

## *Saklatvala Speech in Parliament, 23/11/1922: – MILL WORKERS OF BENGAL & DUNDEE*

The hon. Member who introduced the Motion thanking His Majesty for his Gracious Message said that as a newcomer he felt like a schoolboy. In a similar manner, and perhaps in a higher degree, I shall offer my apologies to you, Sir, as well as to the House, not only for to-night, but I am afraid, for all the nights that I shall be here. I am afraid that I may be misunderstood if I do not acquire what is known as the traditional manner of the House of Commons. We, the 142 who have come here, and I who was but yesterday with the people of Battersea, know the voice and the minds of the people, and we, who have talked outside upon politics and governmental affairs, wish now that the genuine bonâ fide human voice be talked inside, and I would therefore appeal to you, Sir, to realise that if we are found especially wanting in certain mannerisms or if our phraseology is not up to the standard, it is not for want of respect or want of love for any of you, but simply because we of the people shall now require that the people's matters shall be talked in the people's voice.

His Majesty's Gracious Message referred to the question of unemployment. Unemployment prevails largely in the constituency which I represent. The first immediate thing, that is perhaps not of so great consequence from a strictly political point of view, but is of very great consequence from the immediately psychological point of view, is the unfortunate attitude, at the beginning, of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister says that he believes in the division of labour, and also in assigning responsibility to Ministers. All that may be true. But it is sometimes welcome to the heart of the British people to be heard by the Prime Minister. If they want a deputation is the Prime Minister to be the judge concerning whether a matter is an appropriate matter for the Prime Minister to hear or not, when the people who may be unemployed, who may be hungry, may have a special desire to see the Prime Minister himself? I make one last appeal to the Prime Minister. I agree with the Prime Minister, perhaps with a different viewpoint, that it would have been equally futile for the unemployed to have an interview with the Prime Minister or any other Minister. But it is just as well that they should see each other, for though no useful result could have been produced by an interview with the Prime Minister himself there is something in human life which is satisfying if not satisfactory, and if the Prime Minister would only have realised that it was a most satisfying measure, if not a satisfactory measure, to have seen a deputation of the unemployed, I believe that he would have spared the country a lot of unpleasant thoughts, and I think that even now it may not be too late.

Coming to the larger problem of unemployment, the Mover and Seconder of the Address pointed out in their speeches what was wanting in the Message. One of our hon. Members referred to the position in Central Europe. Somebody referred to the collapse of the exchanges, and reference was made to the high taxation. All that may be true, but are we to sit in this House and keep on analysing to-day the condition of yesterday, and going on analysing to-morrow the condition of to-day? Are we not determined once for all to analyse the root causes of it all and to apply the remedy which would remove the real evil? It is perhaps an easy thing to-day to talk of the collapse of the exchanges on the Continent of Europe. Have we no right to ask those who have been ruling this country since 1906 until to-day as to what it was which brought about the conditions that produced the collapse of the exchanges of Europe? Have we no right to ask in a similar manner our friends and the Government that is responsible to-day and the Government which was responsible during all these strenuous years of trial throughout the world as to how and why those conditions were produced? It is not satisfactory for us to say to-day that we are suffering because of these conditions. How are the lower exchanges to be set right?

One of our speakers said that the continent of Europe had been impoverished because capital had gone abroad. Who took it abroad? Is it a sign of disservice to the country for enterprising men to take their capital abroad? If that is so, what can be said of private enterprise in Britain itself, and those British citizens who are taking abroad British capital produced by British working men, day after day and year after year? May I point out to the right hon. Gentleman, who to-day deplores the condition into which Europe has been brought by these greedy private enterprisers taking capital abroad, and ask him why over 74 jute mills have been erected in Bengal by British millers and capitalists who had got the capital produced with the hard toil of the workers of Dundee, with the result that to-day we have shut up shop in Dundee and our workers in Bengal are working at from 14s. to 38s. a month and producing for the owners dividends of from 150 per cent, to 400 per cent.? Out of the 124 coal companies in my country, India, I know that 102 have been opened out by British capitalists who have taken capital abroad for these enterprises. If these are the root causes of private enterprise, may we ask our friends not to sit down and not to wait until the great calamity overtakes this country altogether, but to learn lessons from what has happened on the continent, and remove the causes which brought about the conditions which all of us agree are not worthy of any intelligent and civilised human race?

