POLITICAL EDUCATION

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Political Education

Currently a debate is in existence as to whether political education — or indeed political argument of any kind — should be kept out of the classroom. There are those who argue that political education is synonymous with indoctrination and others who suggest that education is by its nature political. For those who agree that there should be a distinct political aspect of the curriculum which instils political knowledge and awareness, there is of course the question of where the emphasis should be placed. How is it possible to achieve any kind of balance? This book analyses the debate about the introduction of courses in political education to secondary, tertiary, and adult education as well as to youth work. It also examines the introduction of an element of political education to specific subjects. It puts forward an argument for political education and discusses what it should consist of and how it should be undertaken.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a developing interest in political education. At the September 1984 annual conference of the Politics Association (the professional body of politics teachers in the United Kingdom), Mr Robert Dunn, M.P., Under-Secretary of State for Education, made a statement on political education in schools. He made it clear that he was speaking for the Department of Education and Science, and stressed that political education had a valid place in the curriculum, as political literacy was a prerequisite of adult citizenship. He argued that it could be taught separately or indirectly through other subjects and that its content should include not only information about the machinery of government and the decision-making process but also political skills. It should also embody certain values: consideration for the views of others and respect for free democratic procedures and the rule of law. However, political education should not be indoctrination; sensitive issues should be treated in a balanced and professional manner.

Experience and Participation: Report of the Review Group on the Youth Service in England had also stressed in 1982 the need for political education amongst young adults.[1] The Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education (ACACE) published a report in 1985 on Political Education for Adults.[2] This was followed by a WEA pamphlet, The WEA and Political Education, January 1985,[3] backed up by a national seminar held at London University, March 1985, on Adult Education and Political Education. The speakers included an HMI and party spokesmen.

A lecturer has been appointed in political education at the Institute of Education, London University. The Department of Education and Science has commissioned a Curriculum Review Unit to undertake a survey of political education in schools and FE colleges, and an investigation of the training of teachers in that area.

The Curriculum Review Unit has carried out a survey of initial training courses in political education and has since set up a group to prepare recommendations for the provision of courses for political education (see Bedford Papers 16, 1983).[4] The group argues that all teachers should have a general awareness of the scope of political education, and

should understand the political dimensions of their own subject specialisms and classroom teaching. There are many other recommendations.

There is thus considerable interest in developing political education in secondary, tertiary, and adult education, and in youth work. This has the backing of governmental reports and funding and of HM Inspectorate. A Master's course in political education has been introduced at the London Institute. At Surrey University, a political education option is offered on the M.Sc. in Educational Studies course; political education is included in the Post Graduate Certificate in the Education of Adults course for youth workers; a number of day and weekend schools for teachers in secondary and further education in the area of political education have also been run there.

Nevertheless, it would be true to say that the present government remains ambivalent in its attitude towards political education: recognizing that there should be political education but fearing that it would be misused. Indeed we have noticed in conversations with Conservative politicians that there has been a retreat from the degree of enthusiasm expressed by Mr Dunn. We feel that the government is wrong in reducing their enthusiasm. At this time, when there is wide media cover of political events, it is important that people do not feel that they have no say, that events just pass them by, and that they are mere pawns in a game played by others. A healthy body politic can exist only when people understand the workings of its institutions and are prepared to participate in the working of them and perhaps in their development.

This book opens with an examination of the political education debate and in the next few chapters looks at the relationship between politics, morality, education, and the nature of the political community. We then examine the content of a political curriculum and how it should be taught. In effect, we ask a number of questions - what is the nature of politics, why should there be political education, what would be its content, how should we teach it? - and attempt to provide answers.

Do we as authors agree on all of the arguments? Generally our views do not greatly diverge. Specifically Patricia Smart has been responsible for developing the main lines of argument in the chapters on political argument and indoctrination, and Robert Brownhill for the rest.

While the book should be of particular interest to

teachers and administrators in secondary and further education, adult education, and youth work, it will also be of general interest to students of politics who have an interest in moral, political, and social education.

