

Times, 26.2.37.
Shipping and Defence

At the annual banquet of the Chamber of Shipping last night SIR THOMAS INSKIP took occasion, as was natural, to emphasize the highly important part which shipping plays in the defence of the British Empire. Rather more than two years ago this was recognized in a practical manner in the assistance accorded by the Government to a portion of the industry which, after years of deep depression in oversea commerce, was showing unmistakable signs of financial exhaustion. The tramp section is now heading so well towards full recovery that it is in the happy state of being able to look forward to holding its own unaided, without even claiming any portion of the subsidy which is being provided this year in case of need. Indeed at yesterday's meeting of the Chamber SIR VERNON THOMSON, the retiring President, cited several signs of real improvement which have appeared during a memorable year of office. But he also mentioned a continued decline in the United Kingdom share of the steam and motor tonnage of the world, and the steadily increasing shares of foreign shipping in the oversea and coasting trades of the United Kingdom, as unfavourable developments in any survey of the adequacy of the British Merchant Navy in relation to defence. A good deal of disquieting information on these points is included also in the annual report of the Chamber, which recalls that at the outbreak of the War in 1914 the shipping owned in the United Kingdom exceeded by nearly 2,000,000 tons gross the corresponding volume owned to-day. Yet the country was brought close to starvation in 1917, at one time stocks of food were reduced to three weeks' normal consumption, and 7,000,000 tons of British shipping alone were sunk, apart from allied and neutral losses.

Attention was also called to certain threats to British communications both in a resolution submitted at the meeting and in the address of the new President of the Chamber, SIR RICHARD HOLT, who is not by nature an alarmist. The shrinkage of the total volume of world trade, he remarked, could not account for the reduction in the shipping of the United Kingdom, since during the same period foreign-owned tonnage had increased from 28,000,000 to 44,700,000 tons. The position, in his view, calls for the most thorough consideration by all the British nations, since not only does this country depend on shipping for its life in peace and in war, but the maintenance of a mercantile marine of the highest order is also vital to the continuance of the whole Commonwealth. "Destroy Imperial sea communications and the Empire is immediately reduced to a number of scattered and vulnerable units." SIR RICHARD HOLT has his own ideas of improving matters, and there should be an opportunity of considering all responsible proposals when the Imperial Conference meets in London next May. He suggested yesterday that it was necessary to discover how far the Empire as a whole would act together in supporting British shipping, and urged that there should be an effective will to concerted action. It is to be hoped that some useful preparatory work will be done during the next few weeks by the Imperial Shipping Committee, on which the Dominions are directly represented, and to which certain questions have already been referred by the Government for investigation.