



Living with Industry

Next month, 300 up-and-coming leaders from all parts of the Commonwealth will fan out across Canada to examine the nature of life in our industrial society. There are problems aplenty for them to explore. But they will also witness considerable benefits from industrial development — benefits Canadians are inclined to take for granted . . .

□ The era specifically known as the Industrial Revolution occurred in Great Britain between the mid-18th and mid-19th centuries. In that time factories equipped with steam-driven machinery displaced individual craftsmen and family-based cottage industries as that nation's chief source of man-made goods. The character of British society was drastically altered as people flocked from farms and villages to find wage-earning employment in overcrowded, jerry-built and thoroughly unsanitary towns and cities. As one labour-saving invention succeeded another, men found their jobs being taken over by machines and their own wives and children, who could be employed for minimal pay.

The rapid and massive technological change of the time stirred profound civil, economic and political changes. The trade union movement arose to counter the power of the factory owners over their employees. The Industrial Revolution created an entirely new and different role for government. The public authorities were obliged to provide tax-supported services for the growing concentrations of population, and to intervene in business affairs with laws designed to protect workers' rights.

This description of events that took place well over a century ago may seem oddly up-to-date to people in countries that are even now in the throes of industrialization. For, if we strip the historic and geographical restrictions from the meaning of the term, it is evident that the Industrial Revolution has yet to run its course in many parts

of the world. The developing countries are now experiencing some of the worst features of the original developments in England — the cramming of former rural families into urban slums and mass unemployment. And the old struggle between employer and employee still manifests itself throughout the non-communist world in the form of strikes and other labour disputes.

But there is a crucial difference between the current phase of the ongoing revolution and its chaotic beginnings. In the early days of industrialization, near-feudal master-servant relationships still prevailed in the factories and mines. These were operated almost solely for the benefit of their owners, who were inclined to regard as heresy the notion that the fruits of production should be equitably shared with their employees and with the general public through the medium of taxes. They were able to reconcile their consciences to child labour and other inhuman practices on the comforting premise that the law of nature decreed that the stronger should exploit the weaker. The concept of an economy which would work for the welfare of all the people had not yet caught on.

In contrast, no reasonable person today disputes that industry should function in the best interests of the society around it. There are, to be sure, sharp differences among corporations, trade unions and governments as to how this should be done, and as to what these "best interests" really are. Endless arguments are waged over ways and means, facts and figures, and greater and lesser evils, all tinged with the natural human tendency

to put the special interests of one's own group ahead of those of others. But even the most biased partisan of a particular cause is likely to state his case within the context of the public interest. He will try to convince people that the course of action he propounds is what is best (or, failing that, what is just) for all concerned.

Another difference between the first phase of the Industrial Revolution and the stage it has now reached lies in the ability of the society to cope with the instability of an industrial economy. In the old days, every major economic or technological change came as a shock, spreading bewilderment and fear. As well it might, for it often rendered its victims not only unemployed, but permanently unemployable. Amid all the ingenuity lavished on the means of production, little thought was spared to the social mechanisms needed to anticipate and adjust to change.

Today, it is recognized that change is an abiding and ever-present force in industrial society. Anything can happen to an industrial company: its markets might dry up, capital or raw materials might become scarce, strong new competitors might appear with superior products, production or marketing techniques. The management that cannot deal with such contingencies may have to shut down plants, or at least resort to heavy lay-offs. To keep abreast of the competition and to cushion the effects of adverse changes, managements strive for improved productivity through the introduction of cost-saving methods, machines and equipment. Whether a change is due to unfavourable external conditions or technological advance, it is capable of throwing people out of work.

Because of this, there has been a steady build-up in the developed countries over the years of defences against the impact of change on ordinary workers. Social innovations such as unemployment insurance, national employment services and government-sponsored retraining programs have brought a new measure of security to their lives in situations where they once might have stared starvation in the face. In broader terms, these programs have given national economies the resilience they need to take advantage of the great paradox of industrialization. This is that, although its changeability may cause human dislocations in the short term, in the long term it is capable of

creating an ever-increasing number of satisfactory jobs for a growing labour force.

