
Adult Franchise and Educational Reform

“*We must educate our masters.*”

ROBERT LOWE.

SINCE the publication of the Report of the Donoughmore Commission no proposals have aroused so much attention as the Report of the Special Committee on Education. This is not surprising. The reforms advocated in the Report are of such great political and social significance that, if effectively carried out, they would affect privileged classes and institutions and alter the entire structure of our social system. They would make the mass of the people politically effective. They would level down to a great extent the distinctions between the middle and the lower classes. The finances necessary to carry them out would demand such high taxation that in a few years there will be hardly any very rich people left in the country. In fact what is surprising is that more people did not evince an interest in these far-reaching proposals.

The Report is undoubtedly a noteworthy one. It is not suggested that it has no defects. Many of its recommendations require further examination and revision. There are other related topics which the Report has failed to consider and cannot be ignored. But even if it is rejected *in toto*, it will repay perusal for its educational value alone. It brings to light many of the defects of our social system. It shows how little the education imparted now in our schools satisfies the needs of a modern society, and how an efficient system of education, wisely introduced, could do much to remedy the defects from which we suffer at present. But there is a great danger that some of the main objects of the Report, which will be dealt with in this article, will be forgotten and that little will be achieved. What disturbs one is the absence

1. Report of the Special Committee on Education (Ceylon), Government Press, Colombo. 1943.

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of any clear planning and the political considerations that seem to weigh with some of its supporters.

A radical reform in our educational system is undoubtedly long overdue. It is necessary not merely on the ground that 'an educational system grows rapidly out of date in a world of changing values.'² If that were all, one could be satisfied with constant adjustments. A reform is urgent in Ceylon on other grounds. The far-reaching constitutional reforms carried out in 1931 based on the recommendations made by the Donoughmore Commission have radically changed our political system. They have granted to every man and woman over twenty-one years of age the right to choose representatives in the State Council, and thus have placed ultimate political power in the hands of the masses. This has led to a certain amount of administrative inefficiency and corruption, and it is possible that the situation may soon grow worse. Some therefore suggest that this privilege should be taken away till the masses are better educated. But, as Sir Andrew Caldecott pointed out in his despatch on the reform of the constitution,³ the masses cannot be deprived of this right. What can be done is to make men and women fit to exercise the franchise. This should be done, if not in the interests of the people themselves, at least in the interests of good government. In short, whether we like it or not, we have to educate our masters.

The Special Committee has shown full realization of this important fact. It has taken the view that it is the duty of the state to help every individual not only to attain the highest degree of development possible but also to become a useful citizen fit to pass judgment on affairs of state and exercise intelligently the franchise the state has conferred on him.⁴ It recognizes further that the masses cannot be denied any longer equal educational rights and that these should be granted without much delay, and goes on to examine the causes which deny equal opportunities to all.

The chief of these causes is the absence of an adequate number of schools to provide all children with even an elementary education.⁵ Though education is compulsory by law it is not so in actual practice. Recent correspondence in the press has shown that the situation is much worse than the Special Committee imagined. A large number of children attended school for too short a period to benefit by the education they received, and, if education is to be made compulsory for all, it will be necessary to establish schools to provide for the education of more than three times the number of children attending schools today.

2. Ibid. p. 6

3. Sessional Paper XXVIII-1938 p. 3

4. Report p. 9

5. Ibid. p. 24

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The next major defect is the existence of two types of education according to the medium of instruction used.⁶ In other countries schools are generally divided into elementary and secondary and from the first a pupil can pass on to the second. In Ceylon they are divided into English and Vernacular schools. All Vernacular schools till recently corresponded to elementary schools. They taught little more than reading, writing and arithmetic. Even today though they teach for examinations similar to those provided for English schools their standards are much lower than those of English schools which provide a modern education and possess better buildings, better equipment and above all better qualified teachers. This is not all the difference between English and Vernacular schools. A pupil in a Vernacular school cannot normally proceed to an English school unless he is prepared to start his education over again, and he cannot aspire to a post higher than that of a notary or a vernacular schoolmaster. He cannot become a doctor or a lawyer or enter government service as avenues for such employment are open only to the English-educated.

It was not without reason that Sir West Ridgeway over forty years ago advocated the spread of English to the villages. "It should be remembered," he said, "that Ceylon, unlike India, has adopted English and not the vernacular as the language of its courts, and consequently the people have a right to claim reasonable means for acquiring a knowledge of the language in which they have to plead and defend themselves in their appeal for justice."⁷ This statement was made when there was only equality of law. Now when there is equality of political rights should not all citizens have the right to get a knowledge of the language of the government the ultimate control of which lies in their hands? The Special Committee faces the problem squarely and proposes to provide for the teaching of English and a vernacular in all schools thus obliterating the distinction between the two types of schools.

