

## AUTUMN THOUGHTS ON THE WHITE PAPER

SOME unlucky star must have presided over the birth of State compulsory schooling in England; or perhaps we English secretly disbelieve in formal education altogether. It is over seventy years now since the beginning was made, with a special brand of education for the lower orders called 'elementary,' having as little vital connection as possible with religion, and staffed by teachers similarly segregated from any of the true educational influences of the country.

The results have been better in some respects than the nation deserved; the shortcomings have been still more evident, but from 1870 onwards it seems that nothing less than a war will induce England to take a passing interest in educational reform. The Boer War coincided with the 1902 Act which initiated free secondary schools for some at least of the 'elementary' children, and made it possible for voluntary schools to survive and teach religion, at the same time handing over educational responsibility to the elected councils of town and county which dealt with the usual local affairs. The First Great War was another time of heart-searching, and resulted in the Fisher Act of 1918, an attempt to widen the narrow 'ladder' which was the only way out of the 'elementary' system, and to do a little more for the vast majority of boys and girls who would still be thrown into the industrial system at fourteen. It was a very modest bit of planning, but it proved too ambitious for the post-war mood of England; not much of it ever came into action, though the patient administrators managed in time to set going the process called 'reorganisation,' designed to produce, within the elementary system, a substitute for secondary schooling. 'Reorganisation' can show some partial successes, but too often it means a cheap second-best, nor has the fire of the educational spirit descended upon the teachers and children thus reorganised. The Act of 1921 was merely to consolidate previous laws, and that of 1936 was a cocktail intended to stimulate the system to greater efforts at reorganisation. That brings us to the Second World War, which has occasioned a renewal of interest about the ordinary Englishman, and the magnificent material which he evidently still is, and has made people ask why he, and his sister, should not have a better educational opportunity.

The idea of the White Paper, therefore (and surely an excellent one!) is to make sure of full discussion before the legislative stage

is reached; and the White Paper itself has grown out of a mysterious Green document which was circulated privately and was the subject of interminable negotiations behind the scenes amongst those supposed to be most closely concerned. If what you admire is the English genius for compromise, this is it all right. Everything has been said that could possibly be said, and there is little use in trying to alter the intentions expressed in the White Paper, since they embody the ascertained result not so much of reasoned argument as of the balance of numerical forces and human wills. One or two of the crucial points—such as the precise character of the proposed ‘modern’ schools, or what exactly is meant by the local Authority ‘consulting’ Managers before appointing a head-teacher—are purposely left vague in the White Paper and will probably be still vague in the Bill and the Act, not so much to create business for lawyers, but because it will leave a larger scope to give-and-take and personal touch and tact and all the rest of the things that we English revel in. Everybody in England is scared to death of a principle, remembering how, for three centuries, we hanged and burned each other and cut each other’s throats, all for principle, and without really settling anything in the end. One may say that the English have gone pacifist, as far as civil war is concerned: other nations please copy.

The good intentions announced in the White Paper—the differentiated ‘secondary’ schools up to sixteen, the Young People’s Colleges (one-day-a-week continuation schools under a more attractive name) up to eighteen, the boarding-school opportunities, the lifting of the examination tyranny, the strengthening of religion in school and even (what is more important) of its church connection to some extent—all these are good things to aim at, and the only point which might be argued is the degree of compulsion advisable. It is proposed to compel parents (for the first time in our rough island story) not merely to have their children taught the three R’s or what not, but to cause them to receive ‘full-time education’ suitable to age and aptitude: if this means going to school, surely it makes a very great act of faith in schools and school-teachers. Somehow one hopes that this hardly-noticed little sentence in the White Paper will after all not find its way on to the Statute Book. Would not its purpose be just as well served by an enactment preventing parents from exploiting their children for money too soon in life?

