The Government of Education

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The Government of Education in Britain

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Preface

The study of the politics and administration of education draws on many academic sources in the arts and social sciences and it is the authors' view that the behaviour of those involved in the provision of education in Britain can be fully understood only in the context of political life generally. A textbook necessarily simplifies the contextual framework it presents and an introductory text must be selective rather than exhaustive in its treatment of particular issues. Our aim has been to pick up major themes in the government of education today and convey to the reader some of the flavour of old and new controversy alongside detail of the administrative system.

Few textbooks try to integrate historical narrative with exposition of the contemporary system and an awareness of current theoretical perspectives; again, in the author's view, to be most nearly fully understood British educational government must be seen as patterned by past as well as present.

Our first explicitly historical chapter is not intended to provide a comprehensive treatment of the education system before 1944, nor to sketch in a tedious chronology. The chapter sets out to highlight some earlier preoccupations in policy and practice the legacies of which are still with us. The current involvement of the Churches in the education system looks back to a long European tradition which has nevertheless had very different twentieth century outcomes in Britain, France or Germany. The expedient religious compromises of the Education Act, 1944, may be tribute to Anglo-Saxon pragmatism but the centuries-long antagonisms which went before suggest rather different doctrinal and political perspectives. The variety of compromise in the different parts of Britain even now confirms the ambiguity in our tradition.

Historical development also serves to correct the impression common amongst beginning students of contemporary educational government that the system is as it is because it must be so. In fact

decisions have been taken at particular times which could easily have been different and pointed the system in a different direction. The broad extent and general confirmation of central government's power in education is a very recent phenomenon, contestable in the past by appeal to deep seated political philosophy as well as the vested interests of local authorities. History may turn full circle when the extensive regulating and funding powers of central government which were justified in the 1940's and 1950's by reference to the poor record in education of some local authorities, are used, as now, to damp down local commitment and impose a maximum of uniformity, rather than a uniform minimum. The Education Act, 1902, its interpretation still a matter of controversy amongst historians of education, is another turning point for the development of a local education service in England; Scotland's retention of ad hoc authorities for nearly thirty years more, and Northern Ireland's current use of them, must make it clear that contemporary institutions are as much the product of historical prejudice as of rational analysis.

In looking at contemporary government of education nationally and locally we have also tried to stress the contestable nature of educational decisions. While we do not deny the existence of "educational" arguments or "professional" criteria, neither do we ignore economic and political criteria, and, most importantly, we do not present one set of criteria as superior to the other. Education is now a major service industry and most of the audience for student texts about it have a stake in its survival and expansion; there is nothing wrong in such a stake but it may prejudice the student when he should be detached in his analysis. In the authors' view such detachment may prepare the student better to defend his interest and to promote the cause of education than an easy acceptance of publicist nostrums or of the special pleadings of organised pressure groups.

While we try to guard against painting a picture of an education system in which there is no legitimate place for any but the professional, our two chapters on the institution of school and college show only too clearly the proliferation and increasing complexity of the tasks facing teachers and educational administrators of all kinds. The impact of legislation, of negotiated agreements, and of institutional bureaucracy seems least in the small primary school, greatest in the college of further education, but all institutions have been affected. Paradoxically, at the same time as institutions have been much more fully integrated into an overall system, the individual

teacher may have become more isolated by the social fragmentation resulting from accumulation and subdivision of educational tasks.

The superficial uniformity of contemporary educational institutions masks substantial differences in ideological perspective and interest amongst teachers which find partial expression in their national associations. But just as competing demands for educational resources within the education system could be contained while overall expansion continued, so the strains of internal dissent and confusion may be made more manifest in a period of economic retrenchment. Fewer pupils, fewer resources, a "surplus" of teachers, and less public sympathy for education will require at least different management of teacher's associations, at most a realignment of teacher interests.