So, slowly and haltingly, we in the latter part of the twentieth century have learned how to harness industry to the cause of social progress. But our understanding of the society that has emerged from this achievement is far from complete. It was with this in mind that, in the early 1950's, Prince Philip decided to place the prestige of his position behind a concentrated effort to learn more about the nature of life in the new industrial society. He set to work to organize the HRH Duke of Edinburgh's Commonwealth Study Conference in 1956, inviting industrial managers, trade union leaders, and public administrators from around the Commonwealth world to join in what he called his "great experiment". The phrase was apt, for this was to be a conference unlike any other ever held.

It was purposely designed not to consider any propositions or arrive at any resolutions. It was not even to be held in one place. It would last an extraordinary length of time — three weeks — and yet it would not produce a single recommendation. Its purpose, rather, was to study the human problems of industrial communities, not on paper, but on the scene.

A dynamic mixture of viewpoints and values

The 300 delegates assembled in Oxford, England, where they were divided into 20 separate study groups. Each group then set out for a different industrial centre or region in Britain to meet and talk with its people in their work-places, in their local pubs, and in their homes. Members of these groups spent the better part of a fortnight inquiring deeply into the opinions, feelings and perceptions of everyone from managing directors to unemployed labourers. Then they all gathered again in Oxford to compare notes.

Each study group was a dynamic mixture of varying viewpoints and values, containing people from all points of the political spectrum and from places as far apart culturally and geographically as Malta and Tonga. The participants had been chosen not for their prominence at the time, but for their potential as future leaders; a rough age

limit of 40 was set. They represented only themselves, not their organizations, a condition which the Duke considered important in promoting understanding of common problems. "If you put together people from management, unions and public administration in a formal situation they take up formal positions," he explained. "Put them together in an informal situation where they can discuss their attitudes without representing anybody and they feel they can talk freely without feeling that they're committed to any particular line."

Sure enough, members from all parts of the world and of all political stripes came out of the exercise feeling intellectually enriched and broadened. The Duke had planned the conference as a one-time affair to improve communications on questions of universal concern. The Canadian alumni, however, considered the experience so worthwhile that they were unwilling to let the idea drop after only one conference. So they formed a committee to organize the Second HRH Duke of Edinburgh's Commonwealth Study Conference in 1962.

Financed by contributions from Canadian business and labour organizations, this event brought together 237 delegates from 34 countries to examine "the human consequences of industrial change" in communities the length and breadth of Canada. Again, the membership was made up of people between the ages of 25 to 40 who could be expected to be leaders in the industrial affairs of their countries within 10 to 15 years. The second conference was an impressive success — so much so that it prompted a third conference in Australia in 1968 and a fourth in the United Kingdom in 1974.

Understanding what decisions mean to the people on the spot

The fifth of these now-regular affairs, to be held in Canada from May 17 to June 7 this year, will dwell on the broad theme of "People in an Industrial Society". Some 300 up-and-coming young men and women from 30 Commonwealth countries, including 125 from Canada, will take part. They will be formed into 20 study groups of 15 members each who will remain together for the duration of

the conference. Each group will be a microcosm of the membership. A typical one might include a labour organizer from Australia, a teacher from Botswana, a civil servant from India, and a plant manager from Hong Kong.

After initial orientation and briefing sessions in Kingston, Ont., and Calgary, each group will strike out for a different community or district to conduct an 11-day study of local social conditions. Members will be entertained by local families; through such contact they are expected to acquire an intimate familiarity with their attitudes, concerns and aspirations. This ground-level experience is intended to influence the future leaders in such a way "that when they get to a position of authority, the decisions they make will be based on a reasonable understanding of the consequences," as the Duke has said.