The Special Committee goes further. It realizes that if equal opportunities are given to all the schools cannot be carried on on the lines on which they have been hitherto run. English schools were started in Ceylon to provide recruits for government service. Their objective does not seem to have changed much during the last hundred years. After all government service is the chief industry of the people, and English schools have successfully adjusted themselves to satisfy the needs of a government expanding its activities. The vernacular schools as a whole, if they have any objective at all, appear to provide an education necessary to equip a vernacular teacher. A national scheme of education cannot have such narrow objectives. In addition to making the inhabitants of the country fit to exercise their rights as citizens it must make the people develop the resources of the country

6. Ibid. p. 22

7. Administration of the Affairs of Ceylon, 1896-1903. Colombo 1903. p. 64

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to satisfy their economic needs. The Spécial Committee proposes to divide the school-going population into three sections. A small section of five per cent. are to attend secondary schools. A larger section of fifteen per cent. are to attend Senior Schools where the education imparted will have an industrial bias. The remaining eighty per cent. are to have an education with an agricultural bias.

There is bound to be much difference of opinion with regard to this proposal and even more with regard to the way it is suggested to enforce it. Many will object on the ground that it is not easy to make a community, which for the last hundred years has been adjusting itself from a hierarchical feudal society to a competitive modern society, to adapt itself in a few years to totalitarian methods. Others will demand more statistics before they agree to the percentages proposed. The methods proposed for allotting children who leave primary schools into these three divisions also need further examination. But the fact remains that if there is to be a national scheme of education, Government will have to exercise some control over the occupations of people to avoid the confusion that is bound to arise if untrammelled competition is allowed. It cannot permit parents full freedom to decide about the future of their children. In fact parents have little or no say in the matter even today. Most children take to the openings that first come their way, and the occupation is generally chosen not according to the aptitude of the child but according to its economic value and the social status it provides. If parents and children are allowed their own way, most of them will aim at gaining the most lucrative posts, and the greater majority of them will fail and become discontented citizens. Government also cannot fit itself into a system of denominational schools. It has to take full responsibility for the education of the entire people. The denominational schools, if they are to continue, will have to fit themselves into the government system.

These proposals are undoubtedly excellent and if effectively carried out Ceylon will be a different country. But the real problem is whether Government will be able to afford the expenditure? The Board of Ministers wanted a Commission to reduce expenditure on education.⁸ The Spécial Committee proposes more than doubling the amount spent today. The Board of Ministers cannot provide money for education and starve other nation-building services. Besides if the recommendations of the Spécial Committee are to be effectively carried out Government will have to provide large sums of money for other developments too.

It has already been pointed out that the most urgent need is to build sufficient schools to provide education for every child in the country. Who

8. Report p. 38

9. Ibid p. 5

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is going to compel parents to send their children to schools? Government on grounds of finance has not so far faced squarely the problem of village administration. The conditions created by the War have revealed fully the weaknesses of the existing arrangements. Unless the Home Committee reorganizes the system of village administration the Education Department will have to appoint a host of inspectors to compel children to attend school. Whatever is done, it will mean that the Board of Ministers will have to provide a large sum of money for this purpose.

The trifurcation of schools will be of no avail unless industries and agriculture can provide suitable employment for those who leave Senior and Practical schools. Committees of industrial and agricultural experts will have to sit along with educational experts and devise schemes to create openings to satisfy those who benefit by the new types of education. Our present educational system is not the product of a day. It has grown for over a century adjusting itself to our political, social and economic environment. There is no doubt that the political conditions are going through a rapid change. Unless the economic conditions too are changed the three types of schools may gradually transform themselves again into a single type. About a hundred years ago Central Schools were established to give such 'an impetus to practical education that youths will take the opportunity to qualify themselves for agriculture and other lucrative employments'.¹⁰ But Ceylonese who learnt English found neither agriculture nor any other employment so secure and lucrative as government service, and those in charge of these schools soon lost sight of the object for which they were established.

It will also not be possible to make education compulsory in backward and unhealthy areas unless anti-malarial and other sanitary measures are undertaken to improve the general health of the children. Otherwise compulsory education will never be compulsory even if the necessary schools are established. Unless the economic conditions of the peasants are improved at the same time Government will have to provide free not only books but also meals and clothing if not subsidies to parents.

All this means that Government will have to find an immense amount of money if it is to carry out satisfactorily the proposals made by the Special Committee. The great danger now is that as sufficient money will not be available the important proposals with regard to the education of the masses may be whittled down and those affecting the middle class alone will be carried out fully.

W. M. G. Colebrooke came out to Ceylon in 1829 to examine the system of government then in existence. He was a man imbued with high ideals and was dissatisfied with conditions in Ceylon as we are with our educational

10. *Native Education* by H. A. Wyndham. Oxford University Press, 1933. p. 41.