There can be little doubt that governmental attitudes to education have changed; it is more difficult to assess the acuity of the politician's judgement of the public mood. Our final chapter explores this issue in the context of the debate over curriculum content and control. Nothing could be more critical to an education system; nothing could have been taken more on trust in most of Britain during the post-war period. The obsession with non-doctrinal religious instruction have finally subsided, a literal reading of the legal responsibilities for curriculum gave way to less formal negotiations amongst teachers or between them and examining bodies, in which public representatives were happy to acquiesce. As the association between individual educational and occupational success in the mind of the public has weakened, and as scapegoats for national economic decline have been sought, it is not surprising that education in general, a major consumer of resources, and the curriculum in particular, should again become a target for criticism.

While the emergence of a radical Conservative government in May 1979, during the writing of this book, confirms the trend toward educational dissensus, it has made more difficult the detailing of the administrative system. When possible we have taken into account changes enacted or forecast by a national government committed to substantial changes in the style and content of policy which have major implications for the running of the education service. It would be premature to try and express a considered view of the consequences of policies still under heated debate. The Local Government Act, 1958, introduced major changes in the financing of education, but forecasts of its effects which drew on the most expert educational judgements made at the time, would have proved woefully inadequate;

the same may prove true of the predicted consequences of the Education Act, 1980, and the bill which will, at the time of writing, shortly become the Local Government Act, 1980.

This note of caution is reaffirmed on grounds of principle in our last chapter; while the overall structure of society may change slowly, its particular manifestation in the education system and educational controversy is by no means stable. We hope that readers will find plenty of evidence in the pages that follow to show that the education system we have is the evolving creation of men, their views and their actions, and not some immutable and uncriticisable monolith detached from everyday reality.

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October 1980

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CHAPTER 1

A Historical Introduction

While it can be no more than a truism to say that our current education system is a product of its history, in British education today certain features owe much more to history than to contemporary rationale. It is these features with which the present chapter is concerned. In the course of examining the trend away from denominational domination of education and the development of local and national institutions for the government of the education system, it should be clear that history has often taken different turnings in England, Scotland, Ireland and, to a lesser extent, Wales. If these significant variations do not in themselves make a point, then it had better be spelled out that the chronology of events and the positive choices of government do not represent any automatically self-justifying progression towards an 'ideal system'. Rather, they are choices made in particular social, political and administrative contexts, having, in the event, unforeseen as well as intended consequences, opening up and closing off unexpected avenues for further change. There was nothing inevitable about the abolition of *ad hoc* authorities for education; different compromises with the Churches were possible; it would have been possible to clarify the various responsibilities of national government in education without creating a single Ministry—after all, government relations with the universities were discharged through the Treasury until fifteen years ago. It is to be hoped that this chapter will help to explain some of the features of the contemporary British education system—it does not seek to justify those features.

THE RELIGIOUS QUESTION

The sponsorship of education by the Christian Church has a very long

history in Europe. Through parish priests, monasteries, cathedrals and universities, the Church has traditionally sought to inculcate doctrine in all the people, and lettering, grammar and classical studies in some, particularly those destined to join the clergy. The civil power offered little, if any, competition; and the acts of sovereigns in founding schools were seen by themselves and by others as practical expressions of piety. With the Renaissance and the Reformation the higher valuation of a broader classical education, still within the framework of Christianity, led in England to the foundation of many grammar schools, often funded from the estates of local worthies. In Scotland the systematic provision of regular elementary education was attempted by statute in 1696, through the parishes of the established Presbyterian Church. In Ireland the established Church represented the educational domination of an alien and Anglicised minority over a Roman Catholic majority, fuelling religious antagonism with nationalistic fervour; similar Anglican domination in Wales successfully stifled local linguistic and cultural traditions until their re-invigoration by Welsh nonconformity in the nineteenth century.

But division between the different denominations on questions of doctrine and their practical implications for education weakened the religious monopoly and eventually led to its replacement, in England, Scotland and Wales, by a comprehensive, state-funded and state-controlled system of schools which still recognised, in a variety of ways, the historic and residual contributions that the Churches made. In Northern Ireland there still persists a system of state-funded schools critically divided by religious loyalties and mutual denominational suspicion.

