

PADDY WEBB REMEMBERS

THE YOUNG MICHAEL SAVAGE

SINCE events date experiences better than figures from the calendar, it is more illuminating to say that Michael Savage met Paddy Webb before the Boer War than to say they already knew each other about 1900. And even that is not sufficiently significant. It is more significant to say that the two lads met just when Tom Mann was touring to organise labour in Australia, just when the impact of socialist thought was striking out among the workers from England, just when Henry George, Robert Blatchford, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, were finding their literary way around the world in much thumbed books, and tattered pamphlets, in clippings from almost fugitive newspapers, by word of mouth, by rumour. Still more significant is it to remember that this same period was the period when unionism in Australia meant dismissal from work, while liberalism in New Zealand meant Richard Seddon's system of semi-socialism.

All these circumstances played their part in creating the minds and thought of the two young men. One was the son of a large shareholder of a big Australian mining company. Paddy Webb could have done many things with his father behind him. He acknowledged that his father did help, but Paddy had ideas of his own; he was young, he could work hard, and he could work

underground in the mine as well as underground in the minds of the miners. He organised a little island of trades unionism among 299 of the 300 men where he worked. When the mine closed, Paddy was no longer protected by his youth, or even by his reputation as a hard worker. Paddy was out of a job. But while he was there the union survived in a sea of trouble, and part of its survival was due to another leading light in the industrial struggle of the time, another

A "Listener" Interview With The Hon. P. C. Webb

young man whose ideals were shaping and forming in the same pattern.

That other was Mick Savage, whose friend found time to remember their young days for *The Listener*, in the busy hours that followed the death of the Labour Party's Leader.

Brought Up Hard

Young Savage, as Old Paddy remembers him, was not large of stature. He had a deep chest, and strong limbs. Surprisingly for those whose memory of him in New Zealand is the memory of the rather slight little man on the floor of the big House, young Savage could match most at weight lifting, and was particularly good at feats of strength with his jaws and teeth. He'd been brought up hard. He had farmed, and knew as much about farming as most. He had served across a shop counter and knew as much as most about shop management, wrapping parcels, serving customers, ordering, stock-taking, even delivering orders. He had known what it was to be out of work in depression years. He had known what it was to set out for unknown destinations, to tramp the hungry roads, and sleep, when it rained, in hollow tree trunks—first removing the snakes.

He was strong, he was independent, and by the testimony of his friends he was simple, direct, honest, careful in thought, and intensely purposeful in its execution.

Kindred Spirits

The Australian roads finally brought him to the mining districts. It was in the little centre of North Prentice that he encountered a kindred spirit in young Webb.

Mann inspired them with his advocacy of a world fit for workers to live in. Blatchford's books, socialism, single taxing, the *Clarion*, the *Daily Worker*, became their introduction to political literature. They read, greedily, and could waste no time before practising the preachings to which they listened with eager ears.

The workers' newspapers soon brought Seddon's New Zealand Government to their notice. Paddy quickly made up his mind. He had not had much time for reading, with the football and cricket clubs working him hard as secretary, with the Party affairs to claim his attention, with this and that responsibility piling up on the young shoulders of a man not long past his majority. But he had read enough, and off he went. His friend took over his secretarial work.

From New Zealand he wrote glowing accounts of the climate and the people. At last young Savage wrote: "I have made up my mind. I am coming over."

He Wanted the Sun

He was greeted at the wharf by a telegram from Paddy Webb at Dennistown. It had rained for six months. Paddy, however, was optimistic; it might be fine, he thought, for an hour or two, in another three months or so. But Michael had other ideas. At six o'clock of one wet morning he stated quite firmly that he'd made up his mind never again to work underground. He wanted the sun, and the wet West Coast was no place for him. He travelled north. Had one brief spell when he had to save sixpence from a visit to the barber to wire Paddy for a loan, then got work again.

Done with mining, he had studied in Australia as an engineer.

At one stage he worked for John Harris, a local doctor, who owned a mine with an engine to be operated. Michael Savage was the engine driver. The next time he met this employer he met him as the Prime Minister of New Zealand meeting an Australian Minister of Education.

The rest of the facts are detailed elsewhere.

From those days until the very early morning of Wednesday, March 27, 1940, he and Paddy Webb remained inseparable. They worked for the same causes, read the same books, thought the same thoughts.

The Seddon Government could not last for ever. Mr. Webb referred in his talk with *The Listener* to the current description of "Lib-Labism," applied while Seddon was still alive. There was a theory then that when Seddon died his party and its programme would die too, for it contained only a few men capable of inspiring service to fine leadership, and they were getting old.

They Were Ready

The Seddon Government did finally go, and when it went there arose a need which was ultimately to be fulfilled, after varied adventures, by the Labour Party as it is constituted to-day. When that gap opened in New Zealand politics, Webb and Savage were among those who were ready to fill it.

"It is not long," Mr. Webb told *The Listener*, "since he was in this room and we were talking just as I am talking now to you: about those old days when we first listened to Mann, and first read those books. He said then: 'You know, Paddy, there is very little difference between us.'"

Mr. Webb spoke of the Mick Savage of the Australian days as the same Mick Savage of the days when he lived and worked as Prime Minister of New Zealand. When he was young he liked sport as much as any young man. He loved football, although he did not get much time for playing; he loved racing, although he went to watch the horses and might never place a bet. His life and experience, a good deal of it hard, had laid the foundations for leadership, and he brought to leadership, when finally he won it, an idealism which developed as the years came to him, instead of deteriorating as often it does with lesser idealists.

"I believe, in fact," said Mr. Webb, "that over the last months he was firmer than ever in his idealisms. He wanted better things for the people than a system which makes possible unemployment, war, poverty, and until he died he became increasingly sure that that ideal was coming more closely within reach.

"He will be very hard to replace. He was such a lovable character, anyone could work with him in harmony. His simplicity was inspiring, and yet he was never weak. He never said anything without careful thought, but when he had committed himself he would never be shaken—and his judgment was amazingly sound.

"I think he was a very great man."

