

Mr. CLARKE. Why was that not asked before ?

Sir WILFRID LAURIER. Because it was not the proposition before the House, but when my hon. friend and other hon. gentlemen on the other side of the House stated that the Grand Trunk Pacific Company were prepared to build a line from North Bay to the Pacific ocean for the ordinary subsidies, a statement which was absolutely contrary to the facts, then we asked that the facts should be known and laid before the public. We think the House is entitled to all information which is in the hands of the government. I have no objection to this motion passing, and I shall take good care to have all the corners swept and all the files searched, and to have the clerks use all the brooms they can use to sweep up all the information we can obtain for the hon. gentleman. But does he mean to say that this should include all the private correspondence that may be sent to me or to my colleagues ? Is the proposition to be laid down that private letters, even documents which are marked private, and before the seal of secrecy is removed from them, are to form part of the information to which the House is entitled ? I am not prepared to say so. The hon. gentlemen made use of an expression to which I think I have a right to take exception. He said that I had concealed from the House information to which the House was entitled. I do not agree with him, and I think I have a right to take exception to that expression. I may have been right or I may have been wrong in my judgment. Not only in this instance, but in all instances since I have been at the head of the government, I have regarded it as my duty, whenever a confidential document has been placed in my hands, to keep it confidential until such time as the seal of secrecy has been removed from it. That is the position I take to-day. On this point, let me quote from Todd's Parliamentary Government, as follows :

Considerations of public policy, and a due regard to the interests of the state, occasionally demand, however, that information sought for by members of the legislature should be withheld, at the discretion and upon the general responsibility of ministers. This principle is systematically recognized in all parliamentary transactions; were it otherwise, it would be impossible to carry on the government with safety and honour. Whenever it is declared, by the responsible servants of the Crown, that any information sought for in parliament could not be supplied without inconvenience to the public service, or for other sufficient reasons, the House refrains from insisting upon its production.

This authority, in my opinion, applies to the present case. Ministers receive letters every day which are confidential, though on public matters ; others are private ; others are public without any qualification. They

all go on record. Confidential communications, though relating to the public service, do not go on record at once, though they may later on. There may be circumstances in which ministers of the Crown must take the responsibility of saying whether or not documents which are of a public character should or should not be brought down to the House. They have a discretion in that respect ; but I did not claim any such discretion in this case. The hon. gentleman commented, I will not say offensively, but in a manner to suggest something wrong, when he stated that I had not given a candid answer to my hon. friend from Jacques Cartier (Mr. Monk) when last year I told him without any equivocation that all the information had been brought down. I repeat now what I said then. Everything that was on the public files had been brought down ; nothing had been reserved at all. But the hon. gentleman insinuated that I had been equivocating because at that time I had in my possession a confidential document. There was no equivocation on my part at all, because I take the ground that all documents which are confidential, which are not on the files and archives of the government, are in the sole custody of the minister who has received them, and cannot be brought down. Then, Todd goes on to say :

In 1863, ministers agreed to an order for certain papers concerning Fenianism, but finding on close inspection that 'their publication could be attended with no public advantage,' and that 'they contained matter which it is contrary to our public duty as ministers to be parties to laying before the House,' they determined to ask the House to rescind the order, which was done on a division.

On that occasion papers had been ordered, but the ministers found that it would not be to the public advantage to bring down all the papers which were on file, and they asked the House to rescind the order. Todd goes on further to say :

And if the government object to produce any documents, on the ground that they are of a private and confidential description, it is not usual to insist upon their being furnished, except under peculiar and imperative circumstances.

Mr. SROULE. May I ask the right hon. gentleman if it is not the custom, when parliament is pressing for papers which are supposed to be in the possession of the government, and which have not been presented to parliament, for the government to answer that all documents have been brought down except such as are of a confidential nature. That is the usual answer.

Sir WILFRID LAURIER. I beg the hon. gentleman's pardon—that is not the usual answer. I do not believe that confidential papers are ever intended to be brought down to parliament until they cease to have a confidential character, and become public.