

THE LABOUR PARTY AND EDUCATION

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THE education policy of the Labour Party is without any doubt of considerable importance and far more attention ought to be paid to the draft policy document, *Learning to Live*, than has been given in the popular press which concentrated on comprehensive schools and the fate of the public schools. When this document is considered at the October Party conference there may be some opposition that will lead to changes in detail, but it is unlikely that the conference will do other than endorse the document as a whole. The important thing to recognize is that a favourable vote at the conference will not stop the discussion on education, for of all topics this is about the most popular with Labour Party members. Furthermore, there cannot be another party with as many educational 'experts' as the Labour Party has—even if many of them are self-elected.

To discuss the development of an educational policy inside the Labour Party is not possible without recognizing that several schools of thought exist and that there are two other documents besides the official party policy document. One is the Victory for Socialism publication, *Equality in Education*, while the other, *Education and Socialism*, comes from the influential Socialist Union group.

The official document is a long one and it received praise in several unexpected quarters, perhaps because the policies discussed have been argued over for a long time in educational circles. Basically the argument is that if children are to have a fair chance of an adequate education there must be more buildings, better equipment, smaller classes, more teachers and the ending of segregation based on the results of the 'eleven-plus' examination. The statement points out that helping children 'to become educated people is a task in which parents, teachers, the children themselves and the Government, both central and local, all have their share', and continues by stressing that the whole task cannot be performed by a policy or by Acts of Parliament or by administration. The view expressed is that the Government must provide the framework but that the organization and management of schools and colleges are the joint concern of the teachers and 'the

general body of citizens in their capacities as parents, school governors and managers and electors'.

In a fashion typical of the British Labour Party throughout its history little space is given to the theory of education, and after four pages the statement is concerned with practical problems. The keynote is that the biggest single fact about our education today is that there is not enough of it, and the aim is clearly to make sure that there is more.

More will be obtained by having more teachers, for more teachers allow classes to be smaller, they allow for reorganizing schools and eventually they make it possible to raise the school-leaving age. There is already a shortage of teachers and some authorities are having to appeal to untrained people to come forward to teach. The decision to introduce a three-year training course in 1960 instead of the present two-year one will mean that the shortage will be accentuated. If we wished to reduce the size of our classes to a maximum of forty in primary schools and thirty in secondary schools it would not be possible before 1972 because of the shortage of places in the training colleges and the low net yearly increase in the number of teachers.

The Labour Party policy regards this problem as of the utmost importance and although this section received little press publicity it was a key part of the whole document, for on the solution of the problem of the supply of teachers rests so many other parts of the policy. The promise is that immediately a Labour Government took office steps would be taken to increase the number of places in training colleges.

There is ample room for discussion as to the prospects of attracting additional recruits of the right calibre, but without a doubt the project is an admirable one and it is also a major undertaking. If it is achieved—even if not completely—the size of classes will fall, for this reform has the highest priority. Thus one of the greatest obstacles to good education will be removed. The policy also proposes to end another major handicap in the primary schools, the distortion caused by the existence of the 'eleven-plus' examination, which so often leads to selection as early as eight years of age and the consequent cramming of the brightest children to make sure that the school secures a good record for getting children through the examination.

If the 'eleven-plus' is to be abolished this immediately alters the

present organization of secondary education and it is here that the Labour Party makes the revolutionary proposal of comprehensive secondary education. In a sense this means the ending of selection; in another sense selection is bound to continue but it will be, so it is argued, a better selection. There will remain the problem of the course of study to be followed by the child and this should be made, to quote the document, 'by the inter-action of the interests displayed by the child, the judgment of its teachers and the wishes of the parents'. It is argued that this selection can be most fully achieved in a school large enough to offer a wide variety of courses, in a school where the child is not typed for evermore and where there is enough flexibility to allow children to be graded according to their ability in individual subjects and to be graded again and again as developments take place. This is what the Labour leaders mean by 'comprehensive' schools, but it is worth noting that the policy statement does not insist on any one type of school for it regards any 'system of secondary education which succeeds, by any of a variety of means, in providing this opportunity' as a comprehensive system.

Towards the end of the statement the discussion leaves the county system and turns to the private sector. The idea of abolishing the public schools is looked at and rejected. This rejection will cause some bother at the Party Conference for there is a strong feeling inside the Party against public and preparatory schools, for they are seen as a system of privilege that makes entry easier into Oxford and Cambridge and then into positions of ample security and of influence. There is a long argument on this subject which if it is followed will make it easy to understand the attitude of the ordinary Labour Party members on this point. The official proposal is to tackle the problem by raising the standard of the State schools. The idea of abolishing all fee-paying schools is rejected as 'an unjustifiable invasion of liberty'. The conclusion is that 'the citizen has a right to decide for himself'.

While the future of the public schools directly affects only a small proportion of the community, very many more are interested in the direct-grant schools. These are fee-paying schools which receive Ministry grants in return for providing a proportion of their places for nominees of the Local Education Authority. The proposal is that Local Education Authorities are to be encouraged to provide all the secondary education for the children

in their areas and thus gradually to end the direct-grant scheme. The list of direct-grant schools will not be extended, and as the L.E.A. schools are built this list will be reduced. Some of the direct-grant schools coming off the list will wish to come into the national system fully. It can be assumed that this problem is already being examined by the Catholic Education Council, for in England and Wales we have fifty-seven direct-grant schools (compared with 196 aided secondary schools and 587 independent schools). It will be the non-Catholic direct-grant schools which will suffer most by the growth of county grammar and comprehensive schools, for the Catholic direct-grant schools meet a particular need that is not easily met in any other way.

