

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

July 6, 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt discuss the tax burdens faced by those with a fixed income. In the following segment, ER interviews Major Burton Elgin, president of the Forty-Plus Club.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Major Burton Elgin

[Elliott Roosevelt:] The other day, Mother, I overheard a conversation that you were having uh with Annie Moore, Mrs. David Gray, uh when she was complaining bitterly to you uh about the tax situation in this country and the ever-mounting taxes that are being placed on people of uh wealth and uh moderate means, people who are retired and have a set income, and um the fact that there-there is less and less income for those people to live on.

[ER:] Of course, um it is quite true that the people who suffer the most uh are the people who are retired and are living on small set incomes, um but is on the larger question of complaint which you hear from people [Elliott Roosevelt: Of wealth.] who had to change their mold of living. Um I-I understand it very well, because I realize, for instance, my husband's mother had lived in a certain way all her life. I'm very glad that she didn't have to change greatly her mode of living because um she would have felt -- it would have been difficult for her to adjust. But for the rest of us, I've always felt that these changes -- the-the taxes for instance that are imposed on people who either earn a great deal of money or inherit uh a good substantial amount of money and add to it by earnings um are in a way part of the workings of democracy in this country. A--it doesn't- it doesn't in anyway take away from your opportunity to earn more and if you--the harder you work the more you still earn, though you keep less of what you earn.

And um that in a way doesn't irritate me very much for the reason that I think it is part of the effort we make in this country to see that through government action more and more people even of those who are unable to earn large incomes um at least have an adequate standard of living through social security systems and through new things which people might call a welfare state but which I would call the development of an adequate uh life for all people within a country. Now some kind -- I'm not speaking now about socialized medicine -- but some kind of adequate medical care. Some kind of um security for old age, some kind of care for those who are handicapped in some way, or who are made unable to earn at an earlier period of-of life. All of that I feel um in a well administered government, and I don't think-- I think this has to be watched all the time because when you do this sort of thing it is possible to build up such a bureaucracy that more goes into what--the way you administer than into actually the results which you are trying to get, so that you have to watch those things very carefully, but I still think the ideal for which we are striving for in this country is that nobody shall actually not have a decent standard of living. Uh now I'm perfectly willing that that should mean at the--in the upper levels a leveling off, and I don't think it should hurt the incentive to earn uh through more work or better work um because while you don't keep as much you keep something. and therefore I've heard people say, "Well, that isn't worth my working so hard because um I can't keep uh as much as I think I should." Well, I think you ought to get an enormous sense of satisfaction out of the fact that um you don't really keep as much but on the whole your country is a better place to live in, and it ought to give you a sense of pride. For instance I have far fewer servants than my mother-in-law had at my age. Um they do more than-her people used to do and they get far higher wages. They get perhaps double what she paid only ten or fifteen, twenty years ago, do you see? [Elliott Roosevelt: Yeah.] But nevertheless they have more of a life of their own. Um for instance, practically no one now, only one person lives in my house. They each have

their own little apartment or their own little house um, and I'm-I think that's right. I think that's the way life should develop in our democracy. A-and I don't believe -- this, of course, is what we really differed about, that is that I don't believe unless you are working, and producing you should feel uh that you have a right to much service. Um naturally people who are old and can't do things for themselves um have got to have service, but I-I think you should justify service by what you do. [Elliott Roosevelt: I see.] And uh therefore, I think that the way it's developing in this country and I think that's right. (6:36)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] What was Annie Moore's reaction after you got through with your argument?

[ER:] I think she-she didn't say anything, [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] and I'm not at all sure that she approved because she is not quite my mother-in-law's generation but she's in between, and I think she felt that I was perhaps, um well, a little radical.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, well there is uh a great deal of feeling um that there are certain people who are retired now, you didn't really adequately cover --

[ER:] Now that I think is really hard, now that I really do think is hard. That there are people who have fixed incomes, who are not in the wage earning class, and therefore they can't meet the higher cost of living, and it does pull down what ought to be a dignified old age, and in view of the work they have done in the past, many of them retired officers, retired service people, retired government people, retired uh [Elliott Roosevelt: Business people.] business people, [Elliott Roosevelt: Retired laborers.], put in really uh hard work, and that, of course, is the danger of inflation and is the trouble we are now going through um where money does not buy what it did buy, and therefore makes uh these incomes uh really lower in value by great deal. And that I think um is why we should be struggling very hard at the present time um to keep down inflation and prevent inflation, because on those people who have a right to dignity um their -their life is terribly hard. (8:18)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, uh then that is one of the primary and most important reasons why uh inflation must not go on in this country.