CONTENTS

Chapter one

POLITICAL EDUCATION: THE DEBATE

That education and the political structure of society are closely linked has probably always been recognized. Plato, in his Republic, designed a system of education not only to produce the right outlook and frame of mind in his future leaders but also to sift out those people who should not be leaders. People dominated by their appetites for power, wealth, or glory but also the more stupid, those who could not be 'turned towards the light': Plato hoped to classify them accurately and persuade them to accept their classification. In order to do this, he desired to give them that which they naturally deserved. For example, the menial by nature received menial tasks and so, if they received whatever by nature they deserved, they could not claim that they were being treated unjustly. Plato's system of education was designed to support and maintain his hierarchical community but the political nature of his curriculum for leadership and subordination was hidden. The curriculum was ostensibly designed to turn people towards the light, to lead them to an understanding of reality. The participants in the programme did not know, and had no need to know, its political nature.

It can well be argued that all systems of education have a political nature, that they are designed to initiate children into the traditional ways of going about things. Indeed, we find R.S. Peters including this idea in his definition of education.[1] Education, in this sense, must be conservative and give support to the status quo. At the same time, it leads people to look at the world in a certain way. It gives them the categories of right and wrong and true and false, and tells them how normative claims and truth claims can be classified according to these categories.[2] It provides them with an interpretative framework which will enable

them to understand the world, make judgements about it, and cope with innovations.

The development of universal education in nineteenth-century England came about not only because it was thought that ignorance and illiteracy were bad in themselves but also for a number of political reasons. As the century progressed and economic and industrial competition increased, with the growing industrialization of other powers, it became necessary to create a more educated population. For instance, in 1868, Thomas Huxley told the South London Working Men's College that three classes of men favoured education: 'Politicians would educate their masters, manufacturers wanted more efficient hands, the clergy desired to stem the drift towards infidelity.'[3]

However, industrialization had brought with it a much deeper political problem. As the population had moved from the rural areas to the towns, the ties of traditional authority had broken down. There was an urgent need both to adapt to the rapidly changing structure of society and to reassert the authoritarian and hierarchical nature of the community. The French Revolution, which was contemporaneous with the politicians of the earlier part of the century, and the revolutions throughout Europe in 1848 had made many people believe that strikes, riots, and political demonstrations were a prelude to similar happenings in Britain. Kay-Shuttleworth, as early as 1839, had argued that a good secular education would be an antidote to the dangers of Chartism.[4] In a sense, then, the rapidly developing bureaucracy and the introduction of universal education that was controlled and inspected were facets of this adaptation. Education was an instrument of social control. It taught respect for one's betters and the acceptance of authority, and created a population used to discipline.

The elimination of illiteracy and the strengthening of the economic base so that Britain could compete more effectively with industrial rivals was open government policy and therefore could be widely discussed in the development of the curriculum. However, although respect for authority and the necessity for greater discipline were aired in the debate leading up to universal education, they dropped out of the debate when universal education was adopted in England. They constituted the hidden curriculum.

The fact that there is a hidden political curriculum can be seen when society is again in crisis, with high unemployment, unruly youngsters, and the breakdown of

communal homogeneity. One of the first criticisms to be levelled is that the educational system is not doing its job: children and young adults are not disciplined, are not used to accepting authority, and do not show respect for their elders. The hidden curriculum is not being followed and democracy is in danger of collapse.

In fact, as has often been pointed out, the traditional, authoritative nature of school education provides little incentive for the vast majority of the population to make decisions for themselves or to participate in decision making. The majority of children need not make any educational decisions, which are made for them. This results in a major part of the population not only being apathetic and leaving decision making to others but also having been conditioned into apathy. The hidden curriculum was designed both to keep discipline and to allow the political establishment to get on with its job of governing without too much interference.

It can be argued that the type of political analysis which we have made of the educational system is normal, radical clap-trap; that a much more important feature of education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the development of liberal education, particularly in grammar and public schools and at university. This has led to a much wider knowledge of Britain's cultural heritage and to remarkable developments in the sciences. A feature of liberal education has been its ability to lead pupils into the academic disciplines or modes of experience,[5] where they are taught to love a subject for its intrinsic worth, to reason, to present good arguments and, above all, to love the truth. In this great liberal tradition of education, politics is irrelevant. It is distasteful or even wicked to introduce the activity of politics into the classroom. Politics, like sex, should be kept out of schools. It is an adult activity and children should not be contaminated by it.

