

Saklatvala Speech in Parliament, 25/6/1926:
– *JUST OUT OF JAIL*

I hope the House will pardon me for any slips on this occasion, because I have only just returned to this House from a semi-Socialistic institution in which I have been taken care of on a much better scale than the poor miners. I also beg at this juncture to express my gratitude for the many considerations which have been shown to me, and also for the happy impressions I carry away of some of the bright sides of British character in regard to the treatment meted out to me by British prison officials, which I have reason to admire. With regard to to-day's Debate I want this House, and through this House the country, to develop a sense of justice in those instances where, as we heard from the last speaker, our emotions are apt to carry us away. I have been permitted through the courtesy of Mr. Speaker and the Home Secretary to follow in prison the Debates that have taken place from day to day during my absence, and I understand from a study of those Debates that this morning the special subject for discussion here is the question of the money which has been sent to the miners from a country which we still know as Russia in aid of the miners' families who at the present moment are in dire distress.

I want hon. Members to realise how they are apt to forget the entire history of the world in their emotional bias against Russia in the first place, and against British miners and trade union organisations in the second place. We are apt to forget that it is the right of all those possessing money to spend it as they like, and in whatever country they like. This has been done by the British nation and British individuals in the past, and they are still doing it in other countries.

When these facts are borne in mind, we soon see how mad we are in trying to differentiate between our own action in this respect and similar actions by other nations when we are blinded by prejudice. On a previous occasion, when I was challenged with regard to money coming from Russia in the matter of a Parliamentary election, I was just in the midst of my researches when I was taken away from my library to some other place. I ask hon. Members to

be good enough to remember how some short time ago a very keen interest was taken by a number of French citizens in the Parliamentary elections in this country, where a campaign was being run by free traders, and these Frenchmen 'sent subscriptions to help the Free Trade movement in this country. I was right in the midst of my research on this question when I was compelled to take a rest. Again, I ask the House to make quite sure whether one or even two Liberal Members of this House, who are honourably associated with the history of this House, were not enthusiastically financed, quite honourably of course, by that well-known American citizen Andrew Carnegie.

I would ask the House whether this nation, individually as well as nationally, has not poured forth British gold into Armenia on humanitarian motives? Do they never think what suspicions the Turkish Government has been casting upon that? Have you not been pouring out money to help the abolition of slavery? How would those people who sincerely believed in the benefit of the slave system at that time think about your action then? How about temperance associations? Travellers come from America, France, Germany or Belgium, look at various institutions here, and subscribe £5, £20, £30, or £50 to any institution which appeals to them, merely from humanitarian motives. What is wrong? You want to undermine the whole of that. You want to say to the world that money shall only be subscribed geographically. Look at your Christian missions; look at the millions of pounds that you are sending out of this country to China. It may be a very noble act from your point of view, but it may be quite the contrary from the point of view of the Chinaman or the Mohammedan or the Buddhist in other countries. You want this country to forget its past, present and future proclivities, and to be ruled by blind prejudice against Russia.

Let us look at the facts. There is a strike, either a general strike or a sectional strike— it does not matter which. The one thing which does matter, and which no human being can deny, is the economic and material hardship and distress that follows during the period of a strike. It is no use trying to deny that. Once upon a time you set a national standard of anti-slavery, a national standard against

opium-smoking in the country of some other nation—against polygamy, or against any social custom or religious system which from your point of view was wrong, but which was perfectly right from the other people's point of view. There is no denying that in all sincerity, with a studied and developed faculty, the present people of Russia believe that the supremest good in this world is to assist struggling and starving workers and their children, in whichever part of the world they may be. That is their new standard. They do not make a secret of it. There is no conspiracy whatever about it. To them the supremest standard of philanthropy, the highest standard of human good, is not temperance, is not religious institutions, is not the question of legal slavery or its opposite, is not Socialism. To them at the present moment, honestly arid in all sincerity, the highest standard of human good is the assistance of workers in other countries during their moments of distress. In the exercise of the great national principle which they have now established and acquired, and of which they have seen the immense benefits during the last six or seven years, they want to assist the miners of this country. I myself announced a few weeks ago, when there was a strike of mill operatives in Bombay, that I had been instrumental in remitting to Bombay £1,054 which I honestly believe was subscribed by the textile workers of Russia, and in regard to which a stipulation was made that it was intended for the bonâ fide purpose of assisting the suffering textile workers and their families, and was not to be squandered on officials and organisations.

