Duke of Edinburgh's Study Conference

It all began with an idea, small perhaps at its inception, but later broadening to one of the most imaginative and unique conceptions of this century. This might be considered an extravagant claim, but when one takes into account the vast difficulties which had to be overcome before the Conference actually started the claim could be made on that basis alone. What it has achieved will largely speak for itself in the years to come.

The idea, however, had started at least three and a half years before. This was when discussions first took place between our President, the Duke of Edinburgh, and the Industrial Welfare Society. This was the source of the inspiration and the Duke subsequently put the idea to a group of men and women who contained the more prominent among our industrialists and Trade Union leaders. We of the Conference will always be grateful for the fact that they welcomed the proposal with such enthusiasm that they formed themselves into a Council under the Chairmanship of Sir Harold Hartley, and from then on were unspiring in their efforts to ensure its success. From then onwards the Conference was well founded and the work of planning and co-ordination which they and the Conference Staff accomplished in the next three years was a fine example of what men of goodwill can achieve when they have a common purpose and set themselves a very high standard in its attainment. Few of them, though, would deny that they owed much to the enlightened inspiration and personal devotion of the President.

The Conference Members were composed of nearly three hundred men and women drawn from some twenty-nine countries of the Commonwealth and Empire. In actual ratio there were ninety from the United Kingdom, one hundred and forty from the Dominions, and fifty-five from the Colonial Territories. All were engaged in the manager/employer and trade union/operative roles of industry, and all fell mainly within the age group of twenty-five to forty-five years. In addition we were divided from the beginning into twenty groups, the Chairman of each having been selected some six months beforehand, and each being drawn from the United Kingdom. Finally each group had its secretary, drawn from a gallant band of ladies from a variety of industries.

The selection in almost every case, as far as I could learn, was made by committees in each country, and theirs can have been no easy task such was the eagerness to be included. In Australia, for instance, the twenty-five who eventually came represented less than 10% of those who had been put forward, and they travelled vast distances to undergo some training by discussions before they came over to England. For many it meant loss of holiday, and in some cases financial burdens, although these were exceptional as great generosity was shown by employers and trade unions in this respect.
The majority of us met for the first time on a special train which left London on the afternoon of Sunday, 7th July. This was an interesting experience in itself as one found, after talking for a short while to those in the same compartment who had already travelled thousands of miles with Oxford as their common goal, that one soon ceased to represent anyone or anything but became simply a member of the Conference, on level terms with one’s new companions, with something to contribute from one’s own experience and with a very great deal to learn.

On arriving in Oxford we found that we were dispersed in our groups over four colleges, Christchurch, Oriel, Pembroke and University. In passing, I would remark on the very profound effect which the building and tradition of Oxford had on all who had not known it before, and I hope my friends from the other University will forgive me if I say that I think there could have been no more appropriate setting.

