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MISGIVINGS AND HOPES FOR ENGLISH EDUCATION*

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WHEN Mr. Taylor sent me the kind invitation to address you, I accepted it gladly. But I have my misgivings. I very frequently speak on education, chiefly at prize-givings, when only one headmaster is present. One in an audience of 200 or 500 or 800 does not dismay me. An audience of headmasters only is another matter. It is not only the audience; the character of the present controversies about education also weighs on my mind. The range of debate has been widened, and the key sharpened, by the intrusion of motives that are not educational. A crisis, still a little below the surface, seems to be advancing into major politics. For I doubt if the deliberations of Board of Education Committees, or other devices, can keep the issues out of the open arena.

It would be difficult, I think, in any other sphere of discussion to match the confusions and errors that beset education. For what is education? Buildings, equipment, staff, courses, curricula, examinations, are necessary means, but are not education. With them you can miss it; and you can have it without them. The essence of this matter is subtler. The true concern of education, I consider, is with imagination. And what is that? I can give no exact or tidy answer, but only indications. It is a fugitive, delicate, spontaneous manifestation, an intimate stroke of personal initiative. It is not always the agent's act so much as an event of which his mind is the scene. It enshrines, for instance, the curious transition from puzzlement to clarity, from fumbling for a clue or a meaning to a firm grasp, from uneasy dimness to light and security. It is a moment of constructive vision, with the stress now on vision and now on constructiveness. Again, it is the release of a natural energy; it is an act, and the master-key of action.

For all its frequency and familiarity, it is unique, and a sort of miracle. This illuminatory incipience of mind I call imagination. You remember Socrates, of course, who was a born teacher; he claimed only to be a midwife of the mind. This incipience is as various as the modes of man's activity. There

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is the imagination of the hand, the sense of materials, of what can be done with them, and how. There is the scientific imagination that steals ahead of facts in presentiments of what causes will be like, of where they may be looked for, of what the linkages will be. There is, rarest of all, the mathematical imagination. There are the imaginations that give us the fine arts. There is the imagination that makes the athlete or the acrobat, the sense of balance, pace, momentum, whereby in some persons the entire system works harmoniously and beautifully with an almost untaught perfection. Lastly, the most widely diffused and the most urgent in the particular and the general interests, there is the social imagination—the sense of what is in other minds and natures, the reciprocal focussing that builds up contacts into ties, and ties into conscience and a life.

The educator's business, to sum it up, in essence is to search out the roots of imagination in children. The roots are invisible, and often dormant. It matters little in what order they come alive. They ripen unequally and irregularly. The vivifying of imagination in one sphere often induces a vivifying in others. It is for the educator to discern and to encourage the natural stirrings. What the task calls for is obvious; a hopeful and affectionate helpfulness, above all. The temptations of the practitioner are also obvious; to be dominant and didactic. It is so easy for him to forget the miraculousness of imagination, or to despair of it, and to turn aside to mechanizing the circumstantial. Very often there seems no way but this mechanizing to fill the time up. So handicapped is he by the defects or the delays of Nature, by lack of favouring conditions of health and vitality, of home and environment. It is not in reason that the schools should make up for deficiency in the very influences that are the *sine quibus non* of good schooling.

The educator must himself be a person of imagination, of at least two imaginations, the social as *sine qua non*, and some other or others in as high a degree as can be managed. It is not only the teachers. There are the committee men with their staffs, the bureaucrats at headquarters in London, and the politicians. If the teachers themselves are liable to the mechanizing fallacies, how much more liable are those others in their various degrees of remoteness?

From talking about what I think the living core of education, I turn to some of the present controversies. They are developing in an air of crisis. This atmosphere, as hardly need be said,

owes less to educational realism than to stormy impulses invading ambitiously from the field of politics.

Public Schools¹ and Boarding Schools.