One of my colleagues referred to the position of the trade with India, especially the textile trade, and I understood the Seconder of the Motion to refer to it in passing, showing how it had become impracticable for the Austrians to buy Indian hides and the Germans to buy any Indian cotton, and so forth. I want the House to note, carefully that the loss of trade with India is due to two separate reasons. One has been the desire of the Government in this country, who have always prided themselves as a constitutional nation and Government, to try in the outside world the most unconstitutional method, namely, of dictating Government to peoples in various parts of the world from outside. No Britisher would for a moment tolerate a constitution for Great Britain if it were written outside of Great Britain by people who are not British. In a similar way the constitutions for Ireland and India and Egypt and Mesopotamia should be constitutions written by the men of those countries, in those countries, without interference from outside. But there is another great cause, and I wish the House to understand it clearly. That cause is private enterprise. The story of private enterprise, with all its glamour and its seductive tale, has gone out from these shores to India, and it is the rivalry due to the spirit of private enterprise which is responsible now, and will be responsible in the future, for one country depriving the workers of another country of their legitimate livelihood. It is the growth of this private enterprise, of these large corporations and trusts, these huge industrial concerns in India, which is beginning to tell its tale upon the workers of this country. I wish to make no secret of it. The cotton industry of this country is bound to suffer from this two-fold evil, namely, the political sulking of the people of India with the people of Great Britain, and the spread of private enterprise and of the so-called legitimate privileges of the private enterprisers. The Indian private enterprisers have learned to ask for protective duties, for high dividends, for low wages, long hours, and all kinds of privileges which private enterprise in this country has claimed for 150 years. It is this combination and the spread of the cult of private enterprise by the political bosses in this country which is working the ruin of the workers of this land.

In reference to the Near East there was a passing reference in the Address. I would not like to embarrass either the Government or this House in dealing with the problem of the Near East or the Far East in a thoroughly different manner from that of the past if it be intended so to do. If the Government merely intend to deliver different forms of speeches from those of the past Government they will fail as the last Government failed. I remember the time when a British Prime Minister had to stop a Catholic procession from forming in the streets of Westminster because the Protestants would not allow it. If that happened in the streets of London not many years ago under a Liberal Government, I think that the less the

Britisher talks of taking care of the minorities in Armenia or Mesopotamia or Ulster or Southern Ireland or anywhere else, the better it will be for him. There is quite enough for him to take care of in the minorities here. There are many minorities. This morning we heard of the Prime Minister's letter to the Press relating to the unemployed who are now a minority in this country. The right hon. Gentleman exposes them as so many criminals. One reference in that correspondence was to the fact that these men had been dubbed criminals by a legal process in this country, because they dared to belong to political organisations which at present happen to be in a minority. The way in which that minority has been protected has been by bringing into operation legislative machinery, and by bringing the men for trial before judges or magistrates whose chief capital in the past has been party politics and party bitterness, which have made them incapable of dealing out justice. With this one-sided political machinery men have been tried and have been put into gaol. Then the Prime Minister says, "This is a set of criminals." That is the way in which the minority in this country is protected by the majority on the question of the right to express political opinion. I think the Prime Minister knows very well that had it not been for several of these prosecutions and persecutions he would not to-day have had at his back the number of supporters that he has.

In reference to Ireland, I am afraid that I shall strike a jarring note in the hitherto harmonious music of this House. I am well disciplined and trained in the general principle of the Labour movement, namely, that the happiness of the world depends on international peace, and that international peace is possible only when the self-determined will of the people of each country prevails in each country. I deplore greatly those elements still existing in the Irish Treaty that are not compatible with that great and wholesome principle. It is no use denying the fact, for we shall not in that way create peace in Ireland. As a House we say that we are giving this Irish Treaty with a view of bringing peace to Ireland, but we know that it is not bringing peace. Either we are actuated by the motive of restoring thorough peace in Ireland or we are doing it as partial conquerors in Ireland. Everyone knows that the Treaty has unfortunately gone forth as the only alternative to a new invasion of Ireland by British troops. As long as that element exists the people of Ireland have a right to say that the very narrow majority which in Ireland accepted the Treaty at the time, accepted it also on this understanding—that if they did not accept it the alternative was an invasion by the Black-and-Tans of this country. The Irish Treaty all along continues to suffer in Ireland from the fact that it is not a Treaty acceptable to the people as a whole.