What did we hear this morning? The hon. and gallant Member who opened the Debate never for one moment objected, on principle, to Russian gold being received by Britishers. He rather, all the time, insisted on having it. But he objected to the workers of Russia sending Russian gold to the workers of Britain, and demanded that the workers of Russia should continue to send their gold to the capitalists and dividend owners. All the time the demand of the Tory party, the demand of the commercial magnates, is to extract and extort gold from Russia. They are trying to blackmail the Russian nation; they are trying to squeeze out of it so-called debts which they know in their heart of hearts are false and fictitious debts. They are dishonourable figures of debts. All the time they are demanding, not that Russian gold should be stopped, but that more

and more gold should flow from Russia than Russia is financially capable of sending them, but that it should be sent to the dividend owners and bankers of Britain, and not to the children of the miners.

We were permitted to listen to news from the outside world in the church on Saturday morning in the Wormwood Scrubbs Socialist institution where I was. I ask the House to forgive me and to be quite impartial about it. I heard that there are miners and their children still starving, that this is the sixth week of the strike, and so on, that trade union funds have become exhausted; and then it was impressed upon us that a sinful and criminal action was being carried on when some human beings were sending £100,000 to assist those starving human children. At the same time we were told that a certain gentleman had offered the sum of £100,000 as a prize for some racehorse. We are told to believe that this last action was a glorious, patriotic, righteous action, when miners and their families are starving owing to the action of those who came to possess that surplus of £100,000 for racehorses. We as human beings were told that we were wrong because we believed that the action of the Russians was far more honourable, far more Christian, far more noble and far more highly and loftily minded in sending whatever they could spare for the miners and their children.

We heard this morning that this country has claims on Russia. I think it is just as well for the world to know that those British merchants who are forging their claims are deliberately and purposely and knowingly putting forward false figures. The sum of £800,000,000 has been mentioned, comprising a certain sum of money for unpaid interest, in the first place. What was that sum of money? Probably £300,000,000 to £400,000,000. But to whom was it given? Was it ever given to the people of Russia? It was given to a Tsar who was known by the financiers to be a despotic Tsar. That money was sent to a country where it was to be used for corruption, for all the ignominious purposes of life, where it was to be handed over to officials, to tyrants, and to enemies of the people of that country. As was said this morning, and as we have known for a long time, there is no demand which is a righteous demand upon the present people of Russia. You never advanced that money to a

country where the people could be held answerable. It was never advanced with the consent and at the request of the people of Russia.

It makes a great difference in the liability and responsibility. Then we are told about the £250,000,000 of private individuals. Every hon. Member knows that at that period when the Bolshevists took possession of the country it was ruined and devastated, partly by our action in sending anti-revolutionary expeditions. They were still further reduced in value by our stupid, obstinate, malicious and spiteful economic boycott of the country. There is no auditor, no honest accountant, in the country who would value those institutions at anything more than 1s. in the £. They were not worth it. To still put on the value of £250,000,000 is not playing the game. It is making a false claim. Therefore I again submit, that the present action of some people in Russia who have set to themselves the pattern of public spirit and public philanthropy, the assistance of the workers in all lands, is a perfectly bona fide action and is equivalent to the action taken by other nationals on many other occasions, and it is very stupid on our part to keep on talking of it as conspiracy.

May I refer to a past incident in the time of Tsarist Russia? I am not quite sure whether it was 1897 or 1898, when India was visited by one of her devastating famines. I have a perfectly clear memory that when the situation became very horrid, the Lord Mayor of London opened a special fund and announced that it had become necessary for outside assistance to go forth to India. I have a very clear memory that the first foreign instalment paid was from the Russian Government of those days, and that two Parsee newspapers in Bombay had a very big quarrel, because in those days the British rulers in India had a bigger prejudice against Russian. One Parsee paper stated that this money was sent, not as assistance for starving peasants in famine-stricken areas, but in order to get the sympathies of the people on the side of the Tsar of Russia, who wanted to be the ruler. The other Parsee paper vehemently attacked the meanness of that newspaper and said, "Such is not the spirit in which a noble gift should be accepted." History is now repeating itself. It is your blind prejudice that is

looking upon one of the noblest and finest acts of philanthropy and humanitarianism in a spirit of injustice and unfairness.

