

The Struggle Over Educational "Economy" in England

ONE of the revelations of the recent campaign for a reduction in public expenditure has come as a surprise to most politicians and to the greater part of the press. It is the existence among considerable sections of the English population of a quite new attitude towards questions of public education. During the war and for twelve months after the armistice educational reform formed part of the government's much advertised program—blessed phrase, what a remote past it evokes!—of social reconstruction. The last first class educational measure had been passed in 1902. In 1917 Mr. Fisher was summoned, with general applause, from Oxford to the Board of Education. And in the following year legislation was passed which considerably enlarged the power of Local Education Authorities (the county and borough councils responsible for education and other parts of local government), imposed on them the duty of submitting to the Board of Education schemes of development covering the whole range of education from nursery schools to universities, declared that no child was to be debarred from receiving higher education through inability to pay fees and foreshadowed an enlarged system of maintenance allowances, and, in particular, aimed at strengthening the weakest part of the English educational system—the lamentable neglect of the adolescent, by many part time attendance and continuation schools obligatory on all boys and girls between fourteen and sixteen not otherwise being educated. A public pension system was established for teachers, and machinery was subsequently set up for revising and systematizing scales of salaries, which, after somewhat protracted negotiations, secured them a substantial advance.

To pass an Education act is one thing; to get the administrative wheels all revolving smoothly is another. Some time necessarily elapsed before Local Education Authorities were in a position to submit to the Board their schemes of development. In the interval the optimism of 1918 and 1919 was succeeded by pessimism. As the financial situation grew darker, the interests, mostly connected with "Big Business," which had been opposed to the Act of 1918 as likely to diminish the supply of juvenile labor, renewed their protests with an appeal to the urgent need of public economy. At a conference of the Federation of British Industries,—the most representative organization of British employers—at the end of 1920, strong words were said as to the necessity of postponing new educational developments. In the same month the Select Committee of the House of Commons on National Expenditure issued an extremely adverse—and incidentally somewhat inaccurate—report on the subject. The Board of Education took alarm and began to press Local Authorities to economize on education. In the summer of 1921 the government, by way of appeasing criticism and at the same time escaping the invidious responsibility of itself proposing drastic reductions in expenditure, took the unusual step of referring the subject to a committee composed of five well-known business men, chiefly concerned in the railway and shipping industries—with instructions to make recommendations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer "for effecting all possible reduction in the national expenditure, having regard especially to the present and prospective position of the revenue." Education was one of the first public services to come under the Committee's review.

Briefly, it proposed a reduction of approximately twenty percent in educational expenditure to be achieved by a series of changes which would not only have postponed indefinitely the bringing into full operation of the Act of 1918 but have made deep inroads even upon the pre-war system. The cost of primary education was to be reduced by excluding from school children under the age of six (in England attendance is compulsory from five onwards), by increasing the size of classes from an average of thirty-two children per teacher to an average of fifty, and by cutting down certain special services, such as medical inspection and treatment. To save money on secondary education, fees—in England nearly all public secondary schools charge fees—were to be increased, and the "free places," which they are required to provide for a proportion of children passing from the primary schools, were to be eliminated. The system of state scholarships to the universities recently established was to be abolished, and the grants made by the Treasury to the universities were to be reduced. The proposals (of which these are only specimens) were pointed with phrases such as the remark that "children whose mental capabilities do not justify higher education are receiving it" and the complaint that higher education is provided "below actual cost," which seemed to imply an objection not only to the present scale of educational expenditure, but to any policy which had as its object the diminution of educational inequalities.

If the impressions of a visitor to America may be trusted, England is still a considerable way behind many parts of the United States in the public esteem with which education is regarded, and all this may well seem to a foreign observer a rather distressing piece of barbarism on the part of a nation, which, though faced with grave financial difficulties, has not yet reached the point at which the only economy left to it is to cut down the physique and vitality and intellectual development of its children. The significant thing to an Englishman is the reception which the proposals met at the hands of the public. Ten years ago they would probably have been accepted without a murmur except on the part of the teacher and of a handful of educationalists. Both for historical and for practical reasons—the fact that public education in England originated, not in a popular movement, but as a system, largely philanthropic, partly disciplinary, designed by the governing classes for the mass of the people, and that until comparatively recently its quality was often poor—education till recently had not struck the public imagination. It was tolerated, but it was not regarded with any enthusiasm; labor organizations, though applauding it in general terms, were inclined to scrutinize with some suspicion proposals which involved lengthening the school life, and it would have been quite impossible to mobilize working class opinion for any effective resistance to attacks upon it.

