

Studies in the History of Education

The Politics of Educational Reform 1920-1940

Brian Simon



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1920-1940

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OF
EDUCATIONAL REFORM
1920-1940

by
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FOR
SHENA D. SIMON
1883-1972

INTRODUCTION

When I was engaged in reducing this book from too great a length, leaving aside discussion of adult education and other aspects included in earlier volumes to concentrate on the school system, I came across a comment in the Preface to B. B. Gilbert's *British Social Policy, 1914-39*—that education had been altogether excluded from his study because "there is little to write about". He added the observation, from a transatlantic viewpoint: "When the political leaders of both major parties are unable to redeem a 20-year-old promise to increase the school leaving age beyond 14, a nation can hardly be said to have a deep concern with public education." But failure on the part of government to implement policies which, at least, had widespread support is as much a matter of history as achievement of the most forward-looking programme—and such failure shapes later developments just as surely. Indeed, it is hardly possible to understand the educational policy as it developed in the late 1940s and the 1950s, or for that matter the nature and passage of the Education Act of 1944, without a knowledge of what happened—or did not happen—in the inter-war years up to 1940. It is with the operative policies of these years, both negative and positive, that this book is concerned.

It was not my original intention to remain within this period. Study of it began as the starting-point of a book on the half-century from 1920 to 1970, seen as the third in a series of studies in the history of education covering two centuries, the first of which spanned the years 1780 to 1870 and the second, concentrating on the labour movement, from 1870 to 1920. It is for various reasons that the outcome is a different form of discussion of a more limited term of years. For one thing there was an immediate demand for studies of post-1945 developments in secondary education, notably the rise and chequered progress of comprehensive reorganisation. When, eventually, I returned to the earlier period much new material had become available with the reduction of the former fifty-year rule, controlling access to official records, to thirty years. This freed at a stroke the Private Office Papers of the Board of Education during the whole of the inter-war period, the value of which had become apparent from a preliminary study of

those up to 1922, and this is one of the chief sources drawn upon.

Earlier studies making use of these materials, notably by Eric Eaglesham, have thrown fresh light on policy-making in the early years of the century, including the steering on to the statute book of the Education Act of 1902. Minutes of meetings from cabinet to inner departmental level, correspondence and interviews with outside interests, memoranda passing between officials of the Board, chart the inner history of the politics of education—how decisions were arrived at, directives formulated, the framework of policy evolved and adjusted in relation to various pressures. To follow up this process at key moments meant a study in much greater detail, or depth, than originally contemplated and, as a result, both the exclusion of aspects dealt with in the previous two volumes and a close limitation in length in terms of years. The phase of policy-making under investigation came to a close in the early 1940s—at present also the end date for consulting the relevant sources.

Since the outset of the century the central question in the field of public education has been the nature and scope of the secondary school system, the curriculum and means of access, the implications in terms of organisation and finance, the respective share in shaping developments of central and local authorities. This was the focal point during the inter-war decades when pressure to lengthen school life and improve the quality of education for the majority was met by a determination to maintain the separate and limited system of elementary instruction established in 1870. It was on this point that *Education and the Labour Movement* ended, with the rising demand for secondary education for all from the organised working class expressed in the Bradford Charter of 1917, subsequently adopted as the policy of both the political and industrial wings of the labour movement. What was called for in this programme was a free secondary schooling up to the age of 15 or 16 for all children in a common school, and whatever the welcome accorded to positive aspects of the Education Act of 1918 it was recognised that it side-stepped this issue which in due course was taken up anew.

On the other hand there was now, since the Board of Education Act of 1899, a department of state consolidating central direction over the educational system, and not only along lines defined by legislation but by administrative measures which shaped the course of development imperceptibly, without open discussion of the implications or the underlying assumptions. In the first volume of *Studies in the History*

of *Education*, now reissued under the title *The Two Nations and the Educational Structure, 1780-1870*, there was a review of what might be called a "political philosophy" of education advanced by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill in the early years of the nineteenth century—and later in more vulgarised form by Kay-Shuttleworth, who was closely involved in the administrative machinery then beginning to take shape, by Robert Lowe who had the political direction at a key moment, and others. From the turn of the century this form of approach and theoretical discussion was wanting. If there was still current a general idea that containment of the mass of the people under the political system of democracy can best be achieved through control of the organisation and content of education—Bentham's "democratic model" for upholding a capitalist social order—it was no longer overtly enunciated in this form. Rather it found indirect expression in official directives such as the regulations governing the conduct of schools issued by that masterful permanent secretary of the Board from 1902 to 1911, Robert Morant—which in turn contributed to defining a "line" of policy for what was now an established and relatively streamlined department of state. Accordingly the Board of Education moves into the picture as a powerful influence in shaping educational developments of which full account must be taken.

None the less, if the subject matter and sources are more specific than in the previous two volumes, the approach is the same in that it is the aim of this book to throw light on the course of *educational* developments. It is to this end that aspects of administrative history are discussed, as well as overtly political controversy, but I am very conscious that much remains to be done before a full picture of this period emerges; not least at the local level where there were wide variations in terms of deference to or defiance of central directives, in application and achievement, on the part of county or city councils.