Here is this interesting book about which much has been said on all sides of the House. In the first instance I think, in a spirit of justice and fair play, I may ask the House to understand the position quite clearly. It has been rightly pointed out by the right hon. Gentleman the Member for Carnarvon Boroughs (Mr. Lloyd George) that throughout the whole of the House there is no evidence whatever of Russian political funds flowing to some party political funds in this country for the deliberate purpose of wantonly, and, merely through devilment, upsetting the institutions or the Government of the country. But it is pointed out that here is a political activity being run by a very small section who are part and parcel of the working classes, who wholly accept the Labour party doctrine that human good now requires that the individual ownership of land and all means of production should be put an end to and that communal ownership should be the system of society. That section claims to be in advance of the larger body of the Labour party because it is pointed out in the latter part of the letter of which the first sentence was quoted by the right hon. Gentleman that in the opinion of some of us the Labour party is losing its real character and its real objective and is drifting towards the Liberal party. We may be wrong or we may be right, but that is the whole position. So it is obvious to the Home Secretary, the Cabinet, and the House that the Communist movement is a small movement run with very small finances, living from hand to mouth. It is composed of men who are essentially part and parcel of the working class, who wholly and entirely accept the fundamental principles and ideals laid down by the British Labour party, that that system should be insisted upon, and should be brought into existence as early as possible at all costs. I claim no infallibility for this. We may be entirely wrong.

With regard to the quotation from one of the letters under which my signature stands, that there should be a merciless measure to fight the Labour party, it is very unfair for the right hon. Gentleman to quote a sentence like that, because I am afraid, in spite of his cleverness, that would not bring about a fusion between him and the Labour party any quicker. The letter is dated 7th October. It

followed immediately upon the Labour Party Conference at Liverpool on 29th September and the following days. Therefore, it was written within the first week of the Liverpool Conference. The Labour party carried out a political attack, without any particular malice or in it, against the Communist movement and endeavoured to put it outside the pale of the working-class organisation neck and crop. All we said in the letter was that the situation now created is so serious that we should be submerged into insignificance, we should be wiped out, and that now we must take up an attitude of uncompromising fight. It is not by Russian gold, it is not by arms, it is not by poison gas. It is pointed out that it is not to be carried on by any devious conspiratory means, but by adopting the rival system, of inviting the trade unions to affiliate with the Communist party, as they are now affiliated to the Labour party, so that the nation as a whole might have a correct index to see how many branches of the trade unions have a partiality for Communist party methods and how many for the methods of the Labour party.

The most serious thing that I see in this correspondence, and to which I take very serious objection, is the abuse of the Home Secretary's Office by the present holder. There is not the slightest question that within all political movements there are sections, and there are pulls and tugs-of-war. If I could capture the correspondence of some of the Conservative clubs, I am sure that I could find something worse said about the present fine Prime Minister than was said by some of the Communists about the hon. Member for Bow and Bromley (Mr. Lansbury) or by me. If I could capture some of the correspondence of the head of the Northern Irish Government and some of his confederates in this country I could find many announcements and many suggestions which would be very interesting. If we could get the correspondence of one set of directors of a company against another section of directors, or the correspondence of one section of a family against another section of a family, we should find all sorts of things written as to what should be done in order to get power over the other. That is perfectly human. It prevails everywhere, yet we find the Home Secretary using his office and public money and treating the Labour party and the trade unionists of this country as though they are a pack of fools, which they are not, capturing this sort of correspondence

from the Communists and publishing it with the meanest of motives, to make the split between the Communist movement and the Labour movement bigger than it is. That is the direct object.

The Home Secretary was not at liberty, when capturing such correspondence, to disregard the privacy of correspondence where such correspondence did not break the law. When the Home Secretary employs Scotland Yard to capture the correspondence of an individual, he can only give publicity to that part of the correspondence which directly breaks the law or creates violence. If there had been found in the correspondence of the Communist party any suggestion to kill or belabour anyone, or to raid the Labour party offices, or anything of that sort, I would ask the Home Secretary to give publicity to it; but where there was no crime but only a wrangle, a political tug-of-war, it was the meanest of mean acts on the part of the Home Secretary and the Government not to regard the privacy of the correspondence of any section of society, and to abuse their opportunities in this despicable and contemptible manner by giving publicity to private correspondence, for which there was no authority either on the part of Scotland Yard or the Home Secretary to search.

I am sure that we have nothing to apologise for and nothing to be sorry for. The Communist movement at the present time is a persecuted movement. I would ask hon. Members opposite to realise that all the bad things said about Russia have originated on account of the policy of individual persecution, and I hope they will not try to plant these methods of persecution in this country, which will inevitably produce the same results as in Russia. I appeal to the Government, if they are really righteous, if they mean well, if they want peace between this country and Russia, if they want good feeling towards the miners, that it is their duty to write an official letter to the trade unionists of Russia and thank them for the magnanimous way in which they have assisted the miners of this country and for asking the workers of other nationalities to follow a noble example instead of leaving all this despicable squeamishness about it.