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system. He made revolutionary proposals. He wanted the system of administration modernized. He suggested reforms to convert our natural and feudal economy into a commercial one. He proposed the abolition of *rāja-kāriya* which was to put an end to the legal sanction given to caste. He wanted all people given equal legal rights irrespective of race and caste. He recommended the abolition of Vernacular schools and the establishment of English schools and expected the new knowledge to filter down gradually to the masses.¹¹ Our government was modernized except in the villages. Our economy was changed, often at the expense of the villager. Our caste system is still with us. Equal legal rights mean little to the economically and educationally backward masses. And the population of Ceylon consists of a privileged community of about ten per cent. in the urban areas and an unprivileged community of about ninety per cent. mainly in the rural areas.

Will the proposals of the Special Committee have a fate similar to the recommendations of the Colebrooke Commission? If they do, it will not be surprising. In the nineteenth century the masses were neglected partly because Government devoted most of its revenue to satisfy the needs of the politically vocal European planters and merchants. Today those who are politically influential are not the illiterate masses but the middle class who are behind the political and communal organizations like the National Congress, the Sinhala Mahasabha, the Kandyan Youth League and the Jaffna Association. They are the privileged community and they can bring sufficient pressure on our State Councillors to get their demands satisfied. The danger now is that this class will be catered for and not the masses.

The Report itself shows signs of a move in this direction. The Special Committee at an early stage considered whether all education should be made free but came to the conclusion that it was not possible.¹² But just before the Report was signed for some mysterious reason known only to themselves the majority changed their mind and decided to make all education free. What does this really imply? Vernacular education is already free. Even when these schools are transformed into Practical schools there is no proposal to charge fees in them. Free education then really means that education in the present English schools and the University will be made free. In other words the privileged community, the middle class will benefit at once. Even if the village schools are improved the pupils in them will not be able to benefit by this change for even another decade. If a good portion of the available money is used to make the present English schools free and to establish new ones there is little hope of making education really compulsory or any real improvement being made in the Vernacular schools.

11. *Ceylon under the British* by G. C. Mendis. C. A. C. Press p. 28

12. Report p. 65

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In dealing with the three types of schools the Special Committee says : " We would state unequivocally that we intend that all the three types shall be accorded parity of status in our scheme. This can be achieved only by applying the same standards to all the schools in regard to organization, equipment and staff. One type shall not be favoured at the expense of the other."¹³ The Special Committee appears to have lost sight of this excellent resolution of theirs at a later stage.¹⁴ The maximum range of salary and allowances they recommend for a Trained Teacher in a Practical School is Rs. 150 and in a Senior or Secondary School is Rs. 225. What is the explanation for the difference ? Did not the Special Committee realize that by proposing a much lower scale of salaries for Practical schools that they went not only against their own recommendation but also against the equality of educational opportunity which they aimed at establishing ? The Special Committee probably felt they were suggesting a scheme beyond the financial capacity of the country and started whittling down their proposals. Why did not the Special Committee then propose the same scale of salaries for Senior schools which corresponded to the Practical schools ? Is it because the Senior schools will be in the towns and will be attended mainly by the children of the privileged middle class ? If the Committee had to modify its proposals to reduce expenditure, it should have continued the levy of fees in Secondary and Senior schools whose pupils will be in a more advantageous position before it decided to accept a lower standard for the Practical schools.

The Special Committee emphasized that all schools will have equal treatment not only with regard to staff but also with regard to organization and equipment. But no appendix deals with the money necessary for improving the buildings of the Vernacular schools. The structure of the buildings of the Vernacular schools is not very different from what they were in Dutch times. Most of them are utterly inadequate to provide a modern education, and will have to be altered and enlarged if the proposals of the Special Committee are to be carried out effectively.

Many of the speeches made in the State Council and at numerous meetings held to consider the Report did not show much interest in the necessity for improving the education of the masses. If the speeches are analyzed they will reveal that the speakers were mostly thinking how the new proposals would affect the middle class. Some have been concerned with the future of the secondary schools. Some have emphasized the importance of free education and considered it the best feature—the pearl of great price—in the Report. Others have laid stress on the importance of Central Schools,

13. Ibid. p. 39

14. Ibid. p. 156

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the disproportionate number of Buddhist students in the University, as compared with Christian students, and the need for concessions to students of backward communities for admission to the University. But few have been concerned with providing an education that will make the masses fit to pass judgment on affairs of state and exercise intelligently the franchise that has been conferred on them.

The most pressing need today is not the advancement of the middle class. What is important is that the original proposals of the Special Committee for the improvement of the masses should be adhered to and that none of them should be whittled down on grounds of finance. If there is insufficient money for the reforms to be carried out at once they could be spread over a long period of about thirty years. A beginning can be made with a change of curricula in all existing schools. At the same time steps can be taken to build schools to provide all children with education. Next all Vernacular schools can be improved. Finally the system of trifurcation can be introduced and all education made free. If some such plan is adopted the original aims of the Special Committee on Education will be achieved and its work will not be in vain.

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