[ER:] That's exactly it. Inflation must be stopped for that reason, and I don't think it can be stopped by any one or two things, I don't think just control of prices and wages will do it. I think it has to take um credits and taxes and all the things right over the board just as Mr. [Bernard] Baruch said in the beginning. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] It has to be done in all the ways because no-no one or two of them will do the trick.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I see. Well, do you feel that the-the present -- uh as an offshoot of this discussion, do you feel that the present retirement system uh that we have with our social security, do you think uh that its adequate in any of its phases?

[ER:] No, I think it should go up as quickly as we can make it go up on a sound basis. And I think that's one reason that justifies some of the unions who are attempting to have both the business uh retirement continue and the government because only -- even with the two it's only [Elliott Roosevelt: Yeah] barely adequate; not really completely so at any time.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I know that there are so many people um who draw the full maximum amount of social security and uh also have uh pensions from the concerns in which they work, and those pension systems were set up in another day and another era. And uh we don't--we adjust all the working conditions to meet rising costs. I don't see why we can't adjust pensions fund in the same way

[ER:] Well, unfortunately we uh pension funds are based on money paid in and it's uh it would require probably a-a gift from somewhere to adjust them-- now you might-- the government might adjust because they can appropriate money from some other source towards increasing their-their retirement fund, or their pension fund, whatever it may be. But for a business that's more difficult because they've got to get consent of the stockholder's and so forth and uh to increase the fund, because all these funds are based on payments that are made over periods of years by the worker and the employer, do you see? [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] As a rule and the government where it's a government thing added in. So that you can't just say blindly: we will increase these, because if the money isn't there um-um, hasn't been paid in, then it has to be done where it's a government thing by a government grant which takes it away from all people somewhere else, do you see? A-- or in a business it has to get the consent of all the stockholders to putting money into that which isn't always possible to do. (11:29)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, well I think that that covers uh our subject uh right at the moment and I see that our announcer has some very important messages to give us and then we will go on with our interview of today.

[Break 11:43 -11:53]

[ER:] Gladly, Elliott. He's Major Burton W. Elgin, who will tell us about the unique organization called the Forty Plus Club of which he is president. Mr.-- Major Elgin.

[Burton Elgin:] Mrs. Roosevelt, I'm very delighted to be here this afternoon and answer the questions about the Forty Plus Club to the best of my ability.

[ER:] I'm so glad to have you, Major Elgin. Would you tell us exactly what the Forty Plus Club is and its purposes?

[Burton Elgin:] To begin with, Mrs. Roosevelt, the Forty Plus Club is a nonprofit cooperative organization incorporated under the state--under the laws of the state of New York, and of course its purpose is to place men over forty years of age in responsible administrative, sales, and executive positions.

[ER:] Well, that's a great thing really because people now uh as young as forty often find it difficult to get into a-a job when for any reason they happen to have been out of one for a little while, how long has this club been in existence?

[Burton Elgin:] It was started in nineteen hundred and thirty-eight by the president of a very large uh business organization. And in consolidating with another organization he found that he had uh a great many of his uh top executives that were not wanted by the new uh consolidated company, and they were, therefore, on the market, so to speak, for positions and he established the Forty Plus Club at that time.

[ER:] Well, that-that gives a good reason and-and background for it. But really it seems to be uh a-a very high class employment agency, it-it looks for jobs of a very high variety, is that right?

[Burton Elgin:] Yes, indeed it does, and to uh become a member of this club you must be an American citizen, and you must be in sound mental and physical health and have occupied a position of responsibility and who has--you must have a clear record of accomplishment uh before you became unemployed. (14:12)

[ER:] Well, but you don't have to -- of necessity, you don't limit your members to unemployed, you have employed too don't you?

[Burton Elgin:] No, Mrs. Roosevelt. [ER: No?] One of the requirements is that he must be unemployed at the time of becoming a member.

[ER:] Oh really, and--but um how do you um, for instance, um once-once you have found a job do you automatically get dropped from the membership?