The most distinctive aim of English education is to promote the sense of community. Some teachers and some entire nations are content to instruct. The English, more ambitious, emulate certain Latin verbs which govern two accusatives,—the person taught and the thing. They strive after a double technique with a boy; as a pupil and as a person. They have certainly gone to great lengths with their chosen means. Only if the parties live, work and play together, these English think, can this technique get a grip, and to yield good results, it needs time. Community being a hierarchical idea, three years of boarding-school seems the minimum; a year of being nobody, a final year as a somebody, and a year between—if no more can be had—of edifying prospect and retrospect. In any humane scheme of education, residence is not a luxury or an extra, but a well-contrived means towards a major end. Different boys ripen for it at different times; some early, some late, some never. Some would be ripe for it about the time of going to a University; but even if they go, most of the Universities are non-residential.

It needs hardly to be argued, I hope, that a spell of residential education improves a boy's chance of imbibing community, and of learning citizenship in advance. That is the lesson of the Public Schools for the nation. Foreigners are acutely aware of it, and cast about for how to imitate. Some of them think that the Public Schools have made England, forgetting that England first made the Public Schools. It is only at home among ourselves that doubts and grouching about them are heard. That is an English habit; they grouse hopefully and appealingly, in order to have their beliefs massaged. There is no secret, of course, about this lesson of the Public Schools for the nation. But certain conditions must be fulfilled; there must be the right leadership, the right atmosphere, the right spirit in the staff, the right control and method. The most fundamental condition is freedom for conviction and initiative to work. Without this freedom the Public Schools would not have developed, nor could they continue, nor could new schools adopt those open secrets

1. The Canadian reader is reminded that "public school" means in England very much what "private school" means in Canada.—EDITOR.

with good hope. It is not by any ordinance of uniformity that these schools are a means of grace. They differ in most respects, including merit; and there are schools for all tastes; the variety is so great as to embarrass the choice of parents. Freedom is their corner-stone, the freedom of the school and the freedom of the parent. The system is so free as to be inherently experimental; and experiment is a prime need. Freedom seems to be the true element for the extremely personal venture of education, as I have tried to depict it.

The Boarding-School controversy, after all, rings a little unreal. Listening to it, one might gather that the disbelievers in Boarding Schools are in danger of having their children willy-nilly drafted into them, and that the believers are to be denied access to them. Either compulsion would be undemocratic. It would be undemocratic, even if the disbelievers heavily outnumbered the believers. Democracy is not a machinery for submitting all issues to majority votes, and then suppressing minority views and minority practice. That is totalitarianism, which can be watched at work on the continent. The majority vote is not an absolute good, or an end in itself. It is a mere means to an end, and this end is nothing less than wisdom, justice, and liberty in political things and personal comfort and security for the citizen. Democracy is a safeguard for alternatives and differences, in short for liberty, in this case the liberty, primarily, of parents to buy the education they prefer. In the clamour of experts, politicians, propagandists, and directors of education, who, though servants of elective democratic bodies, disregard the salutary rule by which civil servants are restrained from public controversy and agitation, the parents go almost unheard.

The chief fault of the Public Schools is their fewness. Their membership, being limited, becomes a privilege. But there are far more of them than there used to be, and they are much more mixed. Many are quite cheap, and many will be cheaper. They are often charged with not being democratic. If only there were places in them, the existing schools and others that may be built, for a reasonable proportion of all the boys who would profit by joining them, the charge would be false. Even now, it is true only statistically, and only upon the totalitarian view of the majority-minority impasse which I have referred to.

