of Government, I was told that it was the right hon. Gentleman's intention to abolish these Committees. I submit that, unless there is very strong and sufficient reason for his action—which I do not admit—to depart in that way from a policy and tradition of non-party character is, to say the least, something that we ought to deprecate. I want to ask him whether he still believes that there is no necessity for these or some other Committees to study and give effect to the many difficult questions that he has to deal with from time to time.