[Burton Elgin:] Yes, indeed. It's the only club that I've ever belonged to and I happen to be a member of a good many of clubs, and I repeat it's the only club that I've ever been a member of that has only one purpose in mind and that is to get rid of its members as rapidly as possible by placing them on the payroll of large industrial organizations.

[ER:] Well, but that must be done by people who are--who are employed. Now do you have a board of directors or a group--what kind of a group?

[Burton Elgin:] Yes, indeed we do. We have a board of directors that are composed of some of the largest industrial corporations, that is executives of the large industrial corporations of this country.

[ER:] Ah yes, well that--that's of course is how the job is done. Now can anybody over forty belong?

[Burton Elgin:] Oh no, no they cannot. [ER: No?] As I--as I said before to get into this club he must be uh a man who has earned not less than five thousand dollars a year in--uh in his former position. And we have established that uh five thousand dollar a year basis because that is the amount of money which uh generally speaking establishes the stature of an executive in an industrial organization. Now I grant that five thousand a year today seems very small, but back in nineteen hundred and thirty-eight when this club was organized, five thousand dollars a year really established a man as a leader in industrial organizations.

[ER:] Well, now you've already told us that to become a member you must be an American citizen, you must of held a position of responsibility in which you earned five thousand dollars a year. And you must be unemployed. Are there any other requirements for becoming a member, Major Elgin? [ER laughs]

[Burton Elgin:] Why yes there is uh and that is he must have had some very, very good moral references. Now you, I think, will agree with me, Mrs. Roosevelt, that uh men who are qualified to become members of our club must have a very fine moral and uh technical background. Our members are professional men uh of considerable experience and in order to uh protect the uh industrial organization from whom--for whom we serve these men must have a careful screening as to their moral and technical background, their professional background. (17:17)

[ER:] Technical I understand entirely. The moral I understand from the point of view of how it affects their work. I mean I understand that you would want to know whether a man drank or took dope or had loose uh morals of any kind which would affect his ability to work, but there are--and of course his honesty. Um, I-I shouldn't think beyond that that the judgement of um how it would affect his work that you would um have to screen, I mean I shouldn't think you could go in very much to his private and personal life.

[Burton Elgin:] No uh, other than uh to check very, very carefully with his references, his personal references--

[ER:] Because this is a pretty strict um list of conditions that you're going into, you're making it um quite tough for the man [ER clears throat] who is out of a job [Burton Elgin laughs] aren't you? Um how-how do you accomplish the screening?

[Burton Elgin:] We have uh this method, Mrs. Roosevelt. Uh we have an admissions committee, and they interview every day from Tuesday until Friday evening hundreds of applicants. And their interview consists of direct questions as to their background of experience and their uh personal references and also uh what their uh point in life is, that is, if they have definite ideas of the uh particular work they can do. And also uh what their motives are and what their future uh expectation for employment is. Now you have really uh touched upon the most important thing that's in connection with this club, Mrs. Roosevelt, and that is the difficulty with which we, uh not the difficulty exactly, I wish to change that, the uh the-the requirements that we have of admission to membership. Over last year it worked out that only eight out of every hundred applicants were admitted to membership. Now that may seem a little um a little strict to you, but in order to protect the uh the club and the quality of members that we have, we find there are a great many people that like to get something for nothing and our club, of course, being a non-profit um cooperative association of men working for each other have found that it's to the advantage and to the protection of our club to adopt that system

[ER:] Well, I should think it was very much to the advantage because when you do get a man a job, the man who gets him is pretty sure of the type of man that he is-is employing. Um I-I wonder though, I mean there have been cases when men, for instance, suppose a man had a record of having lost his last job because he drank, we'll take that. Um suppose he had really um made a uh great effort and-and most of the people who knew him felt that he was now um a reliable person, would you still bar him completely?

[Burton Elgin:] No indeed, no indeed. I repeat that we uh are as a unit firmly believe that uh a man doesn't have a past nor does he have a future, it's what he is doing today, Mrs. Roosevelt, that really counts, and if the man is sincere and he has uh all the indications of having-having uh tried to overcome his shortcomings, we will accept him in membership.

[ER:] Oh and that's a very um that's very helpful, I think. That's extremely helpful. When a man is accepted what duties does he have to perform?