Inside the schools democracy rules in the sense that a boy stands on his own legs, and is judged strictly for what he is. He finds his niche in that community, and imbibes as much of

its citizenship as he is capable of. He goes out into the rough and tumble of life already in some degree a formed citizen. There would be less rough and tumble if more boys thus learned citizenship in advance. The Public Schools are often accused of dividing the nation into two camps, insiders and outsiders. But this distinction is a constant in all educated nations, whether they use day secondary schools, or boarding-schools, or both. If both were abolished here, the distinction would still persist but on a worse basis, more worldly and more philistine. The great desideratum is that the distinction should rest on a sound basis, such as a lengthy and searching education, and that more and more should become insiders, and fewer and fewer outsiders. An improving ratio of insiders is good evidence of progress in a nation. It is foolish to expect by any manipulation of education to smooth out social differences, if a searching education—and the more searching the better—is the best ground for differentiating. The Boarding-School rests on the belief that community cannot be fully learned out of a book, or by class-lessons or propaganda; it comes not by talking about it, though talk can help, but by living it. Community is not civics, though there is no harm in civics; on the contrary. But civics is about a different citizenship, the adult rate-paying house-keeping sort, and knowledge of these sides of adult life is no substitute for understanding the social texture and drift of school life, and living up to the opportunities of school citizenship.

But the Public Schools, and Boarding Schools in general, are not the only means of grace. All and any English schools, whatever their handicaps and deprivations may be, and however grave, appear to seek after community. It is the bias of the blood. The social imagination, strong throughout the race, is to be seen at work here, there and everywhere, bravely and inventively, with penurious and pathetic economy; and it forms boys into practising citizens who will presently be good recruits for English democracy. Bad friends make worse democrats. Whatever else an English school may produce or fail to produce, citizens it must produce. When, I wonder, will the worse-circumstanced schools be given a special community grant?

Equalitarianism and Bureaucracy.

It is better to conceive our democracy as a form of citizenship than as a form of government. Starting points determine most arguments. Start out from the idea of government and the State, and you may easily slip into totalitarianism, mistaking government for an end in itself and the State for an absolute.

You may easily have too much of either. The truest democracy is a nation of friends. Of citizenship, of fellow-citizenship, of friendship there can hardly be enough, let alone too much. With this political orientation our English schools, striving after community, as I have described, chime in well.

In these days of reconstruction we are threatened with an entirely new order in education. Equality is the key-note; equality of opportunity for children, guaranteed by all-round standardizing, by equality of status for schools, and of salaries, I suppose, for teachers. Farewell to freedom and variety! "Parity of esteem" is the slogan. The easiest parity of esteem to achieve is, of course, parity of disesteem. But parity of esteem is a false idea. It is not in human nature to concede such parity to persons or institutions. Take husbands and wives, who might well have benefit of parity. But who ever esteems them alike? Take the Houses of Parliament, or government offices, or churches, or clubs, or Oxford Colleges, or railways, or butchers or barbers or candlestick makers. The human mind has a voracious instinct for differences. If they are there, it will find them; if not, it will invent them. When confronted by two persons or two groups of the same species, the natural man,—and that is everyone of us—believes the one to be better, if only he knew how, than the other. Esteem is the most discriminating thing in human life. Parity of esteem is a fable, the fancy of an arithmetical psychologist, an idea fit for statistics. It is certainly not a human motive. Esteem is always desired in the comparative degree. To be esteemed equally with another is as good as no esteem at all: it is, in fact, parity of disesteem.

I wish to put a question to the equalitarians. The fathers of democracy are the ancient Greeks, and among them chiefly the Athenians. Have the equalitarians, I wonder, considered the two books on Friendship in Aristotle's *Ethics*? He there sheds light from a novel point of view on Athenian life, on the society for which no political framework but democracy could suit. Why did the Athenians need so much freedom? There was so much of it at Athens that you couldn't tell a slave from a freeman in the street, which shocked many from other parts of Greece. It was because the Athenians were gifted, diverse, enterprising and versatile, above most, above any; and unless they were free, they could not be or do all that was in them to be and do. Friendliness was the substance of their working citizenship. Aristotle's emphasis on it comprehends every sort of contact, those of sport, of business, of culture, the nobler ties, deep and

lasting, or the brief, banal and trivial. Aristotle emphasizes pointedly the entire range of contacts between unequals. Athens rejoiced in differences; and the warmth and force of her citizenship easily saved the differences and inequalities from becoming complexes. The pioneers of democracy were not equalitarians. Equalitarianism is not democracy, but the pedantry of democracy; and against such declension buoyancy, vitality and tolerance make the best defence.

