

Confidential

INTERVIEWS WITH THE PRIME MINISTER AND
THE DUKE OF YORK.

(M.B.GILSON.)

JANUARY 17th 1929.

Mr. Robert Hyde, of the Industrial Welfare Society, had wanted to give me letters of introduction to Mr. Baldwin, the Prime Minister, and to H.R.H. the Duke of York in early January, but as I was starting on a tour of the provinces, he did not do so until my return. This morning, then, was the time arranged for the interviews.

At ten o'clock Mr. Hyde and I were ushered into 10 Downing Street, and I confess to some thrills when the tall butler took us to the cabinet room in the centre of which was the long table around which so many momentous decisions have been made. Mr. Baldwin rose to meet us, and after a cordial handshake, he asked us to sit in easy chairs around the fire. He wheeled his chair at the cabinet table around, therefore sitting in the same place, near the fireplace, as when he conducts cabinet meetings. He was simple and unaffected in manner, and had the art of putting his guests at ease by his direct and friendly approach. He had a nice sense of humour, and greeted any difference of opinion with mellowness and good nature, yet with no disposal of it as of little consequence. I shall try to reproduce our conversation. Poor Mr. Hyde sat by as a modest listener and did not enter in.

S.B. "What are you doing over here?"

M.G. "I am studying unemployment insurance."

S.B. "I am interested to know that Americans are concerning themselves with this question. Of course it is only a matter of time, perhaps fifty years, until you will be facing the same problems as the older countries are facing. You will then have the advantage of our experience."

M.G. "Yes, just as in the case of the Industrial Revolution, when you suffered so much more acutely because of the sudden and extensive supplanting of handwork by machinery. By the time you had piled up a lot of unhappy experience, we had a chance to profit by it, that is those of us who had the intelligence to profit by the experience of others."

S.B. "There you have hit an important point. Many people have to learn by their own experience. They cannot foresee, and they cannot be taught. That was what happened during the General Strike. Both employers and workers learned some valuable lessons then, which years of preaching would never have taught them."

M.G. "Don't you think one of the most insistent problems facing governments today is how far they are justified in going in attempting to make employers act in the interest of common welfare?"

S.B. "It is indeed. I always feel that you can't make people "good". Goodness must come from within. They don't stay good if it is due to coercion. Patience must be exercised in building constructively."

M.G. "I have always appreciated your consistent philosophy in

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this, Mr. Baldwin, and I have rejoiced in all the effective things you have done unofficially to waken your fellow employers to a sense of responsibility, but sometimes patience ceases to be a virtue. For example, cannot too much patience be exercised toward the South Wales coal owners and the Lancashire cotton employers who turn a deaf ear to constructive measures?"

S.B. "Things are moving, but they cannot move too fast. If we coerce people into progress they are quite apt to retrace their steps. Quick solutions are seldom lasting. As for precipitate action, I would have enjoyed tying A.J. Cook in a sack and throwing him overboard during the General Strike."

M.G. "And I would have enjoyed sending after him another sack containing Sir Adam Nimmo and Evan Williams."

S.B. (Laughing heartily). "And don't forget Davies". (another employer.)

M.G. "Of course, we have our problems, too. We have an organization of manufacturers in America who, I feel, retard the wheels of progress awfully by their reactionary, unconstructive point of view."

S.B. (Laughing and looking at Mr. Hyde) "We could match you, couldn't we, Hyde?"

R.H. "Indeed we could!"

S.B. "Well, there is no doubt we are facing an entirely new world and things will never be as they were. The situation today cannot be handled as in former times and, as you said awhile ago, the question is how far can and ought the State to control. I often tell my cabinet there is only the thickness of a knife's

blade between dictatorship and anarchy, and it takes careful steering of the ship of state these days to avoid one or the other extreme. But we must have a new outlook, for we are facing a new era, and because England is an older country she will enter this new era of the world's history before America. We are not far from it, whether it will be a better or a worse world no one yet knows."

M.G. "At any rate you British are meeting your new problems with bold and brave experiments in social legislation."

S.B. "There was nothing else to do. I hope you can make this clear to the Americans who read your report on unemployment insurance - that the war left us with problems which could not be handled by the old laissez-faire methods. For example, we had to evolve machinery for handling unemployment insurance on an extensive scale, because of the wide unemployment consequent upon the war. And I hope you will be able to persuade Americans not to consider unemployment insurance a "dole"."

M.G. "I hope so, too, but it is also essential to educate a good many Britishers not to use that obnoxious term."

S.B. "You are right. There are many people who will not take the trouble to examine the real situation."

(Then we drifted into a discussion of American "prosperity", and Mr. Baldwin said he had liked New York in 1890 because it seemed "homey", but that the city and the people had changed so when he was over a few years ago that he found it very unattractive. He said he longed for more time to travel, that he would like to see our West. He said he wondered how we would ever handle our traffic

Digital Image, 2009. The Ida M. Tarbell Collection, 1890-1944, Allegheny College Pelletier Library

problems when we kept on increasing our skyscrapers, and finally, when I rose to go I said, "Oh, dear, here I have been talking away and I came to hear you talk!" "That is why I have enjoyed our interview", Mr. Baldwin replied, "I have found out a lot of things about your American prosperity and industry which I wanted to know". He certainly has the art of being gracious and friendly, and I must say I admire him for his fine, sterling qualities, whatever people may say about his lack of brilliance. He is thoroughly consistent in not wanting to force people to do what they ought to do if by any means you can educate them to do it. However much one may disagree with this philosophy, it is his honest conviction.)

Later we called on the Duke of York at his home in Piccadilly. A very swanky butler met us, and on hearing Mr. Hyde pronounce my name, knew at once of the appointment. He ushered us through the large entrance hall, between some immense mounted ivory tusks, and on into a small reception room. Then he went into a large adjoining room, and in a few moments ushered us in there. As we entered, the Duke of York entered from another door and warmly greeted Mr. Hyde, who introduced us. We walked to the large, glowing fireplace, and the long training I have had in sitting down in order to give the signal that men may sit prompted me to commit the gaucherie of sitting down before the royal gesture gave me permission! However, the heavens did not fall, for His Royal Highness plumped himself down on the fire bench beside the easy chair I had calmly appropriated and soon we were chatting like old pals. We discussed

employers, and the duke said the small employer who had worked up from the ranks was frequently harder on his workers than the man with more background. It said that was frequently the way in America, too. After some casual chatting about that he said, "Do you mind telling me what your industrial experience has been?" I told him, and he seemed extremely interested, especially in the fact that I had worked in department stores. He asked lots of questions, and I finally got weary talking about my past and burst forth, "What a wonderful time you and the Duchess must have had in Australia!" "It was a good trip," he answered, and then a bit regretfully said, "but you see we don't ever see anything of the people or get really acquainted with them. We have to be escorted everywhere." I sympathized with him by saying that while he saw a great deal it probably was just like apothecised movies, whereupon he laughed heartily and said, "Exactly!" Then I said, "Yesterday I was travelling out to Higham Park to visit the British Kylonite Company. I always travel third class because I find such interesting people in third class carriages. Yesterday there were two old chaps from Yorkshire in my carriage, and it was as good as the theatre." He was interested at once, and then we discussed Yorkshire, Gloucestershire, and other dialects. All in all, he was keen and intelligent and, while possessed of infinite savoir faire, was friendly and informal. One thing he said impressed me; "Hyde", he said, "Isn't it amazing the way industry is turning to research in various fields? That is an encouraging sign."

Do you blame me for thinking I have had a very interesting day?