

that is, to return the document to those from whom it came. I might have returned the document and perhaps I should have returned it, but that idea did not occur to my mind. At any rate if we had returned the document to its authors, then, according to the hon. gentleman, we would not only have been within our rights but within our duty. However, not having entertained the prayer of that document, and not having returned it to the parties who sent it to me, I believe I was quite justified in not filing it upon record in the department. The prayer of the petition was ignored and there was nothing of interest to the public in it after that. At all events I so treated it. Let me ask now: what rule shall be laid down by parliament in a matter of this kind? Shall the rule be that when a motion is passed by parliament for papers, then, every paper and every letter which may have been sent to a minister, though marked 'confidential' shall be given to the public? Does the hon. gentleman pretend that parliament is entitled to every letter which a minister may receive, whether it is marked 'confidential' or not? I do not think the hon. gentleman will go that far. I think he will acknowledge that there must be a certain limit. I repeat that in my judgment, if a paper is marked confidential, and if the prayer of that document is ignored, then under such circumstances it remains a purely private matter, although of course if the proposition in the document be accepted and its prayer granted, then even though marked 'confidential' it becomes a public document. The hon. gentleman (Mr. Barker) made an insinuation which I want to meet here and now. He said that he doubted if this paper had not been submitted to certain supporters of the government. Well, I do not know what he means by that, although I would think the remark rather offensive, but I have to say to the hon. gentleman as I said the other day: that this document has not been shown by me to anybody outside the cabinet; that document never went out of my hands and never was shown to anybody outside the members of the government.

Mr. R. L. BORDEN. Nor its contents disclosed to anybody outside the government?

Sir WILFRID LAURIER. Its contents—I am not aware that I ever disclosed them. I will not say that the proposition for the extension of a railway across the continent may not have been discussed by me with some parties, but so far as my recollection goes at this moment, I do not think that I ever spoke to any person in the world, outside of my colleagues in the government, of the proposition which had been made and which was sent to me in the month of November in the year 1902. I may say, though it is of no consequence to the House, that being in poor health at that time I left for the south in the month of November and did

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not come back until the middle of January, when the negotiations were—I will not say renewed because there had not been any negotiations—but when the new communication was made by the Grand Trunk Pacific, of which the House is aware.

Now, Sir, am I to understand that my hon. friend and his colleagues on the other side, are prepared to contend that when a proposition of any kind is made confidentially to the government, and is not entertained by the government, it is, under such circumstances, a communication which must be made public? If that be the contention of the hon. gentlemen opposite, I must say that I do not agree with it. The hon. gentleman (Mr. Barker) must not expect that the government could do, must do, or would do what he himself would not do in his own private business. If the hon. gentleman is approached by a party who makes a confidential proposition to him and ask him to treat it as confidential, I have too much respect for his honour to believe that he would divulge that communication and betray that confidence, I am rather inclined to believe that the hon. gentleman would treat it as a sacred secret belonging to the party who approached him. Is it to be expected, in the multitude of business which must engage the attention of the government; in the multitude of applications which must come daily before the government, there are none which may be asked to be treated confidentially by the party who makes them, but that they must all go into the archives of the government? Is it to be expected that none of these communications are to be included in the private correspondence of a minister? I treated this communication as confidential. I did not think that it was a public document; I believe that it was not a public document when its prayer was not acceded to by the government. But, when hon. gentlemen on the other side of the House stated in the course of this debate, that the Grand Trunk Company first approached the government and offered to build a railway from North Bay to the Pacific ocean for the ordinary subsidy, and when these gentlemen repeated it again, and again, and again, apparently convincing themselves that it was a fact, then, Sir, I thought it was time to ask the parties who made the proposition if they would agree to have the seal of secrecy removed so that the truth as to their proposition might be laid before the House.

Mr. CLARKE. If that document was not produced in deference to the order of the House because it was considered confidential, why was it not considered confidential until the end of the debate?

Sir WILFRID LAURIER. It was considered a confidential document all through; but before making use of it I asked Mr. Hays if he would remove the seal of secrecy and give me permission to use it.