It is in this connection that the first of my acknowledgements may be made, to my mother whose work finds mention in later pages and to whom the book is dedicated. From 1924 a member of the Manchester Education Committee, almost continuously for over forty years, and from 1931-40 on the Consultative Committee of the Board of Education, she was a well-informed advocate of improving the financing and organisation of education in order to provide all children with a good start in life. If I took little account of discussion of educational policy around me during youth, I have been able to draw on

papers and contemporary publications she left, including a correspondence with R. H. Tawney with whom she worked closely for many years. Indeed it was he who advised Charles Trevelyan, when Labour Minister of Education in 1931, to appoint her to the Consultative Committee, where she played in the formulation of the Spens Report as important a part, to judge from Tawney's comments, as he had earlier played in shaping the Hadow Report. My particular memory of Tawney, it might be added, is an uncharacteristically immoderate observation made when we met outside the House of Commons at a moment of bankrupt national policy in 1939, to the effect that the only good parliamentarian had been Guy Fawkes. It is a comment easier to understand in the light of a closer knowledge of the decades during which he and others laboured unremittingly for educational change. But it should be added that I also have direct personal memories of the 1930s and was president of the National Union of Students in 1939, at a time when it began to take a new interest in educational policy, not only in relation to the universities but more generally.

I have many debts to acknowledge, besides to my wife, Joan Simon, with whom every aspect of the book has been discussed. Miss Jepson and her colleagues on the library staff of the Department of Education and Science have made me welcome on summer visits over a number of years, first at Curzon Street then in the larger spaces at Elizabeth House. I have also had assistance and advice from the archives department, notably from the late Miss Forsyth and Miss Perry. I am also grateful for ready assistance at the Trades Union Congress library at Congress House and the British Museum Newspaper library at Colindale.

At Leicester I have had the help of Dr. Higson of the School of Education library, and her successor Roy Kirk, also of Mike Hopkins who has a thorough grasp of the ramifications of the official publications in the university library. I am indebted to the University of Leicester for a term's study leave in the summer of 1972, during which the first draft of the book was completed; also to those of my students on whom chapters have been tried out. I must particularly thank Philip Cotterill of the university for assistance in working on the complexities of national expenditure on education—specifically Tables 13 and 17.

Finally, I owe to Alan Simon the laborious analysis of 1,800 protests against a Board circular, issued in 1932 by the National Government,

given in Appendix I; he also kindly undertook the compilation of the Index and went through the final draft making useful comments and recommendations both large and small. For the final product, however, I alone am responsible.

Leicester,
March 1974

BRIAN SIMON

CHAPTER I

POST-WAR PRESSURES, 1920-1922

During the first world war there was a rising demand for education. It found expression not only in representations about necessary reforms, during the discussions preceding and accompanying the passage of the Education Act 1918, but also in direct pressure on the schools—especially the secondary schools in which there were places for less than 10 per cent of each age group in the elementary schools. In 1918 there were 81,056 entrants to secondary schools in England, as compared with 54,141 in 1913-14, an increase of nearly 50 per cent. As the numbers had risen each year, children were packed into the schools, classes increased unduly in size, but even so the demand could not be met. Looking back on this period a Board of Education report noted that the pre-war policy of the more progressive local authorities—bent on extending provision for secondary education—"was now justified to the full". Earlier accusations of overbuilding "fell to the ground" for "even where the provision was greatest it proved inadequate. Schools were crowded and over-crowded; all sorts of temporary makeshifts were adopted . . . and still pupils had to be excluded."¹ This pinpoints a weakness at the key point of the school system and it is on what was advocated to repair it, and what was done, that the politics of education in the inter-war years chiefly turned.

During the war there could be little or no replacement of old buildings, let alone provision to meet new aspirations. But from 1918 there was an Education Act on the statute book which seemed to forecast steadily increasing expenditure on the education service. "Anything which this nation really wants, it is rich enough to pay for", a deputation from the Trades Union Congress was told in February 1917, by H. A. L. Fisher—brought into Lloyd George's coalition government as President of the Board at a critical stage in the war in 1916, to frame far-reaching new legislation. If the nation "really wants a good system of education, this country, war or no war, is perfectly rich enough to pay for it".² This was only to repeat the guarantee given to him by the prime minister before he took

¹ *Board of Education Report, 1923-4*, 23.

² PRO Ed24/1384.

office—that the funds would be available to translate far-reaching legislation into practice.

It was in the financial clauses that the greatest promise of the Education Act 1918 lay, notably Section 44 which secured a minimum exchequer grant of 50 per cent of all expenditure incurred by local authorities. This was a measure calculated to encourage “the more progressive” authorities setting the pace for educational advance, no less than those lagging behind to avoid putting too great a burden on the rates. It constituted a recognition that the education service was of national importance and that it was in the national interest to secure its consolidation and expansion. It seemed also to guarantee that particular measures incorporated in the Act, under pressure of wartime events, would be realised.

At a time when women were drawn into industry in growing numbers, but there was less room for the under-fives in elementary schools, a planned expansion of nursery schooling was envisaged (Section 19). Schooling for all children was lengthened at the other end of the elementary course, by raising the leaving age to 14 without exemptions; that is, ending the system of half-time work from the age of 12 and leaving school at 13 which was the rule in many industrial areas (Section 8). Moreover, it was envisaged that from 14 to 16—in due course 18—all would have compulsory part-time teaching for some hours a week—a measure first advocated by the Board’s Consultative Committee in 1909 and strongly supported by the Departmental Committee on Juvenile Employment (the Lewis Committee) which reported in April 1917 (Sections 3 and 10).

The proposal for continuation schools, added to the raising of the leaving age, had met with opposition from industrialists, accustomed to regard the availability of cheap juvenile labour as an essential freedom, particularly in old-established industries. But the Lewis Committee had underlined the extent and dangers of exploiting juveniles, both in industry and in dead-end jobs, and part-time day continued education, seen as a necessary protective measure, won sufficient support to secure incorporation in the Act, to be realised at a future date.¹ On the other hand this fell far short of the Labour programme, the central feature of which was a free passage for all children from

¹ Relevant excerpts from the Lewis Report and evidence are given in Willem van der Eyken, *Education, the Child and Society* (1973), 206-19. This very useful book of readings, which includes contemporary documents, will be referred to whenever appropriate.