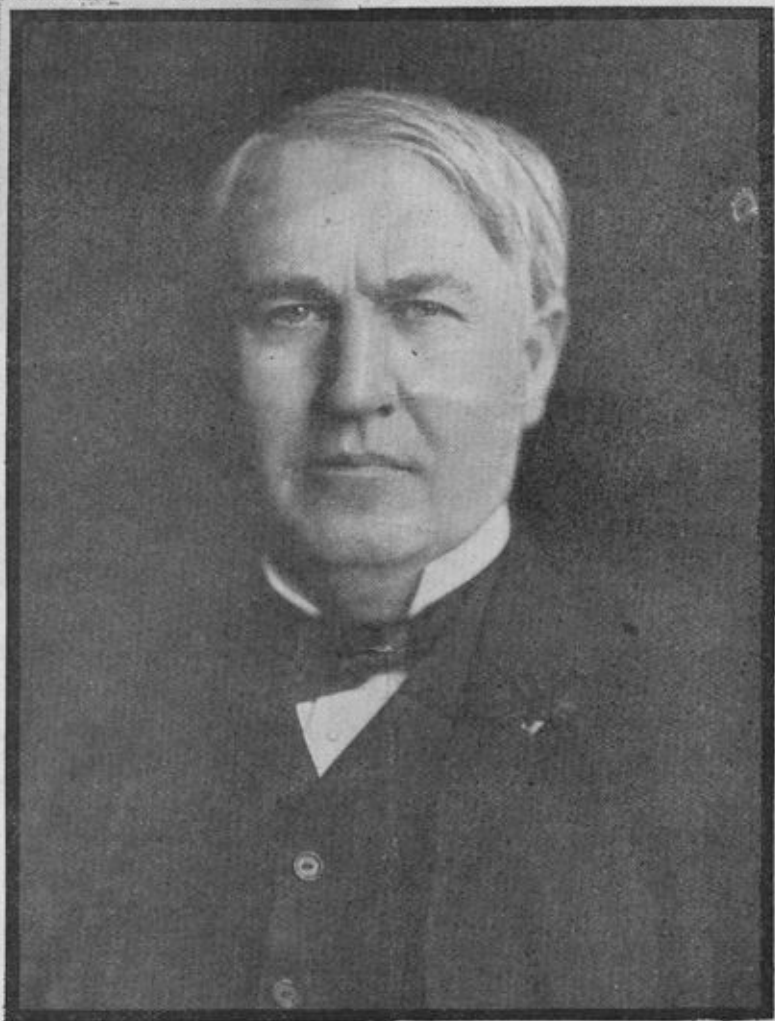


Why Edison Is a Progressive



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AN INTERVIEW

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By **WILL IRWIN**

Why Edison Is a Progressive

It's a Young Man's Movement, Says the Inventor, and He's a Young Man at Sixty-five—That's One Reason

THOMAS A. EDISON had finished a spurt of work—a hundred and twenty-two hours, as his time card showed, out of a possible hundred and forty-four—and had let down for a little recreation. In brief, he had strolled over to an abandoned Erie Railroad track which runs near his laboratories to witness the trial of his famous storage batteries on a train of tramway cars built for a Cuban tramway. The batteries, black cylinders about the size of an ordinary stove water-back, were “feeding”—taking from the wires of the Orange electric railway system enough current to reduce an old line battery to a fluid. He stood with his hands stuffed in his trousers pockets and his big gentian-blue eyes of a dreamer fixed on the batteries, and as he looked he talked, half to his listeners, a group of street railway men, and half to himself.

“Nothing sensational about it, but it’s going to change things a lot. We’re shipping ten of those batteries a day to New York now for the use of automobile trucks. Some of them”—Edison’s eyes lost their look of the dreamer and became those of a shrewd, humorous Yankee—“and some of them to malefactors of great wealth, I suspect. Doing all we can to make them happy—they need it in these times. You see, people used to say when I was a boy that three dishonest dollars in the hand don’t do you so much good as one honest dollar”—here Edison counted an imaginary old-fashioned silver cartwheel into one of those powerful, sensitive-fingered hands of his—“and if any malefactor of great wealth is buying these batteries—mind, I don’t say there are any such—we’re giving him honest dollars.

“Who’s your candidate in this campaign?” he added, suddenly shifting the conversation to his nearest neighbor. “Not Taft?”

“No.”

“Roosevelt?”

“No.”