Not that I am one of those who suspect the Government and the Board of aiming at a totalitarianised education. It is true they often seem to encourage things—nursery schools and 100% school meals are cases in point—which do little to foster home life. But those

who complain about this do not realise how far a decent home life has disappeared in certain patches of the population. The uprootings and migrations caused by the industrial system have produced numbers of people who are culturally lower than savages, because they have by now lost hold of all traditions of family living. Of this fact all educational authorities, and the ruling classes in general are now fully aware, because of the Evacuation episode early in the war. It must have been the last letter that Fr. Vincent McNabb wrote to the press, in which he quoted a School-inspector's appalled comment on the state of affairs revealed by Evacuation: 'We find we have been living in a fool's paradise,' he said in effect. Another point we have to remember is that the organising of the material side of education—such things as school-canteens and handicraft-centres and moving children about here and there in buses—comes much easier to the committees and officials than do those educational intangibles which are so much more important.

Writing in BLACKFRIARS, one naturally thinks again of Father Vincent. A quarter of a century ago, when I was starting a little periodical called *The Sower* (and it still exists, though I fear its name will be unknown to most readers), I made a trip to Hawkesyard, wearing the uniform of an Army Chaplain, and no doubt looking too youthful for anything journalistically responsible, and asked Father McNabb to help by writing an article in the first number. He was kindness itself, of course, and his way of helping was a long-range one. I suppose I must have mentioned that the idea was to bring modern educational methods to the teaching of religion, and perhaps that gave him his cue. For a couple of hours or so in his bare little room he talked, trying to persuade me (at least that was the general impression I gathered—making no allowance maybe for that North-of-Ireland instinct for dramatising everything) that Catholic education had nothing to gain and everything to lose—especially its soul—by co-operating in the State system. He had served on an Education Committee (at Leicester), which was more experience than I could claim; but his point of view was so different from that of any other Catholic I knew that I could not help regarding it as somehow unpractical. Later when the first issue of *The Sower* duly appeared, Father Vincent wrote about it to similar effect in the *Catholic Times*, and we enjoyed in its columns a short and amicable controversy of which I can remember nothing but one of his headlines—'What Will It Sow?'—and a question of mine which I thought should be disconcerting: 'Would Father McNabb abolish compulsory schooling, if he had the power to do so?' To this Father McNabb answered, with something like holy

indignation, that he did not want to have power, indeed hated the very idea of having power, to compel anybody to do anything. My own sentiments were and are much the same, but I suppose there has to be some civil power somewhere and the upbringing of children in our industrialised age does present it with a problem.

I cannot remember who had the last word, but I hope it was Father Vincent, and twenty-five years afterwards I should like to record a growing conviction that he was right on what may well have been the really urgent point in his mind—namely, that if education is to have a soul, it should not properly be the business of the civil government, either national or local. Few of us feel the old simple faith in ‘elected persons’ for every function and in all circumstances, and some people are beginning to ask whether, after all, the Local Education Authorities, even with the help of an almost non-existent Board, are the best possible authorities for education. Many headmasters of Council Secondary Schools, for instance, are asking this question just now very audibly. The organised teachers of Scotland, for another instance, have just demanded that Local Education Authorities should be abolished, though I am sorry to say they want to transfer their function, not to some genuine local cultural authorities such as might be formed from Universities, Schools, Churches, and Parents’ Unions, but merely to a central Education Department like our Board. The White Paper itself proposes to abolish the smaller English L.E.A.’s, but wants to substitute only bigger and remoter L.E.A.’s of essentially the same character, and even this will be strongly opposed in Parliament.

Well, let us move on to another question. Supposing that the good intentions expressed in the White Paper are all embodied in an Act, how much of them is likely to come true, and how soon? Even when they become law they will still only be good intentions, awaiting their various ‘Days’ later to be ‘Appointed,’ before they can become reality. First of all the War has to end. German war, or Japanese war? Who knows? Then the re-organising of L.E.A.’s, which will take at best many months. Then a lot of planning and building—again, many months, or more truly years. Will the nation have the energy to keep its good resolutions? Will people really *want* so much ‘further education’ when it comes to the point? Will the necessary money be ‘found’? Above all, will there be the teachers—the thousands of new teachers—to carry it all to reality?

