

LABOUR'S FIRST PRIME MINISTER

Survey Of A Life Of Service

MICHAEL JOSEPH SAVAGE was the product and, to a very large extent, the justification of the Labour Party's political system. He was born poor. He grew up among poor people, and when he had grown up, he still worked among poor people. He had heard, and often answered, "the toot of the factory whistle." He made the first political steps of his career in Trades Unionism. On unionists he practised his first steps in debating and working-class oratory. From unionism he graduated to politics. He grew up with the growing Labour Party in New Zealand. He started in the front with Fraser, Semple, Webb, Lee, Parry, and the rest, and he stayed in front, with his benevolent manner, his kindly smile, his seeming gentleness, hiding a determination to see that the organisation of society was not developed along lines calculated to "get more out of the already much-sweated working classes."

In Opposition

For year after eventful year he was one of the critics. His politics were opposition politics. Those shrewd eyes of his watched the political machine in action through most of its post-war developments. Behind him were the dusty Australian roads, the collieries, the flaxmills, the brewery cellar. In front of him were his dreams of the sort of socialism common people dream about when hours are long while a halfpenny rise in the cost of bread is the difference between living and existing, while strikes seem their only political weapon, and starvation their only recourse when strikes fail.

Behind Harry Holland he helped in his quiet way to build the most efficient party organisation New Zealand has known. It was not easy. Extremes of hardship can bind people together but "the masses," as he sometimes called them, are not always consistent. They jump this way, and that, in search of the palliative or antidote to their ills. It takes long hours of debate and argument, long straining hours of making appeals, of constant and wearying application to one endless problem after another.

Through this he lived for 25 years, spent on the other side of the fence.

His Turn at Last

With the depression came fresh and more bitter grievances for the class he represented. Harry Holland was gone. Michael Savage, the bachelor, the constant friend of the common people, the man with the mild manner, the one man, it seemed, who met all shades of opinion at least half way; tolerant, but not compromising; gentle, but not weak, was elected Leader of the Labour Party, in time to become Prime Minister.

At last his turn had come. He rode high on the tidal wave of 1935. He firmly held his place through the first exciting session of New Zealand's first Labour Government. In the next election his people once again voted their confidence in that strange mixture of benevolence and fighting spirit, tolerance and prejudice, that was Michael Savage's Labour Party.

He led the party's first year of this second session, staying with it in spite of growing unease about his health. Slowly he had to let some of his activity go. He still walked with his slow, deliberate step to his bench in the House to make his deliberate policy statements. He reassured, he created confidence, he smoothed away difficulties. He seldom presented the close argument of the political initiator. His was the task of drawing together all the shades of opinion in his own party, and conciliating the critics, with the idealistic generalisation, the "friends of the common people," the "equality of opportunity for everyone," the "right to live," the "security in old age," the "richly deserved reward of service," and, only when necessary, slashing, bitter attack on his political enemies.

New Zealand Enters the War

Soon, his major policy statements became fewer. He was not seen so often on the benches. When war came, he led New Zealand into it, making a great effort to meet a momentous occasion with a momentous statement to the waiting House.

It was his last great moment in the New Zealand Parliament. In the same deliberate voice he had used for every crisis that had met him through his political life, he described the greatest crisis of them all. There was some sadness in his voice and manner, a droop in his shoulders that meant more than poor health, and yet a determination in his intonation that meant that Michael Joseph Savage was still going to carry quietly on, doing the job next to his hand.

Over the microphone he was still New Zealand's Prime Minister, exhorting his people, comforting them, with the voice of a chosen protector and the art of a very experienced politician.

Toward the End

Once, he came out of his semi-retirement, to reply without mincing words to an attack made upon him within his own party. Then he returned to his home on the heights of Northland to watch while the rest of the world went by.

He had had a serious operation. He must rest. He was resting this month, but not so much to save himself as to conserve his

strength for a Labour Party Conference, which at that time seemed likely to have momentous results. Michael Joseph was going to be there. But at last the rumours of serious illness were confirmed. Mr. Savage "was not able to undertake any duties, and was resting."

Michael Joseph Savage was resting, waiting for the end of a life which had meant continuous and continuously sincere devotion to a cause which inspired him to carry about on those small shoulders as heavy a weight of responsibility as comes to any one man during a lifetime.

Mr. Savage was born in Benalla, Victoria, in 1873, of poor parents whose extraction he once admitted was Irish.

He was not yet adolescent when he was set to work in the mines. At the age of 14, he left home and tramped the roads. He won a first-class certificate as a stationary engine driver and for a time managed the Rutherglen Co-operative Company. He and "Paddy" Webb had worked together in Australian mines and in 1907 he came to New Zealand, influenced by Mr. Webb. He joined Messrs. Semple and Parry, whose exodus took place at the same time.

For a time he worked in West Coast mines, then as engine driver in a Foxton flaxmill, where, the story goes, he was popular as a tap dancer. His next job was as cellerman in an Auckland brewery. In 1911 he stood for Auckland Central but was defeated by a little more than 1,000 votes. Peter Fraser was then secretary of the General Labourers' Union. Robert Semple was organiser of the Federation of Labour. There was no Labour Party as it is now constituted.

In 1914 he tried again with even less success. But in the first post-war election, when he stood for Auckland West, the anti-Labour vote was split and Mr. Savage was elected.

He had held his seat since, and when he became Prime Minister had been a member of the Auckland City Council and Auckland Hospital Board (1918-1922). In 1927 he was re-elected to the Hospital Board after a break of five years.

Sometimes his majorities for Auckland West were very narrow, but in 1931 his majority of 8,007 was second only to J. A. Lee's 8,607. Since then Auckland West was never again in doubt.

First Session

The first session with Mr. Savage as Prime Minister saw a phenomenal rush of measures embodying new principles and greatly enlarging the responsibility of the community—through the State—for the welfare of the less fortunate of our people. There had been nothing like it since the famous days of old age pensions, the advent of the State Advances to Settlers Department, and the establishment of industrial conciliation and arbitration. Mr. Savage was carrying out his promise to start where Seddon left off. New Zealand, after a generation of prosaic legislation, with only one or two innovations to meet depression emergencies, was now once again the centre of world interest for its experimental laws.

New measures came as fast as they could be drafted, but the sound strain of the practical in the make-up of the idealist who was Prime Minister found expression in a strengthening of the Staff of the Crown Law Draughtsman, and a full use of all the resources of skill and knowledge at the disposal of the Government, inside and outside the Public Service. The conversion of the Reserve Bank and restoration of the State Advances Corporation to complete State ownership, the shortening of the working week and

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