The traditional association between the established Anglican Church and the state since the Reformation underlay much of the denominational rivalry and suspicion. In the early nineteenth century loyalty to Church and state were presumed synonymous, manifestly in the civil disabilities which were partly removed by the Test and Corporation Acts of 1828. The Anglicans asserted as their due a privileged position in many fields, including education, a view which (in the course of the century) they had to modify in the face of the growing political strength of nonconformity and the insufficiency of their financial resources to realise their aspirations unaided. Nonconformists combined to oppose state-backed provision of sectarian education in England and Wales, and their unity was

cemented by guarantees that the new board schools after 1870 would be restricted to non-denominational religious education. It was at this same time that the established and the independent Presbyterian churches of Scotland handed over their schools to the state; in this instance the dissenters were Roman Catholics and Protestant episcopalians, who retained their schools until the Education Act of 1918 guaranteed their denominational character within a state system. In Ireland a different solution to the denominational problem in elementary education was attempted, with the establishment in 1831 of the Commissioners of National Education. The Commissioners were empowered to disburse the funds provided by Parliament on the erection of schools, the payment of teachers and the publication of textbooks in an attempt to create a system of schools offering a 'combined literary and separate religious education'. It was anticipated that denominations would unite to provide a common secular education with full opportunities for the separate teaching of religious doctrine. In the event each denomination came to provide its own school for secular and religious education. Government intervention in the funding of intermediate or secondary education—in the form of the passage of the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act 1878—later in the century had more limited ambitions; grants were made to voluntary schools on the basis of pupil success in public examinations set by the Intermediate Education Board, and so again voluntarism and denominationalism in education were consolidated.

At the beginning of the century the rival denominations might all agree that education and religion were indivisible, but radicals were already arguing directly for a secular education. Rather than concede the claims of the established Church in England and Wales, the nonconformists championed secular education by the state. Eventually the Anglicans found themselves arguing, from a position of financial weakness, for access to state schools, leaving the Roman Catholics alone in their determination to maintain the unity of secular and religious education and direct control by the Church.

Government could never ignore the huge contribution made by the denominations, nor the powerful political lobbies they could muster within the major political parties. The original Scottish system of parochial schools, proposed for England and Wales in 1807 by Whitbread and again in 1820 by Brougham, was defeated in Parliament because Anglicans and nonconformists were equally suspicious of the advantage that such a system might give to the

other. The first Inspectors, appointed in 1839, were subject to the approval of the Church of England. Every tentative step depended upon its acceptability across the religious divide. Single-school areas, usually Anglican, were a continuing source of irritation to nonconformists—a fact which was only partly acknowledged when in 1860 the Committee of the Privy Council decided to refuse building grants for new schools whose Trust Deeds did not include a conscience clause.

The perceived failure of the combination of Church initiative and government subsidy to provide a national system of elementary schools by the 1860s exacerbated sectarian conflict and shaped the intervention of the state in direct provision of education under the Elementary Education Act 1870. Radicals campaigned for free, compulsory, secular education under popular control, but there was a variety of less revolutionary views among the anti-Church lobby. The National Education Union, representing the denominationalists, demanded support for Church schools from the local rates as well as central government grant. Under a Liberal government, returned to power in 1868, the prospect of secular school boards was called into being, charged ostensibly with filling the gaps left by Churches in the provision of elementary schools. Over the next thirty years a rapidly shifting and expanding population provided many opportunities for the establishment of state elementary schools committed to the conscience clause, a choice between non-denominational religious instruction and none at all and priority for secular instruction. While for many years to come parents in rural areas might still find themselves with no choice other than the local Church school, in general the board school soon usurped the denominational school as the model for the future in England and Wales.