Although we agree that the idea of a liberal education is of major importance in the development of the British educational system, we shall argue that the liberal concept of education includes a certain concept of politics. Indeed, some of its exponents do themselves admit that it has within it its own hidden curriculum of political education.

POLITICAL EDUCATION: ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR

Arguments in favour of political education come from both right and left of the political spectrum. The philosopher and educationalist, Nicolas Haines, opens his book, Person to Person,[6] by asking two questions:

> How many people in our free society find that their education helps much when it comes to making up their minds on major issues outside their field?
> How many educated people seriously believe in their larger political and social role?
>
> (Haines 1967: xi)

He is making the point that growing specialization in higher education has made people less competent and knowledgeable in areas outside their speciality; that their education, rather than widening their horizons, has limited them to such an extent that they have no desire either to participate in or to show an interest in the activity of politics. Yet, he argues, modern society depends very much on a growing, educated middle class. If society is to remain free and not to be controlled by a bureaucracy then an educated professional class must be prepared to take an interest in 'the connection between their own jobs, their personal aims, their principles and the changing, shifting emphasis in politics and reconstruction' (ibid., p. xi).

Haines' argument is not so much that democracy means that everyone should participate in political decision-making but that the major wealth-generating class should at least be prepared to participate. Unfortunately, little attempt is made in the educational system to prepare the new professional classes for such participation. This is a major criticism of the education system. He is arguing that the very group that one would expect to be educated in the running of a free society is not being so educated: 'Free men have to decide, to choose: to elect representatives, support or undermine policies, advocate, persuade, guide, teach, as well as manage, their own affairs as well as they are able' (ibid., p. xii).

The new professional classes are not receiving the sort of education that would enable them to take on the mantle of responsibility which would lead to the protection of freedom. The aim of political education should therefore be to develop the professionals' interest in politics and to point

them towards their political responsibilities, while at the same time endeavouring to give them the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out those responsibilities.

Haines' real concern is with a growing bureaucracy and a collectivist movement which he sees as destroying traditional notions of freedom.[7] He is elitist only within the Hayekian liberal/conservative tradition. This recognizes that the defence of political freedom must realistically come from the middle class and points out that collectivist attitudes often downgrade the working class. Collectivist leaders 'over-indulge and pet it with permissive principles and cloying values as if the working class were without moral and intellectual potential - rather as many white people used to think and talk of the Negroes' (Haines 1967: xiv).

Behind Haines' book lay a clear, radical, political intention to oppose collectivism by a programme of political education that would point out how the collectivist society limited people's freedom by taking decisions for them and thereby preventing them from acting responsibly. Haines hoped to educate people in such a way that they would wish to and be able to make their own decisions. The vanguard of the newly politically educated would be the professional classes but the ideal of the future liberal/conservative society would be political education for everyone and a desire on the part of everyone to participate in political matters. The danger that lay behind Haines' proposals and that was part of his nightmare was that the very professional classes (such as social workers, local government officers, teachers - the new professionals), who must be educated into participating in a free society, might themselves see an advantage and self-interest in developing the growing bureaucracy and collective, and therefore provide a weaker line of defence than he hoped. The intention of the book was radical but the book itself was low key, as was its sub-title, 'A work book in principles and values'. In the preface the author stated that it might be useful for groups run by the Workers' Educational Association, for groups of undergraduates in Political and Social Philosophy, and for General or Liberal Studies Courses in Higher Education.

Denis Heater takes up a wider but related theme in a series of books.[8] He stresses that it is the very logic of democracy that citizens should be politically literate, by which he means that adults should be able, in a

representative democracy, to make a reasoned choice between candidates and parties at elections, and should perhaps be prepared to take part in some grass-roots activity. If a representative democracy is to work as such, people must be shown how to understand and to use democratic institutions. People cannot be expected to understand, participate in, and make use of democratic institutions, let alone take an interest in them, unless they have been brought up to appreciate them and given some ability to participate in them. They must see why democratic institutions and procedures are so good and why it is worth while having them, and must be able to taste for themselves some of the benefits that can come only from participation. In order to achieve this, not only must children be taught about politics and be given the necessary skills to participate but the institutional structure of their schools must allow them to take part in decision making.