The method of the proposed New Order is administrative simplicity and uniformity in unit areas of considerable size. Educational effort within those areas is to be bureaucratically subordinated to local committees and their officials. The signs are that both committees and directors would be masterful. The extreme voices in the movement threaten to abolish all governing bodies of schools, or at least to neutralize them. Some threaten to exclude from employment in the public services all those who have not been educated in the bureaucratic system of schools. The movement as a whole disregards the rights of parents.

All this can be studied in the orange sixpenny of the directors of education, *Education: A Plan for the Future*. Administrative uniformity in a broad scheme of centralized power is, of course, a distinctive ambition of bureaucrats. I don't blame them altogether; for that, besides being their ambition, is the key to good administration in certain spheres. Strong central control with hierarchical subordination of staff and labour is often the basis, and the only basis, of effective working. But this hierarchical scheme would not suit English education, or the English. It may have its uses elsewhere. It is the German system; it was, long before the Nazis came into power, and it has lent itself admirably to their purposes. Without it they could hardly have made such a conquest of German education. It is, in fact, the totalitarians' opportunity.

But let us confess that the working of our democracy has occasioned, though it does not excuse, the bureaucratic ambition. The County Councils, themselves somewhat political bodies, can hardly be said to fill their education committees with a single eye to the fitness of the members for work on education. As the work steadily extends and diversifies, the laymen naturally find themselves at a growing disadvantage. They are tempted, and indeed obliged, to rely more and more on their chief official. It is the system, of course, that is wrong, so wrong that it ought to be altered. The current conceptions have been too simple.

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The nation has assumed that a uniform style of bureaucracy will answer equally in all branches of administration, as if what suited the 'bus system of a city, or the Streets Committee, would also suit the schools. The misfit is just as glaring in Whitehall. The responsible organ at the Board of Education ought to be a body recruited from educational practitioners of distinction, especially those from the highest levels of education, and from the educated professions and other persons of distinction. The best local thought and experience in education should similarly be organized into the local control of education, and not least the Universities. If no reform on these lines is undertaken, the bureaucratic trend will strengthen, and the Directors of Education will have won. But that victory might itself lead to a reform on novel lines. If a highly placed official is to be virtually supreme in the control of education, he ought to hold his power direct from the electors, and not by the appointment of a body not well-fitted to instruct or guide him. America offers good examples of chief executives by election. In a broad view the election of Directors of Education by the popular vote would break no democratic principle.

I have pursued the two topics of equalitarianism and bureaucratism at considerable length. The danger that threatens, on the one hand from an exaggerated and morbid view of the place of equality in the democratic ideal, and on the other by over-reaching claims and encroachment by one of the elements in the technique of governing, can be summed up easily. It is freedom that is endangered, the freedom of parents and schools, and the freedom to experiment. The crisis extends far beyond the sphere of education, for it may be said to have reached that sphere from general politics. The challenge to lovers of freedom is no momentary or local diversion. This gathering is specifically concerned with the challenge in education. But you and your organization are not alone in this danger. Many organizations and many individuals are only too well aware of it. They nurse their fears, and their courage, in isolation. They would be stronger, both for defence and for offence, by joining forces. A lead is needed. A lead, even a powerful lead, of course, would be only a beginning. I look round this room, and wonder whether the beginning might not be made here. You have behind you a large and diverse body of schools, a comprehensive constituency. I ask myself whether you might not hopefully and advantageously give a lead for all defenders and lovers of freedom in education to unite. I leave you, if you like this question, to ask it of yourselves.