“Oh, you’re one of those academic fellows!” said Edison,

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poking him in a friendly way. "Don't know Jackson is dead?" He laughed a dry laugh. But in a second more he had assumed his expression of a dreamer, as he always does, they say, when that dynamo of a mind is whirling within; and he fell to talking politics. All that afternoon, indeed, the campaign seemed to engage one lobe of his brain, while the other was on controllers and currents and feed wires. He kept returning to the subject; and as we tried moving and backing and stopping in the Jersey fields, as we inspected the car barns, as he made his way home to the laboratory he delivered himself of these remarks:

"Of course I'm a Progressive, because I'm young at sixty-five—that is the first reason—and this is a young man's movement. There are a lot of people who die in the head after they're fifty. They're the ones who get shocked if you propose anything that wasn't going when they were boys. It's the way the world goes—the young push ahead and do things, and the old stand back. I hope I'll always be with the young.

"You see, getting down to the bottom of things, this is a pretty raw, crude civilization of ours—pretty wasteful, pretty cruel, which often comes to the same thing, doesn't it? And in a lot of respects we Americans are the rawest and crudest of all. Our production, our factory laws, our charities, our relations between capital and labor, our distribution—all wrong, out of gear. We've stumbled along for a while, trying to run a new civilization in old ways, and we've got to start to make this world over.

"Just look at us beside Germany, for example; not that Germany has done everything, but she's made a start. Of course, Germany's a monarchy. She has just now a good Emperor and an efficient ruling class. Give them a bad ruler and a degenerate ruling class—that's likely to happen at any time in a monarchy—and it would all go to grass, of course. But have you thought what a republic could do, even if she only went as far as Germany? No great standing army, rulers responsible to the people, so that they could be changed if they went wrong—have you thought what we Americans could do, the most efficient people in the world?

"So you can see I'd naturally be for the party which comes nearest to promising a change—going to the bottom of things and setting them right. I don't need to say, I guess, that it's the Progressive Party—the Progressive Party and Roosevelt. We're coming to a new era. We've got to transform everything. And we've got to have a big, strong, honest man at the head. Teddy's that man. I go the whole way with him.

“An experiment? Yes. Of course. How can you get any new thing without experiment? You never know until you try, in government or in mechanics. And if you don't experiment you don't get anywhere. What do I do when I get an idea? Well, if I think it is sound enough, I take the time and money and energy to work it out. Sometimes it fails, and sometimes it succeeds—generally it succeeds, after I've tried it enough ways. Suppose I was afraid to try. Would I ever get anywhere? But even if we should make a terrible mistake, what then? We have the power to correct it every four years—yes, every two, because the President isn't all there is to the government.

“We can just forget the Republican party here—and I was an old-line Republican before I woke up, at that. And nearly all the Democrats offer is honest application of the old stuff. I've heard that before, campaign after campaign, until I'm sick of it. We'll tinker the tariff here, put in a few fancy frills there, and everything will be all right. But we go on just the same, somehow, wasting our resources, widening the gap between work and pay, our government—our regulator—generations behind our industries, our inventions—everything.

“Free competition—take that, for example! That idea's as old and worn out as the States' rights doctrine, which is the joke in this campaign. We've got clear past the wastefulness of the free competitive era. We might as well talk about smashing all the steam engines and electric lights and going back to stage coaches and candles. Put in two railroads, freely competing in the same territory, and what generally happens? After all the waste and the throat-cutting and the disturbance, they both go into the hands of a receiver. Some malefactor of great wealth comes along and picks up the pieces, and it's monopoly, and a tyrannical and unfair one, too. Free competition would be like a mob without the police. Somebody would gobble it all in the end, and make all the old trouble in the process. We must recognize combinations, if only for its economy—and then see that the benefits are passed around, that no gentleman sits in Wall Street and gathers up the proceeds.”

Edison, as he talked, had been gazing out over the whizzing Jersey landscape. He turned now, and his eyes changed from dreamy to shrewd.

“I had my experiences with Wall Street myself,” he said, “and I left some deposits not subject to check!

“Building a new world out of old material, that's what we're doing,” he continued; “that's what some of us have been doing

all our lives!" He sat dreaming for a few minutes after this, and we had to guess at his thought. But if you have tried to get the inner meaning of this man's career, you understand what it may have been. Every one of his ten thousand experiments has been a hammer stroke in this new world-building; everything which he has put forth an effort to make life more full and happy for the millions. Had he stopped on any one of his greater inventions, given his energy to turning it into money, he might have been a very rich man—and little more. But his profits have meant to him only the means of more experiment, further effort to make the unknown forces serve the welfare of mankind. A progressive always, even before the Progressive movement reached politics! Embodiment, as he is, of the American raised to the highest power by genius, he is expressing in his politics what he has expressed all his life in his work.

"There's the initiative and referendum and all that," he said, coming back to politics a few minutes later. "It's another line where I go the whole way. The Democrats are for it—yes. I don't object to the Democratic party when it agrees with me. Do you know about Herbert Spencer's experiments with statesmanship? He looked over the British Parliament and deduced the law that in any deliberative body the intelligent result of the deliberations is lower than the intelligence of the most stupid member. Something like that, anyhow. The British Parliament passed thirty-three laws to ameliorate the condition of the poor. Of these, thirty-two didn't work; and any member of Parliament sitting alone with his common sense should have been able to see that they wouldn't. I tell you, I'm inclined to believe that the average mechanic, put in front of an Australian ballot, will be more likely to get at the truth and common sense of things than a legislature, especially if he's properly given the facts—and that's mostly up to the press."