After all, education means teachers, and you can’t go on forgetting that for long. In teachers, as St. Thomas might say, one may consider their quality and their quantity. As regards quality, the recruiting of entrants has been in the bands of the L.E.A.’s; this

is just the sort of function that an Education Office is almost sure to do badly, and the teaching profession is plentifully sprinkled with mis-fits. Even so, there are not enough of them to go round. The shortage of teachers was acute before the war and is now desperate. The McNair Committee, appointed to consider the whole question of recruitment and training of teachers, has not yet reported by the end of August, which makes the White Paper seem rather like a performance of *Hamlet* in modern dress, but without the Prince. The White Paper expresses a hope that large numbers of men and women will be forthcoming from the demobilised Forces, suitable to be trained in a few months as teachers, but from the Army at any rate reports indicate that such volunteers are likely to be very few indeed. The attractions of teaching are conspicuously not felt. Unless the McNair Committee produces some really revolutionary suggestions, and unless they are acted on at once, most of the White Paper will for this cause alone remain, alas ! just paper for many years to come.

One part of the document which could fortunately be carried into effect without too much difficulty is that which concerns religious instruction and worship in Council schools. The changes proposed, both as regards teachers-in-training and school-practice, are considerable and entirely to the good. The Agreed Syllabuses, though not acceptable for Catholic children, at any rate when expounded by non-Catholic teachers, are usually good as far as they go, and when fully reinforced with training-college preparation, text-books, etc., should certainly recover a good deal of lost ground as regards religious knowledge. If we are concerned to score controversial points we may sneer at the Agreed Syllabuses; if we are glad that God should be more known and loved we shall be grateful to Mr. Butler for encouraging them.

It is evident also that Mr. Butler has the best will towards denominational teaching, and even denominational schools, but in this respect he is limited by the national mind and mood, which again is limited by its historical experiences from Henry VIII onwards. A reasonable society would favour schools connected with religious groups, but in the matter of religion England is not a reasonable society, but a society which, amongst so many sects, has despaired of truth, and fallen back on tolerance as the only wisdom. The Church of England schools in the villages will survive in proportion as there exists a real desire to keep them as they are and as they always have been, Church schools. I venture the prophecy that they will substantially survive. As for the Catholic school-system, plainly it cannot ask for more help and on easier conditions than the Church of England schools are to be offered. Logic and justice

would no doubt give denominational schools one hundred per cent. grant, and perhaps some day will, but the opposition is too deep and strong, especially in the case of Catholic schools, and it is no use blaming Mr. Butler. Blame Mary Tudor, blame Bonny Prince Charlie, blame the propagandists of the Spanish Civil War period (for in such matters the psychological bill inevitably comes in and has to be paid in the end), but face the existing situation and get ready to raise a steady stream of Catholic money for school-building.

Since 100 per cent. State assistance is not a possibility, Catholics will do well to console or fortify themselves by considering the disadvantages that would have accompanied the 100 per cent. if we got it. First, the school buildings would not belong to us, and we should not be able to use them in the evenings or holidays, unless by asking permission and paying rent. Secondly, if Catholics could get schools just for the asking, every other denomination that could get enough parents to sign a requisition would be able to do the same. Methodist or Baptist schools would soon be multiplying, Spiritualist or Christadelphian in some places perhaps, no doubt Communist schools too under some religion-of-humanity camouflage; indeed, if the necessary number of parents demanded an Atheist school, how could it be refused? Is this what we really want, what anybody really wants, this new lease of life for sects as such? Would it perhaps be better to pay a modest price ourselves for the privilege of teaching the true Faith, doing our best of course to bring down the price to as modest a figure as possible?