As regards independent schools, the proposal is that inspection will continue as is laid down in the 1944 Act and that satisfactory schools will continue to be registered and the others closed down.

The Victory for Socialism policy statement is far less balanced. In many of its points there is agreement with the official document but this group wishes to begin 'the integration of independent and maintained schools in a national system' and it proposes that there should be no public funds provided for any school without public ownership.

An exception is made for denominational schools 'in view of the historical connections between churches and schools and the strong religious feelings involved'. For this reason 'denominational schools should be given a special status—so long as all elements of social privilege are excluded. This can be done by ensuring that all fees are abolished and that these schools accept the principles and standards laid down by the Minister of Education. By an extension of the policy which many of them happily accept today, church schools, though not publicly owned, will come to be financed wholly from public funds and woven into the pattern of a national system of comprehensive education'.

In addition this group plans to take over all efficient independent day-schools and the whole programme, it is airily said, could be achieved during the first five years of the next Labour Government, and while it would involve some 'little cost', this would not be large and would, in any case, be divided between 'the taxpayer and the ratepayer'.

It is not necessary to devote much space to the Victory for Socialism proposals, in spite of the fact that many of them have

an instinctive appeal for the left wing of the Labour Party.

Education and Socialism is a far more important document, even if the Socialist Union seldom makes the newspaper headlines in the way that Victory for Socialism does. In this document far more space is devoted to ideals than in the others, and, expressed in simple terms, the ideals are of a school system that would provide equal opportunities for all children and at the same time different opportunities to cater for different needs. The ideal is more stress on true education and the postponement of specialization and the avoidance of a narrow concentration on examination requirements. 'What is needed is to prepare all children to be able to make judgments of values, and to have some common understandings of the democratic, scientific and spiritual heritage which they share . . . but with the best will in the world the State cannot accommodate within its own institutions the whole range of philosophical tenets which some people hold to be the truth, and parents who disapprove of the principles taught in the State schools, or the methods of work used there, must have the right to opt out of the system and to send their children to schools which are independent of the State.'

The Socialist Union advocates the ending of the 'eleven-plus' selection and favours the comprehensive school because the selection of children to follow the academic courses is not made in public and because the organization can be more flexible. Yet this approval is a qualified one, for the group responsible for this document found many problems connected with comprehensive schools. In an article in the July, 1958, issue of *Socialist Commentary*, which is the journal of Socialist Union, a writer considered that the official policy statement was not honest in its references to comprehensive schools and to 'other variants' of comprehensive education.

Turning to practical problems, the group deals with the teaching of religion in State schools. It regards the present system as unsatisfactory and as putting a smear of hypocrisy over the child's mind, 'for he recognizes insincerity in his teachers soon enough, and he knows, too, how little importance many of these same adults attach to religion for themselves, even while they insist on his having his daily dose'. Two solutions are considered. One is to bring in representatives of the churches to give instruction to those children whose parents wish it or to make the State schools

completely secular. This latter solution is rejected, for it is 'certainly unacceptable to a great part of our population. The battle over secular versus non-denomination schools bedevilled the growth of education in this country for many years, and we have no wish to re-open that bitter wrangle.'

While the authors say that they do not see any complete solution, they ask that the school assembly should be made 'a sincere and meaningful corporate activity' and that scripture should be incorporated into the general timetable and not sandwiched between the registers and arithmetic. Teachers who are indifferent to the value of the scripture lesson should be 'actively discouraged from teaching it'.

The Socialist Union group finds no other answer to the question of class privilege and the public schools than the 'integration of the great majority of them into the State system', and likewise with private schools. But not all of them, for the view is strongly expressed that parents should be free to opt out of the State school system.

Thus we have three documents, and even if they have their points of agreement they likewise have many points of disagreement. The argument will go on for a long time and many groups inside the Labour Party will contribute to the discussion. From the viewpoint of Catholics concerned with Catholic schools two things need to be mentioned, one of hope and the other the contrary. Inside the Labour Party there has developed a considerable understanding of the Catholic viewpoint and there has been growing up a willingness to help us to meet the liabilities our conscience imposes on us. Many Labour M.P.s and leaders would agree with Mr Leslie Hale, M.P., who was reported recently in *The Bury Times*: 'Mr Hale put in a plea for denominational schools. "I believe that as denomination schools are accepted as part of our educational system they should be helped to bear the exceptional financial burden that post-war inflation and the 1944 Education Act has placed on them", he said. "This burden falls with exceptional severity on the Roman Catholic authorities, particularly in Lancashire."' That is the hopeful side. On the contrary side there is the grave lack of informed Catholic contribution to the Labour discussions on education. There are plenty who will speak up for the preservation of the dual system, many who will argue for better financial arrangements, but few,

very very few, who will seriously discuss education itself, its aims, its place in a democratic society, the subjects to be taught and the methods to be used. Surely, out of all the Catholics who support the Labour Party we could find a quota of educationalists willing to take an active share in the discussions that go on inside the Party.

DIAGRAMS

RAYMOND GARLICK

Outside, a formal oak-tree laid
upon the napery of snow:
deltas of boughs that seem to flow
up to the glittering escalate
of Moelwyn, like a peak of jade;
complex inflections rise and grow
mutating from the stem below
and burst like a peacock's tail displayed.

Within, upon the ice-white wall
a further theorem of grace:
its stem subtends, slender and tall,
twin branches sprung from a single place;
upon this wooden tau, a sprawl
of limbs no summer can efface.