The government, considering, like most governments, what form of economy would be least unpopular, evidently held that the attitude to which the members had been accustomed in their youth, was still general. The press, with a few exceptions, did the same, and for several weeks before the Geddes report appeared, poured forth articles ridiculing educational faddists and urging sweeping reductions in educational expenditure. The proposals of the economy committee were published, and lo! the experts in public opinion appeared to be a decade behind the times. There were protests from every quarter of the country, in which teachers naturally played a conspicuous part, but which were chiefly remarkable for the indignation which the policy

of educational economy appeared to have aroused among working people. When the Workers Educational Association—a federation of trades unions, cooperative societies, and educational bodies—organized meetings to oppose it, it met everywhere with instant and enthusiastic support. Two bye-elections, one in Manchester and one in London, took place immediately after the proposals had been made public. In both the Labor candidate put opposition to the educational “cuts” in the forefront of his program. In both he was returned, largely, in the opinion of good observers, on that ground. To the astonishment of politicians, the gratified surprise of many educationalists—an attack on education turned out to be bad politics. When the question was discussed in the House of Commons recently, members dealt with it in an unusually chastened mood.

Some reductions in educational expenditure will be made, largely by the silent pressure of administrative action, which cannot be resisted so easily as open reversals of policy. But it may be prophesied with some confidence that no government will in the near future appeal to the country with the frank declaration that it intends to make large savings at the cost of education. For over two years progressive movements have been beaten from point to point. If one ground seemed more hopeless than another for making a stand, it was that of education. And it is precisely in education that the stand has been made.

The person who is happy enough to belong to a nation which takes education seriously, will see nothing surprising in such a result. To an Englishman, who is accustomed to see education treated as the Cinderella of the public service, it is very remarkable. To what is it due? Probably no doubt to the practical fact that the proposals for educational economy threatened to disturb the arrangement as to salaries recently made with the teachers, and that the National Union of Teachers, not to mention the smaller societies, is a powerful and well organized body. But mainly, it would appear, for deeper and more significant reasons. For one thing, there is the immense improvement which has recently been taking place in the schools themselves. Twenty years ago, under the old régime of formal discipline, the majority of children were undeniably glad when their schooldays were over. Today, thanks to the new freedom which is generally being won for them, to the intellectual concern which has as its aim to adapt the school to the child not the child to the school, to the conceptions of the purpose and method of education for which England owes much to (among others) distinguished American writers on education—one need mention only Professor Dewey—the schools are becoming places of activity, life, a vigorous and many-sided growth. Naturally they have won the affection of the children, the true propagandists of education, to a degree which was rare in the past. Naturally the change of attitude on the part of the children has produced a corresponding change among the parents with the result that the primary school has in many places become a popular institution, and that parents are quick to resent proposals which threaten it.

In the second place the last ten years have seen a silent revolution in the sphere of higher education. Historically primary and secondary education have been until recent times in England social rather than educational categories, not stages of education, but systems of education between which somewhat slender bridges have been thrown by means of scholarships. There is a long way still to travel until that doctrine and the organization based upon it are entirely discarded. But the most impressive feature in

the educational history of our generation has been an expansion of secondary education which twenty years ago would have seemed beyond the bounds of possibility, and a growth in the desire for it on the part of the mass of the people which has doubled the secondary school population since 1910. Consequently the supply, greatly as it has increased, has been so far short of the demand that some 10,000 children are refused admission to secondary schools every year because the schools cannot accommodate them. Hardly less important, the spread of adult education represented by the growth of the Workers Education Association and kindred movements has given organized labor a new conception of the possibilities of higher education of a liberal and humane kind as a vital element in the life of a democracy, and has produced a growing body of students who can speak from practical experience of the value which such education has had for them.

The result is that the development of education has become one of the ideas which appeal to the popular imagination. The consequences of that change of outlook in the ranks of labor may be far-reaching. It will awaken a powerful response among sections of the community, for example the teachers, who are little stirred by conventional programs of social reconstruction. Amid the general disillusionment of the moment it offers evidence that a population with new ideals is growing to maturity.

R. H. TAWNEY.

Memory

Do not guard this as rich stuff without mark
Closed in a cedarn dark,
Nor lay it down with tragic masks and greaves
Licked by the tongues of leaves.

Nor let it be as eggs under the wings
Of helpless startled things,
Nor encompassed by song, nor any glory
Perverse and transitory.

Rather, like shards and straw upon coarse ground,
Of little worth when found:
Rubble in gardens, it and stones alike,
That any spade may strike.

LOUISE BOGAN.

Little Sonnet

Let your loving bondswoman
Salute your lips if you prefer;
This is your courtesy to her.
Yet still remember how she ran
From her grave, and running, leapt
To catch the arrows of your hurt,
To stretch her body in dust and dirt,
Flinging a causey where you stepped.

Remember how, asleep or waking,
The shallow pillow of her breast
Shook and shook to your heart's shaking,
In pity whereof her heart was split;
Love her now; forget the rest;
She has herself forgotten it.

ELIN