On the Monday morning we met for the first time as a group and if from now onwards my account is perhaps more concerned with 'I' Group then the Conference as a whole, it is because the canvas is too large and anyhow the composition and activities of 'I' Group were typical of the whole. First our Chairman, Reginald Johnson, Managing Director of a pottery firm in the Midlands, whose views expressed the depth, sincerity and warmth of the Christian with a personal sense of responsibility towards his fellow men. Then in alphabetical order, Shanti Banker, Managing Director of a firm of shipping agents in Ceylon, who was one of the three proposers of thanks to the President after the Opening Ceremony at the Sheldonian; Arthur Bell, a second-hand walker in a steelworks in Ayrshire and a member of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation. Arthur has an intense, almost passionate love of the great literary classics, and in the early hours of one morning in Dundee regaled one or two of us with stanza after stanza of "Tam O'Shanter"; Eric Brown, nineteen stone clerk with a shipping company in Stockton-on-Tees and Vice-Chairman of his local Clerical Union branch. Eric was also a Councillor of some standing, and as may well happen on his Council he took an avuncular interest in the Group, his particular care being the welfare of Nathaniel Cole, Chairman of the All Nigerian Trade Union Federation in Lagos. Nat was a most colourful personality both in his dress and in his speeches, which never failed to be a model of controlled passion and good humour; Ted Ivos, Chief Staff Officer with Rolls-Royce at Derby, whose views expressed the wisdom born of experience gained the hard way; "Chunky" Koh, Chairman of a firm of pineapple and hardware merchants in Singapore. This we found out meant that he grew his own pineapples and then canned them. His views on some of the more feudal aspects of industry in the East were a source of constant delight to the Group; Ken McLennon, member of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers of British Columbia, a man who reflected the self-confidence and spirit of enterprise which is characteristic of Canada to-day; Persi Nargolwala, Works Manager in a chemical firm in Bombay. Persi clearly identified himself devotedly with the present modernisation of Indian industry while
his views showed the stability and traditions of an age-long culture; Rag Nichols, Foreman in a paper mill in Tasmania, whose experience of supervision in a hard school was of immense value in our later discussions; another Canadian, Rich Phillips, Vice-President of the Philips Electrical Company in Ontario. Rich combined a dry humour with great shrewdness and was quick to see through a trend of thought removed from the realistic; Sandy Torrance, African Personnel Manager at a copper mine in Northern Rhodesia, where the complexity of rapidly growing industry and the problems of colour call for an almost superhuman adaptability; Maurice West, General Secretary of the Rhodesia Railway Workers' Union in Bulawayo, a warm and earnest man with a deep-rooted concern for his fellow men; and finally, but by no means least, Evan Song, Chinese by ancestry, Canadian by education and now Mines Superintendent of a bauxite mine in British Guiana. Evan is one of those restless characters, who has no time for the complacent and generally accepted beliefs, and who is seeking for a truth which one prays one day he may find. This then was our Group and if I seem to have dwelt on long on it, it is to show the wealth of experience which we could bring to bear on the various aspects of our theme which were presented to us on our Study Tour. It is also because it serves to underline one of the most important lessons of the Conference - that men of goodwill can work together in common and worth while purpose, irrespective of their colour or loyalties, their prejudices and sometimes conflicting backgrounds. What went for 'T' Group, clearly was common to the other nineteen groups, and it would be no exaggerated claim to say that we worked with that contentment which has to be experienced to be appreciated.

Later on the Monday we went to the Sheldonian Theatre to hear the inspiring opening address from the Duke, who outlined very clearly the purposes which he felt must underlie our thoughts. These he felt were fourfold, the first being whether there were any lessons from the past which could help overcome the problems of industrialisation. Could what we in this country have learned in the past hundred and fifty years help those countries who are developing at a rate when human relations have difficulty in keeping pace with material progress? Secondly, can the new industries in the Commonwealth help each other? Where new industries and, therefore, new communities are coming into existence, new ideas must be tried to grapple with the many problems which arise. Some are successful, some are not; each can teach a valuable lesson in itself. Thirdly, we should consider the ways in which the atmosphere in a works had its effect on the community, and how the contentment or otherwise of the community could be reflected in the Works. Finally, said the Duke, every problem of industry or industrialisation looks different depending on where you see it from. Therefore he charged us to make an all-round approach to what we saw and heard. In all we must take into account that all people are primarily citizens, and not just workers with a bit of private life.
This speech sent a thrill through us all, and it did more, for there were many who had entered the Sheldonian still a little bewildered as to what were our true aims and what was expected of us. The perspective, however, had now been set and it was with greater confidence that we entered on the first stage of the Conference.

For the first three days we heard a series of talks from such eminent men as Sir John Maud, Lord Citrine and Sir Alfred Roberts, which were designed to provoke thought and set before us some of the many urgent questions posed by modern industrialisation. At the same time by discussion, both formal and informal, we were coming to know each other and already one could sense the excitement of new ideas, new experiences, new aims and outlooks, and if during the three weeks we slept far less than was good for us it was because there was a constant feeling of so much to learn and so little time to assimilate it.

On the Thursday we journeyed to London, and the Conference were honoured by being invited to the Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace. Afterwards we dispersed in our groups to twenty industrial centres, and Group 'I' caught the night train from Kings Cross to Scotland, with the final injunction from the London Secretary of the Scottish Council to take salt on our porridge.

Our arrival at Hawick at 6.30 a.m., was unexpected, if traditional, for a pipe major had risen early and was there to greet us. So started a day which took us to the cashmere wool factory in Hawick, the community club at Galashiels, the spinning mills at Selkirk, a lively discussion on the causes of the depopulation of the Border towns at Peebles, and finally, dogtired and after 11 p.m., we entered Edinburgh. On each occasion the pattern followed was that which was to characterise similar visits on our tour, namely, a quick look at the factory, after which we met a group of industrialists and trade unionists almost invariably, and also on occasions local government officials, clergymen and many others for a discussion on various aspects of what we had seen. I think we may claim that these discussions often provoked as much thought and argument among the 'home team' as they did amongst ourselves. On the Saturday and Sunday we devoted ourselves to studying the social implications of current economic and technical trends in Scotland, and also the role of the University in an industrial economy, a point to which we returned when visiting St. Andrews. On Saturday we lunched with the Lord Provost at the City Chambers.