If it were possible in some way in the preamble of the Treaty or by an Act of this House to allow the people of Ireland to understand that their country's constitution is to be framed by them as a majority may decide, and that the alternative would not be an invasion from this country, but that this, country would shake hands with Ireland as a neighbour, whatever shape or form that Government took, it would be quite a different story. Otherwise, whatever we may do, however many treaties we may pass, however unanimous the British may be in their behaviour towards Ireland, Ireland will not be made a peaceful country. As in 1801 England gave them a forced Union, so in 1922 England is giving them a forced freedom. We must remove that factor. Unless we do so we shall not be giving to the Irish the Treaty of freedom which we have all decided mentally that we are doing. When I say so, I put forward not my personal views but the views of 90 per cent, of those Irishmen who are my electors. They have pointed out to me that, whereas under the threat of renewed invasion the Dail only passed the Treaty by a majority of barely half a dozen votes, Irishmen who are not under that threat—Irishmen who are living in Great Britain—have, by a tremendous majority, voted against it. As long as those factors continue to exist, the Irish Treaty is not going to be what we—in a sort of silent conspiracy—have decided to name it. The reality will not be there. The reality is not there.

Before I conclude I wish to refer to one point which is conspicuous by its absence from the King's Speech. If in the Empire, this House and this Government is going to take the glory of the good, they will also have to take the ignominy of anything disgraceful which happens outside this country. This Government may not be responsible. This House may not be responsible. The people of this country may not be responsible. Yet there is something like a public voice and public prejudice, and if this Government and this House are proud of their association with the Colonies and the Empire, this Government and this House will also have to satisfy this country as well as outside countries, why the policy of the South African Government, in hanging and shooting workers, was permitted and was kept quiet. We are still calling Ireland a part of this Empire, and it is only last week that four young working-class lads, without an open trial and without even fair notice to their families, were shot 117dead. Even on the night before, their families were told that everything was all right, but on the following morning, when the mother of one of them went to convey a bundle of laundry to her son, she was informed that the poor boys had been executed. These acts might be described as the acts of independent governments. Either these governments are independent or they are part of this Empire. If they are part of this Empire, then the Government in the centre of the Empire must see to it that a policy of this kind does not go without challenge and without, at least, protest from this House, if nothing else can be done.

Our relationship with Russia is also a subject conspicuous by the absence of any mention. We hear of the revolution in Italy; we hear of Mussolini, the leader of it, and we have seen Mussolini's manifesto. He does not care for the Italian Parliament, nor for the majority in it. He is going to rule the country by 300,000 most obedient and faithful followers who are fully armed. Here is a revolutionary. But our Foreign Secretary is sitting in consultation with him. Our Foreign Secretary is shaking hands with him. We do not object on the ground that the Italian Government is a revolutionary Government. Why? Because the revolution in this case belongs to another class. We have the case of the King of Serbia. His Majesty King Edward for two years and more refused to have any dealings with him because he had slain the monarch who sat on the throne of Serbia before him. Yet we are friends of Serbia. We honour King Peter; we respect him; we call Serbia our Ally; we co-operate with the Serbians, yet if the monarch in Russia has been assassinated, or something had happened, we refuse to join hands with the people of Russia on that account. Why? Because in the Serbian Revolution class interest was topmost. In the Russian Revolution the mass interest came topmost. I do not for a moment suggest that any of us in this House are purposely and consciously behaving in a dishonest manner. But the unfortunate part of every human life is that we are unconsciously the victims of many suppressed prejudices which are inborn in us and are traditional. Now we are face to face with a situation in this world in which, if we are not determined to burst out of these time-worn prejudices and boldly take a new place, if we are not prepared to 118push forward not only the good but the rights—even the sentimental rights—of the masses of humanity, into the forefront, and if the traditions, the family interests, the class privileges, the profits and dividends of private enterprise, are not set in the background, then neither this Ministry nor any other Ministry will cure the, evil, though they may deliver as many speeches as they please, upon it.