Thus the argument is that the logic of representative government demands political education, because if one desires the end one must also desire the means to that end. Unfortunately, the United Kingdom, although formally a representative democracy, does not have the complete features of an ideal model of such a democracy, simply because not enough people know how it works or participate in its working.

Another assertion is often attached to this sort of argument. The political system of the United Kingdom has a stability and continuity which presumably arises because of its democratic nature. This stability cannot be taken for granted and there is some evidence that there is a growing disillusionment with the system: for instance, the student troubles of the late 1960s; the influence of the extreme left and the extreme right on the major parties; the riots in Bristol, Liverpool, and Birmingham; perhaps also the pressure for devolution in the 1970s.[9] It is suggested, therefore, that it is necessary to teach people the benefits of a democracy so that they will not become disillusioned with it. A more radical suggestion, following the same line of argument, is that the present system of democracy should be developed in such a way as to encourage greater participation and so make it effective. It will thus help to create or preserve a stable society. The idea of continuity can also be maintained by an argument which, in looking at the historical development of British democracy, points out that, in order to maintain the evolutionary development of the system

rather than chance revolutionary change, we must progress to the next stage of democracy, which would include greater citizen participation.

In support of these arguments, evidence is produced by Robert Stradling to show the political illiteracy of school-leavers.[10] However, this evidence becomes relevant only if the thrust of the previous arguments is accepted, i.e. that political education is now necessary and is not taking place. A questionnaire was issued to 4,000 15 to 16-year olds between 1975-6. Bernard Crick, Chairman of the Working Party, A Programme for Political Education, writes in the preface to Stradling's study:

> Consider, for example, that almost half of the young people taking part in this survey think that the House of Commons makes all the important political decisions on the running of the country; that 46 per cent cannot name even one pressure group; that one in four fifteen-year-olds associates the policy of nationalisation with the Conservative Party; and that 44 per cent believe that the I.R.A. is a Protestant organisation.
>
> (Stradling 1977: ii)

Stradling concludes his study with the comment that there is something paradoxical about a democracy in which 80 to 90 per cent of its future and present citizens know so little about local and national politics; they not only do not know what is happening but also do not know how they are affected by it or what they can do about it.

The evidence can also be used for a straightforward academic argument in support of improved general education about the nature of politics. The hope of educationalists is that children at 16 years of age will emerge from their schooling with something more than just an ability to read and write and do simple arithmetic, namely some knowledge of literature, history, and geography, for example. We would consider children ill-educated if they did not have a smattering of such knowledge but should we not also consider them ill-educated if they do not have some knowledge of the theory and practice of politics, since politics cannot help but have a major influence on their future lives? They are bound to come into contact with political arguments and to make decisions that have a political element. The very nature of modern life at work and leisure will bring them into contact with political and governmental policy and action.

There has been a considerable amount of governmental and semi-official support for political education. As mentioned in the Introduction, Mr Robert Dunn, M.P., Under-Secretary of State for Education, made a statement on 'Political Education in Schools' at the 1984 Annual Conference of the Politics Association. He argued that political education had a valid place on the curriculum because political literacy was one of the prerequisites of adult citizenship. He said that in Britain the education system would not be expected to enforce a single political philosophy 'as would be, and is, required in a totalitarian state'. Nevertheless, schools have a responsibility to the society that maintains them and so certain approaches would have to be followed, such as 'respect for the process of democracy itself'.[11]

Regarding the education of the 16 to 19-year old group, further support is given to the introduction of political education. The report, Experience and Participation: Report of the Review Group on the Youth Service in England, states:

> In a democratic society it is inevitable and desirable that there should be a diversity of ideas and opinions. Our political tradition depends on consensus being reached on various issues. While it is accepted that differences cannot always be resolved, an understanding of and respect for the views of others lies at the very heart of a civilised and organised society. This involves a certain level of political literacy. ... Political education then is necessary. ... If they had a better knowledge of the processes by which change can be effected and greater skill and confidence in using them... they would be less likely to resort to more violent methods of expressing their views about society.[12]

Here we find the usual argument about political literacy being necessary, something about its content, and the further argument that people would be less likely to use violence if they understood the process of politics. In all governmental and quasi-official statements, something is said about the nature of politics: that in its practice people should be non-violent, show respect for others, and listen to other people's points of view.

A major reason for the newly found interest in political education evinced by establishment political parties is an