[Burton Elgin:] He discovers--um when he's accepted by the club, Mrs. Roosevelt, we put him in a committee for which he is best suited. The club is composed of several committees just exactly as an industrial organization is formed, such as the admissions committee, the placement committee, the marketing committee, the special services committee and we place that man in the committee for which he is best suited to do the work and he finds that when he takes an active part in this club he has become a unit in a large organization of unselfed workers working for each other, and he is inspired, he is uh encouraged to uh-to go out and to secure positions for other people so that he loses his heart breaking attitude of not being wanted and in helping to do something for others. (22:17)

[ER:] Well, I think that's a grand plan. Well, now I'm sorry but we have to break off this interview for just a minute and give our announcer an opportunity to say a word but we'll come right back.

[Break 22:29-22:44]

[ER:] And now we come back to the interview with Major Elgin, who is president of the Forty Plus Club, and I'm very glad to go on asking him questions because I think this this is a most unique and interesting organization, the first question I'm going to ask is, do you ever accept women executives?

[Burton Elgin:] [Laughs] You are certainly are asking very leading questions, Mrs. Roosevelt, because only today and, in fact, for the past two or three weeks we have had considerable number of inquiries from ladies and women in New York City and, in fact, as far away as Boston and Philadelphia asking what uh bylaws that we have available and what incorporation uh procedures they must follow to establish Forty Plus Clubs for women.

[ER:] For women? I see, well you're not going to mix men and women together [ER laughs] [Burton Elgin: Oh no, no, no.] they've got have them separately.

[Burton Elgin:] They're going to be separate.

[ER:] I think it'd be a good thing to mix them; they'd have a much better time [ER Laughs].

[Burton Elgin:] Well, that's a good idea, that's a good idea.

[ER:] Well, now I want to ask you something because you mentioned that um when you accepted a man into membership, um he was immediately put to work on a committee and he worked unselfishly to get jobs for other people. It's like a big business organization trying to help each other. Do you ever have any kind of menial duties to perform for your members and do they resent that or do they do that as part of the uh training?

[Burton Elgin:] Quite the opposite, uh they do not object to menial duties and when you use that word, I-I know exactly what you're using because we have men of executive uh caliber who have learned how to use the typewriter, we have one man who can uh really write on a typewriter faster than any secretary that I have seen, any lady secretary. We have--

[ER:] A lot of people, though, who are executives, think that to be able to take short hand or type is beneath their dignity. (24:56)

[Burton Elgin:] I think, Mrs. Roosevelt, it's quite the opposite. Any one executive--

[ER:] I do too, but I'm just saying [ER and Burton Elgin laugh] what I sometimes find.

[Burton Elgin:] We have one man uh you'd be interested to know who has spent years and years in fact some uh fifty years uh with a large industrial concern, and he's one of our most able typists and shorthand operators.

[ER:] Well, that's- that's really very grand. I uh struggle to get enough time to practice type-typing because I'm so slow at it, but I would give anything if when I was young I'd been taught how to do shorthand and typing. [ER laughs] Now I struggle along, oh I do it beautifully but so slowly that I nearly die! [Burton Elgin laughs] Well now, what you've said about the screening and the uh qualities that you develop really as uh-as you become a member of the Forty Plus Club um ought to make employers seems to me very anxious to know about the Forty Plus Club and who you have available. Major Elgin, do you find that they are anxious to get in touch with you?

[Burton Elgin:] Yes, they are, and uh hardly a day goes day that we don't receive anywhere from five to ten, twelve, fifteen calls from large industrial organizations, and we've had an unusual record of uh placing executives uh just in the past month in fact in the month of April we've placed twenty-seven executives in twenty-seven very fine paying positions, and we've had a record recently of placing two executives a day in industrial positions.

[ER:] That is remarkable, [ER coughs] um did you have that record right from the beginning or has it been improving as you go along?

[Burton Elgin:] No, it has been--yes, it has been improving from its very start in the beginning uh as all organizations we had to feel our way along very carefully, and uh it's been growing and growing, and you might say well uh does it--uh is it a result of the current demand for uh employees? Well, I don't believe it is, I think it's developed entirely through the services of this Forty Plus Club in really giving to the employers the right man for the right job.

[ER:] Well, that's a great achievement. Now I understand, Maj-Major Elgin that um you were chairmen of the Special Services Committee, and I wonder if you would tell our listeners about this committee.