Monday found us at Dundee, firstly among the jute mills, then to Valentines, famous for post-cards, and on to the new factory of the National Cash Register Company which was in striking contrast to the very much older jute mills. Our discussions subsequently were concerned with the recruitment of labour and satisfactions at work, and in the evening the community effect of a new trading estate on an old established industrial area, subjects which are of very immediate concern to Dundee to-day.
On Tuesday morning we faced the question of the employment of married women with young children, seeing first a firm's day nursery, then that of the Corporation, and finally discussing the question with people intimately concerned with the very human social problems which are involved. Afterwards we journeyed to St. Andrews and spent the evening with the Scottish T.U.C. Summer School. This school was virile and enthusiastic, but as a group we felt that the ends of industry could be much better served if management and trade union could only meet together on such occasions instead of maintaining separate camps. The aims of both have a great deal in common but suspicious of each other will never be allayed until the opportunities for coming together are encouraged at other than just the highest levels. Wednesday morning was spent at the University, lunch, seemingly to the general amazement, was taken at the Royal and Ancient, and then we travelled to Glenrothes, a new town which has grown to meet the housing needs of the East Fife coalfields, but which is seeking to avoid turning itself into a wholly mining community. The effect of this new community, which is gradually rising to an estimated population of 16,000 on the older industries was the subject which led to a most outspoken discussion that evening in Kirkcaldy. It was from there that we took the night train to London, astonished that we could have fitted so much into the space of six days. What we had seen in Scotland had made a deep impression on us all and had given some most valuable leads for the subject that we must ultimately report back to the Conference on - 'Industry and the Community'.

Breakfast on Thursday was at London Airport, and lunch at County Hall, where afterwards we were given the opportunity of learning something about the future development of London. On Friday we spent the day at Stevenage New Town, which offered a most interesting comparison with our visit to Glenrothes. After touring the new factories we met a representative body of employers, and after seeing the residential areas we were joined by men and women who have concerned themselves with various aspects of the new community life. By then we had come fully to appreciate that the problems of the New Towns do not end with bricks and mortar.

On Saturday after a Sherry Party at the Mansion House, we returned to Oxford and began the very considerable task of writing our report. Considerable is no understatement as we had all been looking at what we had seen from many stand points, and it was no easy matter to combine the many, varied thoughts and opinions into one comparatively brief whole. By Tuesday night, and after much burning of midnight oil, we had produced a report which satisfied the group, but then it was put to a further test by being read to two other groups in what were known as "married" discussions. Those latter groups had, of course, been to other centres and consequently had seen perhaps much the same problems but through different eyes. The report was re-drafted, to take in those views and it was therefore with a sense of relief, mingled with apprehension, that it was typed in its final form for the reporting back session on the Thursday.
This session which lasted from 9 a.m. till 6 p.m., and in which each of
the twenty reports was given before the President was undoubtedly the
climax of the three weeks. We came on just after tea and Evan Wong from
British Guiana was our spokesman. His delivery was strong and clear and
did full justice to the expression of our endeavours. His reception when
he had finished sent a thrill of pride through us all.

Throughout these days the group work had been interspersed with talks
on the overseas view point where we heard papers from men eminent in their
various fields from West Africa, Australia, Southern Africa, India and
Canada. Finally on Friday the whole Conference, its aims and its present
achievements, were summed up brilliantly in two session by Sir Philip
Morris, Vice-Chancellor of Bristol University.

The Conference closed on the Friday evening with a farewell dinner in
Christ Church Hall at which the Duke again presided. To him this must
have been a most moving occasion, for we could appreciate the courage behind
his decision to back such an experiment, and now speech after speech
testified to the fulfillment of its success. Later that evening we met
for the last time in our groups, sad that we, who had come together from
such distances and who had learned to work together in such intimate
harmony, must now needs go our several ways. Truly we had been lifted out
of ourselves and our memories will be of things exciting and new. There
was, however, a final and most human gesture in store for us, for the
following morning our President came down to Oxford station to bid us
goodbye. Our hearts indeed were full.