A time of disenchantment with industrial development

Each study group will prepare a report on its members' reactions to their encounters and the lessons learned from them. These will be discussed with the Duke of Edinburgh and with members of other groups at a summing-up session in Quebec City; out of them the Duke will prepare his overall summary to bring the conference to an end.

Canada makes a good setting for such an exercise, containing as it does industries of all sizes and stages of maturity. Among the 60 or so places to be covered by study tours are ghost towns and boom towns, diversified industrial centres and small villages in which the entire population is dependent on one plant. Some groups will view the problems of urbanization in big cities like Toronto and Montreal, while others will be exposed to the opposite difficulties of isolation in remote mining towns and coastal settlements. Of special interest to members from the developing countries are the questions of environmental trade-offs, native land claims, and the "culture shock" exerted by industrial development on the natives of northern Canada. Another relevant subject is the practise of introducing new industries with government support to relieve unemployment in economically-distressed areas. Study groups will go to places where this has worked, and places where it has failed.

The overseas delegates will be coming to Canada at a time when there is a good deal of disenchantment about industry and development in general. No longer do Canadians regard development as automatically desirable; the environmental hazards, the depletion of resources and the unsettling social influences connected with it have all become matters of public concern.

The conference is necessarily devoted to studying problems — otherwise there would be no point to it — and members certainly will find no shortage of problems to examine in Canada. But while they undoubtedly will hear much about the drawbacks of various aspects of industrial life from the people concerned, they will also witness some of the broad benefits that tend to be overlooked in the controversy over its disagreeable side effects. For industry is, after all, one of the major sources of the high standard of living — the high standard of *life* — enjoyed by most of the people in this country. This is so whether they are employed directly in industrial production or not.

Putting the system to work to solve its own problems

Many of the problems they will observe here — urban traffic congestion, for example — have been brought about by the kind of mass affluence that enables most families to own and operate at least one motor vehicle. In fact, the ongoing public debate about the problems and priorities of industrial development is possible only because Canadians on the whole are well-educated and well-informed. And this in turn has been possible largely because the tax revenues drawn from the industrial sector and its employees have built a strong system of public education; and because Canadian families now can afford to keep their offspring in school longer than any generation before.

The nation has arrived at this enviable state mainly as a result of industrial and related natural resource development. Yet the future of development around the world has lately been called into question, notably in studies prepared for the Club of Rome. It is difficult for people in a fairly newly-developed country like Canada to follow the argument that growth should be curtailed. On

the basis of their national experience, Canadians would probably be more inclined towards the view of Sir Solly Zuckerman, former scientific adviser to the British government, that economic growth is essentially the only means of achieving an acceptable standard of living for people everywhere. According to Sir Solly, the concomitant problems can best be faced within the existing system. "We must remember," he has said, "that while technology does provide us with new and dangerous ways of damaging the environment, it is also to provide new techniques whereby damage can be corrected or avoided . . . The broadening of advantage does not necessarily mean that our environment must be destroyed."

A consensus that people are what it's all about

Much the same might be said for the human problems of industrial society. Having invented methods to ease the dislocations suffered by people through economic change, governments ought to be able to invent new social devices to deal with the fresh problems that inevitably will arise. This has been attempted over the years with varying degrees of success in Canada. The measures taken have been vigorously and exhaustively debated by representatives of industry, labour, government and other interested parties. But there has been no disagreement on the general objective — to improve the lot of the people in the long run.

The celebrated economic philosopher John Kenneth Galbraith argued in his 1967 book *The New Industrial State* that "we are becoming the servants in thought, as in action, of the machine we have created to serve us." In their explorations in Canada, both Canadian and overseas members of the conference will have the opportunity to see for themselves whether that process has taken place here. It was certainly not supposed to; there has long been a consensus among Canadians that the industrial system should be an instrument of the people, and not *vice versa*. In some cases we may have fallen short of that ideal — but we trust that in general our guests will return to their homelands reassured as to the latent capacity of an industrial society to provide a life worth living for human beings.