While the school boards south of the border had to leave Church schools to their own devices, in Scotland school boards set up for every parish and burgh were empowered to take over existing parochial schools, financing them, regardless of sponsorship or denominational character, from local taxation. Denominationalists in England perceived the school boards as a threat because determination of the number of school places needed in an area lay in the boards' hands and because the rates paid by Church members supported the board schools but could not be used to support their own Church schools. In the short term more government subsidy was the solution, allied with Church efforts to dominate the school boards' electorally and thus

keep their activities in check; in the long term, as the Majority Report of the Cross Commission proposed, the school boards should acquire permissive powers to aid Church schools from the rates. In the event a Conservative Government, traditionally sympathetic to the Church cause, set out first to restrain, then to abolish, the school boards, transferring their powers and their schools to the recently created county boroughs and county councils, which were in turn empowered, for the first time, to fund Church schools from local taxation. Although unsuccessful, the campaign against what was to become the Education Act 1902 brought together the defenders of the school boards and their undoubted achievements, the nonconformists, secularists and the growing trade union and labour movement, souring the prospects of substantial further educational reform for over a generation. Some local authorities in Wales refused to maintain voluntary schools in their areas, but the government responded by allocating funds directly to voluntary schools and by deducting the amount payable in grants to the local authorities concerned (Education (Local Authority Default) Act 1904). When the Liberals regained office in 1906 they made three attempts to redress the grievances of their nonconformist supporters; Birrell's Bill of 1907 — which, not unlike the Scottish solution, proposed the transfer to local authorities of all Church schools and the introduction of limited opportunities for denominational instruction within the local authority system — was defeated by the House of Lords. McKenna's and Runciman's Bills of 1908 featured the transfer of voluntary schools to the local authority or the alternative of contracting out of rate support, but both were withdrawn in response to the protests they aroused. It was, not only the socially powerful Church of England that stood to lose from the reversal of the 1902 Education Act, of course, but also the Roman Catholic Church, whose influence lay among some of the poorer voters whose support the Liberal Party might be seeking.

As the secular impetus towards educational development grew in the twentieth century (uneven in space and time though its growth was), the dilemma for government was the choice between the improbability of legislative change without religious controversy on the one hand and, on the other, the impossibility of structural reform of education without the provision of substantially more financial support, including capital grants, to Church schools. The problem was finally overcome in Scotland with the Education Act 1918, which allowed denominational interests to retain a right of veto over

the appointment of teachers in respect of their religious belief or character, while transferring the schools and all financial responsibility for them to the local education authority. Nonconformists in England and Wales, less ready to compromise and embittered by history as some of them were, represented a much larger section of the organised political community. Unless and until the smouldering antagonisms which had burned so fiercely at the beginning of the century finally died away a programme of comprehensive educational reform would have been nothing but a political liability.

In Ireland partition had produced a separate Parliament in Belfast, which was responsible for educational legislation (among other matters) throughout the six counties and had inherited the structures and the schools of nineteenth-century Ireland, with the one difference that the Catholics who formed a majority in the whole island were a minority in the province. The Education Act (Northern Ireland) of 1923 constituted the two county boroughs and the six counties the responsible education authority for their area. Provision was made for the transfer of the very many voluntary schools of different denominations to facilitate the development of unified schemes of elementary, secondary and further education. Because the Government of Ireland Act 1920 forbade the passing of any law which would directly or indirectly establish or endow any religion, the previous system of financial support for a combined literary and separate religious education initiated by the Commissioners nearly a hundred years before could not be maintained. Until the passing of the Education Act (Northern Ireland) in 1930 a settlement could not be devised which would convince the Protestant managers of the desirability of transferring their schools; the refusal of the Roman Catholic Church to yield control of its schools, despite the financial benefits, has led to the present dual system, under which county schools are staffed and attended largely by Protestants, voluntary schools by Roman Catholics.

The growing consensus among educationists inside and outside central government and the local authorities was in favour of the abolition of the two parallel schemes of public education, elementary and secondary (or higher), and their replacement by one coherent progression, primary, secondary, further, through which all children would have the opportunity to make the fullest use of the education system. The new local education authorities had taken their chance, in the first few years after 1902, to provide many secondary schools to