

## "You've never had it so good"

Mr Macmillan has served the Tory party very well indeed. Along with shrewdness and other qualities he has shown himself to be a master showman in a team of showmen. But when he told the British workers that they've never had it so good, there must have been some of his fellow Tories who doubted its wisdom. A tag like this labels a politician and his party for a very long time and when their luck runs out—as it always does—they will never live it down. But a master showman has to take risks and so far the thing has exceeded beyond all possible expectations. He persuaded his followers that it is so, and then the Opposition, so that we now have Mr Anthony Crosland, Labour MP for Grimsby, endorsing it. He confessed this at a Labour Conference at Utrecht, and he told them that the British workers "now scarcely seem, either to themselves or to other classes, to be suffering from oppression or capitalist exploitation". (*Daily Mail* 11.1.60). It helped to win the support of a majority of the electors for the Tory party. It convinced the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Fisher, though it failed to win his approval. He calls it a "dreadful phrase". "Whenever I hear it", he said, "I say to myself in the words of Our Lord, 'how hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom of Heaven'". (*Daily Telegraph* 11.1.60). With his comfortable £7,500 a year he is worried lest the general affluence of the workers should imperil their souls.

But just how much substance is there in this propaganda, and how much of it exists only in the distorting imagination of the politicians and Press?

### Half the Story

There is no lack of supposed evidence to back it up. Let us look at some of it.

The *Evening Standard* (1.1.60) greeted the new year with an editorial telling us about the "Age of Plenty". The opening paragraph set the tone:-

The age of scrimping is over. The age of affluence has begun. In the past 10 years Britain has passed through a social revolution whose full impact is only likely to be felt in the new decade which has just begun. For the first time in history the greater part of this country's people—and not just the fortunate minority—have money to spare beyond their immediate needs.

Even a light-hearted journalist would hardly make this claim without evidence, and evidence is there.

One figure sums up the progress of this revolution. As the 1960's begin, everyone living in this country has an income higher by an average of £3 a week than at the beginning of the 'fifties.

But before passing on we must look more closely at the average increase of £3 a week. It was clearly derived from figures that turned up in the Press about that time. In the *Financial Times* (31.12.59) under the heading "Standard of Living" we were told that average personal income per head of the population jumped from £220 in 1950 to £375 in 1959. Sure enough the difference, £155 a year, is £3 a week so what more need be said? But what the writer omitted to point out was that in the same

period, on official figures, the price level (cost of living) rose by 47 per cent. To buy in 1959 what could be bought for £220 in 1950 would need £323. So the real increase was not £3 a week but the difference between £323 and £375, a matter of about £1 a week, and that the £1 a week would buy in 1959 only about half that a like amount would have bought in 1950.

Another figure published by the *Financial Times* showed "expenditure" per head of the population (after deducting from average income the amount of taxation and the amount put aside as savings). This produced an increase between 1950 and 1959, of nearly £2 a week. But again, after allowing for the increase of prices this seemingly large increase gets cut down to a mere 4 per cent—not a lot to show for 10 years of "social revolution".

It is particularly surprising that the *Financial Times* should give figures in this incomplete form because four years ago (6.9.55) when that paper looked at similar figures published then, they pointed out what a miserable showing the figures gave when compared with 1938. They made the point that the real increase per head of the population (after allowing for higher prices) was the trifling rise of 4½ per cent as compared with 1938.

It happens to be useful to the case of those who see a vast increase of the standard of living to have chosen the year 1950 because average expenditure in all the post-war years up to 1952 (after allowing for higher prices) was actually below the pre-war level.

Mr George Schwartz in the *Sunday Times* (10.1.60) had his own line of comment. He at least is very well aware of the fact that much of the current statistical evidence of higher incomes is merely a reflection of the steady rise in prices and a corresponding decrease in the purchasing power of money. On this occasion he wanted to make the point that booming production and exports are not a new phase in British capitalism. He reproduced columns of figures showing how "peace and prosperity" were booming in the years 1903 to 1913. Again some very imposing figures, but when we look at prices in these ten years we see that they were steadily rising, a total rise of about 12 per cent. Wages were rising more slowly so that the higher wage actually bought less.

### **Staggering Truth**

What is really astounding about Macmillan's boast is that, at least on average, it contains an element of truth, remembering however that the rich too are in the average figures. The state of most British workers really is a little better than it has ever been before. Of course there are large numbers of clerical workers (including most of the civil service, bank clerks and others) who are worse off than they were before the war, and some industrial workers, including London busmen, are also worse off. But with fewer unemployed and several million married women enjoying the dubious advantage of doing two jobs, home and away, working class purchasing power has gone up. But what a commentary on capitalism that this small advance can be hailed as a social revolution and set the church worrying about the corrupting influence of working class "riches"!

Just about the turn of the year agricultural workers advanced to £8 a week for 46 hours toil. Hundreds of thousands of other men in industry and transport are on much the same level. The average earnings of women of 18 and over in manufacturing industry is £6 17 0 a week—hardly a corrupting level of affluence. And there are over 2 million people who in the course of a year are poor enough to qualify for National Assistance—with wives and children the number is much larger.

### **Real Capitalism**

In spite of the talk about a social revolution capitalism has not changed. It is still a system of minority wealth and mass poverty and insecurity—and just at present it is profits, stock exchange prices and the emergence of new crops of millionaires that truly mark the phase of "you never had it so good". And the Church, with a rise of £50 million in the value of its investments in the past five years, hasn't done badly.

Just before Christmas, the *People* (20.12.59) gave unintentionally a close-up of the capitalism we still have with us. Mr Gilbert Harding ran a charity fund and invited readers to subscribe. He was proud to report that 40,000 readers had sent in £15,000 (it later reached £30,000). In particular he recorded that 89 workers in Reading had voted to his fund the £630 held by their defunct Social Club. They had been employed by a biscuit firm but a week before Christmas the firm closed down, unable to meet the competition of larger firms. In all, 290 workers got the sack, "with not a penny in compensation from the firm", although many were likely to get other jobs, "for most of them the Christmas prospect looked bleak". Mr Harding was entitled to single out the charitable mindedness of the workers who gave the money to his fund, the money "they had scrimped and saved to put the social club on its feet".

But there was another item of interest. The *People* disclosed that when the chairman of the firm died "he left a quarter of a million pounds—all made out of biscuits".

How much more useful it would have been to point out that the quarter of a million was just part of the tribute levied by the capitalist class from the workers, not "made out of biscuits" but out of them.

The socialist struggle has not ended, it has hardly begun, and it will achieve in due time a social system which really will be a social revolution. One in which, incidentally, it will not be necessary for workers to scrimp and save to help the discarded members of their class.

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