And what then are the lessons that we learned? In the first place
what I have mentioned before, that with a common and worth while purpose
men of goodwill can work well and happily together, irrespective of the
prejudices of creed, colour, loyalties and religion. Secondly that the
opportunity to meet together in the enlightened atmosphere of a Conference
such as this can remove suspicions, give greater perspective to the true
aims of life and open new and exciting horizons.

And what from the reports themselves? These will shortly be published
and no attempt will be made by me to summarise the many and often unorthodox
points which were made, nor the provocative questions which have been posed.
Perhaps, however, a brief summary of our own may serve to show the sort of
findings on points which arose on our tours and which were set against
Commonwealth backgrounds. As I have said, our theme was 'Industry and
the Community'. In examining the relationship between the two, we felt
that industry owed it to the community to be efficient and progressive,
providing strong and sympathetic leadership at all levels of management
and employee organisations. Here we highlighted the need for good
communications conducive to creating in each individual a feeling that his
work was satisfactory and worth while. We felt it was the responsibility
of industry to control its less pleasant by-products such as ugly buildings, atmospheric and river pollution, and tips of waste materials. The mark of industry on town our country should, we felt, give rise to feelings of aesthetic pride, not shame.

Conversely in order that the individual may play his proper part in industry, conditions must exist within the community for good housing, good education, good services, and constructive and worth while outlets for leisure time. By and large, the community should manage its own affairs but industry had its duty as a citizen, and especially in the under-developed countries where the community has not the resources or experience to foster these needs, then industry, we felt, should assume the role of patron, encouraging but not seeking to control.

With regard to housing, it was our opinion that for man to establish his proper roots and independence, he should, wherever possible, own his own property. This point was re-echoed in four or five reports, and is of considerable significance at this present time, when in so many parts of the Commonwealth Company towns are being established where a new industry has grown. If industry accepts this point, it should give assistance towards its fulfillment.

In considering family life, I am afraid we were concerned at the employment of married women with young children, particularly on shifts and for long hours, in spite of the excellence of the day nurseries we had seen. We had heard many views, social and medical, which convinced us that it was far from being in the best interests either of child or mother. Although we were told that it was essential to the economic prosperity of certain countries for such women to be employed, nevertheless we felt we should be working towards the position where it is no longer economically necessary for married women with young children to seek employment, and we considered that the pressure for shorter working hours for men in those countries where such married women are extensively employed, is unrealistic until that end has been achieved.

Concerning education, we called for a closer contact between the Universities and industry, a better balancing of the teaching of Science and the Arts, which we felt was demanded by modern life, and regretted the strong evidence that interest in the cultural and aesthetic development of so many of the adolescents in the community ends in the early teens.

With regard to old people, we deprecated the fact that industrialisation had created the condition where at a certain arbitrarily fixed time in their lives, the aged, even though fit for employment, can be forced to surrender their status as contributors to the prosperity of their country. At the same time they so often suffer a reduction in their standard of living and consequently a feeling of frustration characterises their latter years.
Instead of higher pensions, we felt industry and the community should combine to give the aged a higher status, providing outlets and occupations which can give the individual a conviction that he still has an important and purposeful part to play among his fellowmen.

We considered the ideal size of the community and were impressed by the community life – the Scottish Border Towns where the average population was just under 20,000. Small towns, however, did not seem to be able to provide the type of entertainment which was attractive to the younger people who had to drift to the larger towns. This is a trend which is harmful to local industry, while magnifying the problems of the large town, and we felt a much more realistic approach should be made to the problem by older people in the community.

Finally it was our feeling that we were in lesser or greater degree approaching the time when good towns, good food, good working conditions, good housing and medical services were becoming a basic standard and the common heritage of all; whereas at the start of an industrial revolution they might well be looked on by the visionary as the true aims in life. Science in addition may well give us increased leisure time. We felt, therefore, that the time was ripe for asking ourselves again what are the true aims in life in this modern world? Can we seek wider conceptions which go beyond the purely materialistic? These are questions which I think came into the minds of us all during the course of the Conference. By the end we were convinced of the importance of seeking in our daily life the answers to them.

These then were a very few of the lessons of the Conference. It was a warming experience for it showed the virility and solidarity of the Commonwealth and demonstrated even to those who had doubts that, in spite of so many differences of beliefs and aspiration, it is a really practical thing. We know comradeship as it is only rarely experienced, and I personally am profoundly grateful that I can say those wonderful words “I was there”.

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Edward Guiness

August, 1956.

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