"The review of judicial decisions?"

"Oh, certainly, I'm for that! Do you know who governs us? The Supreme Courts of the United States and the various States. They're the power above the President and Congress. They've put the Constitution where it is. We've got to have the Constitution amendable—there's another good Progressive plank—but the trouble isn't so much the Constitution as what they've built up around it. Precedent, all precedent! The spirit of the law isn't anything. Common sense isn't anything. No, it's what some old judge thought before. Likely as not some judge away back in the eighteenth century who hanged men for stealing six shillings and

believed that live toads rained from the sky. Most of the big decisions are hair-line affairs, anyway. What turns the balance? The man himself—the way he feels about things in his bones. Your associations are part of your feelings, aren't they? And these fellows get to looking at things as their crowd looks, no matter how honest they are. So we get a hair-line decision here and another there, and finally we're all tied up.

"There's this matter of injured workingmen," continued Edison, quoting this old example with all the force of a new idea. "A laborer loses his right hand in an accident. It's his capital. It's as though my plant should burn down without insurance. In most States he must go to law. It's the only recourse he has. After he's lived, God knows how, for three or four years, a jury gives him \$5,000—perhaps. And he gets \$500 of it. The rest goes to the lawyers. But a decent workingmen's compensation act is unconstitutional. The Supreme Court says so, and the Supreme Court rules us. I never heard a squarer and truer thing from Roosevelt than when he said that the loss to workingmen by injury should be a tariff on the business, to be paid by the public in increased prices if necessary."

"And equal suffrage?"

Edison fixed his eyes, set that wide, practical mouth of his, and thought for a minute. "Well," he said, "women should certainly have the vote on all questions involving the education of their children and all moral questions. Yes, and questions concerning their work, too."

"Just where would you draw the line?" I asked.

Edison thought for a minute; it was plain that the dynamo was working within, turning out a thousand ideas a second.

"I guess we can't," he said finally, arguing aloud to himself. "I guess I can't stop there. No, I'm for it. It's only right, and it's expedient, too. Woman's the moral force of the world, and this movement's part reduction of waste and equalization of wealth, and part plain morals. You know, the average man's a pretty tough proposition when you strip off the husks. Just lately we've been stripping off a few husks in New York—the Rosenthal case. If I hesitated on that point it was because I was afraid of the trouble of doubling our vote in a time when we've got so much to do. But after all, that will take care of itself, I suppose."

We were inspecting the carshops now. In a few stabs of his eye and three pertinent questions Edison had learned all that he didn't already know about improved car bodies, and he returned to

politics again.

"I haven't talked much about one of my main reasons," he said. "That's Theodore himself. If we're putting a factory to rights, a factory that's gone wasteful and behind the times, we try to learn the up-to-date method of setting it right, and then we get the best manager we can find. And that's Roosevelt. We never needed a big leader more. He's all that. He's proved it. Most people don't consider, I guess, what a situation a President finds in the White House. All the crooks who've grown up in this curious period are after him to fool him one way or another. They fooled Taft badly. They even fooled Teddy now and then—but not a second time. Do you know one thing I like about Roosevelt personally? He doesn't—what do you call it?—preserve the amenities!"

I laughed at that, and broke in to repeat something which I had seen in the newspapers that morning. A respected and eminent gentleman of the old school, being interviewed on his ninetieth birthday, had declared for Wilson "because he is the most mannerly of the candidates."

"That's it!" chuckled Edison. "There you have the old stuff! Everything goes, so long as your deportment is good. Now, if a man's a liar and you know he's a liar, if he's a crook and you can prove he's a crook, why not use short words and say so? It's the way of a strong man. They're always criticizing him for that. It shows how shortsighted they are, for the people like it.

"Has it ever occurred to you how hard those other people have worked to get something on Roosevelt, and how he comes out right every time? Again and again they've laughed in their sleeves and said, 'We've caught him now'—and the next thing Roosevelt has beaten them to a pulp. They don't get anything because there's nothing to get. It's like a man on the witness stand. If he's telling the truth, the best lawyer in the world can't do anything with him. But let him tell one little lie, and they'll raise the dickens with him."

Edison's automobile tooted outside the factory, calling him back to punch his time-card like the rawest apprentice in his factory, and to settle down for another long night's work on his improved phonograph.

"I suppose I've rambled around a little," he said, "but I guess I've made you see why I'm a Progressive. First, it's the only square bid I've seen to begin at the foundation and rebuild, and last, and just as important, it's T. R."

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