The chief difficulty we meet with at this point is a slogan: 'No more public money without extension of public control.' No Catholic spokesman, to my knowledge, has ever made a frontal attack on this doubly-false principle, yet that might well be good strategy. To begin with, what is 'public money'? The answer doubtless would be 'Money that comes from the taxpayer.' 'No taxation without representation,' said the Roundheads, and cut off the King's head to enforce their view of the nature of money. But they were wrong, and the King, whether he realised it or not, was right. It is the King who by rights puts money into circulation, and when he taxes it back he is only doing his duty and making it circulate. Money is a public service. Public money is *prior* to taxes, not the other way round. The ruler (after taking lots of advice of course) ought to assign grants of public money to anybody who is doing good public work; keeping an eye, of course, on what becomes of the money but seeking to control the work itself as little as possible. Even if we admitted the principle that the taxpayer should control the spendings of the State, it would still by no means follow that the taxpayer,

through the State, should control the activities, such as education, which he is financing. If the State thinks it is not getting results for its money, it can always stop the grant. It will only do harm by 'extending public control' on mere principle.

Yes, all political discussion, even educational politics, has to come back to the money-system, because at present it is the money-system which is the centre of the disease which poisons and convulses human society. All during this war the State has continued borrowing, partly from small savings, but also partly from the bankers who create it by a stroke of the pen, that money which the State ought simply to have created itself. The unnecessary interest on all this borrowing mounts up and up, and at the end of the war may be anything up to six hundred million pounds a year. Such a burden would be fatal to anything like educational reform or housing schemes or to the New England in general. Most of the interest, and some of the debt, will have to be repudiated in some way. That done, there would be no financial difficulty about such things as school building, which calls for nothing from abroad, but only for English raw materials and English sweat. If the nation is determined to have new school buildings, even for Catholic children, there is not the slightest reason why anybody—any Government or Local Authority or Bishop or Managers or Catholic congregation—should have to pay interest. It would be quite enough by all financial common-sense, if the loan itself is repaid over some reasonable period, to avoid ultimate 'inflation' of currency.

Indeed, as I am writing this, the Catholic Bishops have just stated publicly that they have already suggested to the Government the possibility of interest-free loans for new Catholic schools. Yes, and why not for all new Council schools too? If the White Paper imposes an 'intolerable burden' on Catholics, it is because the whole money system is an intolerable burden on the country. If the 50 per cent. or 75 per cent. grant (for reconstruction-schools under the 1936 Act) were extended to *all* future Catholic schools, and if the Catholic part of the expenditure were covered by interest-free loans—well, we should still be under a penalty for educating our children in their own Church, but it would be a penalty we could pay with more cheerfulness than at present.

The view of the White Paper's future prospects taken in this article may seem unduly pessimistic. Time will show. But, meanwhile, there are educational reforms which can be begun at once, and which need fresh energy rather than fresh legislation. What does the White Paper say, for instance, about reducing the size of classes? It just mentions, as being an essential element in the pro-

posals, 'a progressive reduction in the size of classes in infants and junior schools as the supply of teachers and buildings permits.' It also remarks that the 'further advance' of senior schools depends on several things, of which the *last* one mentioned is 'a more generous scale of staffing.' No ring of urgency about either of these statements. And yet this matter of the size of classes is one which, equally with the quality of the teacher, goes to the very root of education. It affects everything—methods, discipline, curriculum; above all, perhaps, the recruiting of teachers, for what sensible boy or girl is going to be a teacher when they see that being a teacher means policing a crowd of fifty or more children penned impossibly in desks for hours at a time?

Reduction in size of classes is a reform which everybody pays lip-service to, but it is too practical, too unspectacular, to be given priority. Yet if the White Paper were put away carefully on some shelf, and the schools were left for another ten years just as they are organised at present, and the whole energy of all administrators were bent to the job of improving the quality of the teachers and reducing the size of their classes, it is possible that the nation would then begin to have some inkling of what education is all about and would be in a better position to put through an educational revolution even more radical than anything in the White Paper's proposals for which the indefatigable Mr. Butler has managed to collect so satisfying a measure of agreement.

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