

Comment

Among the many fascinating statistics in Michael Hornsby-Smith's and Raymond Lee's study of Roman Catholic Opinion in England and Wales* are those relating to catholic attitudes to social problems. While 67% of all catholics interviewed thought that "the Church ought to be more involved in issues like housing, poverty and race relations", only 34% agreed that "the Church ought to take active steps to promote social justice, even if it means getting involved in politics". Just how the Church can involve herself in politics is not clear, and the muddle suggests an ambivalence in catholic attitudes to matters of social justice. The attitude to the problem of justice in education is surely typical of this ambivalence.

It was very heartening to read recently in the catholic press that the Catholic Teachers' Federation was to mount a campaign against clause 23 of the Tory Government's monstrous Education Bill, which removes the statutory obligation on local authorities to provide free school transport. Clearly, dropping that obligation poses a severe threat to the viability of many catholic schools, particularly those which draw their pupils from a large catchment area. Already Oxfordshire County Council has voted to stop funding pupils who travel to denominational schools. It is right and proper that catholic educationalists should oppose the injustice of clause 23. But isn't it also right and proper that they should oppose just as vigorously all those other blatant injustices of the Tory education policy? Unhappily there was no reporting of such in the catholic press.

Like all other measures issuing from the Tory monetarist dogma, the fruits of the education cuts, (closure of nursery schools, sabotage of free milk and school meals, reduction in staffing, increased charges for adult education, and so on), will predictably hurt most the worst off and underprivileged. Equally predictably,

* *Roman Catholic Opinion*, Michael Hornsby-Smith and Raymond Lee. University of Surrey.

not only will the rich and privileged be exempt from this educational belt-tightening, (there are no plans for reducing the estimated £500 million a year state funding of the so-called independent sector – no surprise from a Cabinet boasting 30% old Etonians!), but they are to be boosted by the £50 million a year grant for the assisted places scheme.

Presumably an important reason why the catholic education world is ambivalent in its opposition to the injustices of this Education Bill is not only because an analysis and opposition which is broader than the sectarian interest in clause 23 would be *political*, (and we mustn't be *that*), but also because the unsavoury truth would be exposed that our education system mirrors and colludes with the socially divisive structure of the national education scene.

The catholic version of privileged education establishments, the catholic public schools, have of course been an odd facet of english catholic life for a long time. But now a new and worrying switch is happening in a number of catholic grammar schools run by religious congregations. Bending to the pressure of groups of selfish middle-class parents, they have "gone independent" rather than join and support the local catholic comprehensive schemes. On Merseyside, for example, three schools run by the Irish Christian Brothers have gone independent, even though the brothers came originally to Liverpool with the Gospel-inspired purpose of educating the poor and the underprivileged. Their educational role now in that city of high unemployment and social deprivation would seem to be to a selfish and privileged elite. In order to support and sustain their new status as 'christian' independent schools, advantage will be taken of the government's £50 million handout for assisted places. But that is *not political*, is it? Isn't it?

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