[Burton Elgin:] Yes, uh gladly. The Special Services Committee is really a government contact committee, and its uh purpose is to uh form close personal contacts with the various government agencies, such as the ECA [Economic Cooperation Administration] and TCA [Technical Cooperation Administration], the OIT [Office of International Trade] and the NPA [National Production Authority] and the OPS [Office of Price Administration], and so forth. And in addition to that we have a personal and a very close contact with the armed forces, armed forces, such as the air force, the army ground forces, the navy, the marine corps and all other camps, posts, and stations of the armed forces. And the men in charge of the personnel sections of these various installations find the services of the Forty Plus Club uh very useful because we screen every one of the applicants we send to them with their form fifty-seven, and I don't know whether you know what a form fifty-seven is or not, Mrs. Roosevelt, [ER: I do, but perhaps somebody on air does not.]. Well, for those uh those of our friends listening it is really the pet name for an application form for a-service in the government agencies. And we uh direct those individuals to the personal section with their fifty-sevens and they report to them and it saves these individuals who are faced with a superhuman task of literally uh screening out thousands of applications from all over the world, these form fifty-sevens, and they have been very grateful and very cooperative to us, and we think we've been able to save them considerable time in processing-- (29:31)

[ER:] Well, now in this-this area um you have of course a good many emergency demands, now what about those? [Burton Elgin: Now--] And what are they?

[Burton Elgin:] Those emergency depends, of course, are uh filled by personal calls from the various camps, posts, and stations that I indicated before, and we uh -- in all cases where there is a particular job specification, where there's an emergency specification, we send the individual who is best suited for that particular demand.

[ER:] I see, well now, what--along what lines do most of these requests run for emergency demands?

[Burton Elgin:] They're running along the line of industrial specialists, uh certified public accountants for the army audit sections uh, industrial uh designers, and in a great many cases uh men with degrees--with a CE degree, civil engineer, mechanical engineer, or an industrial engineer, and in some cases men who are uh not qualified with such a technical background, men who can expedite and secure uh cooperation between small business concerns and prime contractors, and other things in connection with the immediate procurement of emergency supplies to the armed forces.

[ER:] Yes, I can see where that would be extremely um valuable in the present time. Well now, Major Elgin, I wonder uh whether you have any trouble um in political interference. Do you find that since you've become established and you get political pressure or they try to use political influence with your organization?

[Burton Elgin:] You know, Mrs. Roosevelt, I was uh just hoping you would ask that question, because only recently I was um impressed with the fact by one of the largest installations, the government installations in the city of New York in uh discussing this very situation uh with the top management. They asked me to stress to our members and to anyone who migh-may come into contact with that there is no political pressure of any kind. The job they have to do in securing the right man for the right job is so serious that politics does not play a part in their selection, that I can say to you unequivocally and sincerely. There is no such pressure, none that I have found and none that our other members have found in our marketing committee.

[ER:] Well, that I think is really a very encouraging sign because that shows that um in the agencies of the services and also in the agencies of the government uh they are really trying to get well qualified people and are not trying to do it on a political basis. [Burton Elgin: That's exactly right.] Well now, is there any other thing that you have developed um in your work that you think um is a reason why um people around forty lose their jobs. Now I know that there are many times where there is no--um just in the case you cited whether it was an amalgamation, and whether is. But is there anything that you think is tending towards bringing jobs for people of forty and thereabouts to an end that could and should be eliminated?

[Burton Elgin:] Yes, there is. We have found in our uh work with this Forty Plus Club that there are actually two outstanding reasons why men become employed--unemployed. First, I would say uh -- and not truly, Mrs. Roosevelt, the main reason, but first I would say inefficiency. Now inefficiency is usually based upon two fundamental reasons, first is the inability to get along with your coworker. Secondly, is the fact that people become so selfish that they forget that the main issue in life is to do something for somebody else. And when a member becomes active in the Forty Plus Club, our um regime, our officers and our routine of indoctrination takes up the first point, namely to improve a man's ability to get him to direct his efforts toward securing the position in which he could be happiest in and the best and most constructive work. Secondly, we teach him to get out of himself and do something for somebody else which is after all following one of the great commandments, and that is to do something for somebody else and when you do usually forget your own troubles.

[ER:] That's very interesting and I think an awfully good note to end on, and I'm sorry our time is at an end, so I want to thank you, Major Elgin, for being with me today and telling us about this worthwhile organization.

[Burton Elgin:] Thank you very much, Mrs. Roosevelt, I was delighted to be here.

(35:30)

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