ARMAMENTS AND EDUCATION

TAKEN on the whole the educational system in Great Britain is the finest in the world, and represents an achievement of which the nation may reasonably be proud. Generally speaking, the tradition of freedom, which has been superseded in so many European countries, still exists and this, combined with its high scholastic standard, gives to British education a two-fold strength.

We cannot, however, afford to be complacent about the state of English education. It is significant that in its report reviewing the work of the past 25 years, the Board of Education admits that educational advance was retarded ten years by the war and the economic crisis; and teachers will not need to be reminded of the primitive state of many school buildings, the lack of new buildings, the large size of classes (in spite of the drop in the school population), the failure to carry out that vital part of the Hadow scheme, viz., universal raising of the school age to 15, of the numbers of children who come to school suffering from physical defects due to lack of sufficient clothing, overcrowded and insanitary homes, and long journeys to school.

THE EFFECTS OF REARMAMENT.

Effect on Educational Advance.

In 1932 Gt. Britain was spending roughly £100,000,000 on preparations for war; in 1936, £190,000,000; in 1937 she will spend £280,000,000. During each of these years expenditure on education (as far as the National Exchequer is concerned) remained constant at about £44,000,000. Can this level of expenditure on the training of people's minds, small as it is relatively to the amount which is to be spent on destroying their bodies, be maintained? It seems unlikely. During the next five years we have contracted to spend £1,500,000,000 on armaments. In face of this colossal expenditure, it is difficult to believe that the social services will not suffer, and, if history is any guide, that education will not suffer first among the social services.

Education suffered in the last war; it suffered again in 1931. Grants were cut down, classes increased, and buildings which had been condemned were retained.

The latest report (1935) shows 1,100 schools still in use which were put on the black list compiled as long ago as 1924. Dr. Spencer, ex-chief inspector of the London County Council, estimates that four-fifths of the schools in which the children of the nation are being educated need to be rebuilt or reconditioned; and schools are deteriorating more rapidly than they are being replaced.

Nursery schools, which were promised as long ago as the Fisher Act of 1918, and are urgently needed, both to provide the right psychological environment for children from two to five and to prevent the physical defects that 16 per cent. of them contract before they enter the elementary schools, are still practically non-existent. There are only 77 for the whole country, which means that only one child in every 4,000 enjoys the advantages of a nursery school education.

The relief of overcrowding in the schools is a reform long overdue. While there were in 1935 only 44 classes containing over 60 children, there were 4,362 classes of over 50 and 46,000 classes with 40/50 pupils. Yet the total number of teachers employed was reduced in 1935 by 1,250. Secondary education has also suffered from "rationalisation." In 1935 there was one less secondary school than in 1934, but 8,362 more pupils.

There is little possibility of that full and free development of individuality which is the keystone of true education while we allow 2,500,000 of our children, i.e., half the school population, to be "educated" in batches of from 40 to 50. Conditions are propitious now for altering this state of affairs, for thousands of teachers are unemployed and the birth rate is falling; but there is every sign that this situation will be perpetuated if the present expenditure on armaments is to be maintained.

During the last war teachers were exposed to serious economic hardship. Salaries were admittedly insufficient at the beginning of the war; yet for years they were not increased, in spite of a 150 per cent. rise in the cost of living. The rearmament programme will
almost certainly entail a sharp rise in the cost of living. Is it certain that teachers will obtain an equivalent rise in their salaries?

More serious still is the probable effect of the rearmament campaign on the physical well-being of the school child. The present drive for physical fitness is evidence that the authorities are concerned at the prevalence of malnutrition and all the defects arising from it. The urgent need is for increased expenditure on educational health services, but everything points to further “sacrifices” at the children’s expense.

**Effect upon the Teachers and the Taught.**

Not only are we preparing to devote an increasing proportion of the nation’s resources to rearmament, we are also proposing to direct the national energy and enthusiasm into the channels that run to war. Over a community dominated by the thought of war, the authority of government grows until none is permitted to gainsay it. The Press is its mouthpiece, history its apologist, the arts its echo, education its propaganda. The example of Germany is only too plain. In Germany, teachers’ professional organisations have lost their independence and have become entirely subservient to the Nazi party. As a result the position of teachers has progressively worsened. They must belong to the Nazi organisations; they must accept labour service and military training; they must teach and the children must learn according to syllabuses which are imbued with the Nazi ideology, according to which the past must be seen through German spectacles and the future regarded as an opportunity for German aggrandisement. Can we suppose that some of the same tendencies will not become apparent here as the nation bends all its efforts to the task of war preparation?

**Effect upon Education itself.**

“National Socialism consciously turns away from education that has knowledge as its aim.” The effort of educationists must be “to produce the man political who in all his thoughts and actions is rooted in his nation and inseparably attached to its history and faith. Objective truth is secondary and not always to be desired.”

The first of these quotations is from a decree of the Prussian Government dated March, 1934; the second from the mouth of the German Minister of the Interior. Their tendency is sufficiently plain. Education is to be used for the service not of truth, but of the State; its object should be to produce not minds but mirrors.

Now, education should have two main functions: the first, to furnish the necessary instruments—reading, writing and figuring—without which there cannot be education; the second, to create the mental habits which will enable those possessing the instruments to use them for themselves. In this second capacity its concern should be to provide training in an art: the art of using one’s intelligence in the most effective way—the art, in a word, of thinking. It should teach not what to think, but how. To give information without intelligence is to open a man’s ears to the voice of reason without giving him the power to close them against the cries and catchwords of the hour, with the result that the voice of reason, being small, is drowned.

Governments who are thinking of war distrust education which seeks to train the intelligence, precisely because it affords the mind of the ordinary man protection against those who would exploit it for their own purposes. Those whose function it is to persuade people to perfect themselves in the art of efficient killing do not desire that they should think for themselves, since those who think for themselves are liable to cause difficulties for the persuaders. Only the guardians, as Plato would say, are to think; the rest are to follow their leaders like a flock of sheep. A government aiming at war and maintaining its position through fear has every incentive to keep its citizens uneducated and, because uneducated, uncritical. Hence when the thought of war is in the air, education aims at substituting a readiness to accept the ideas of others for a capacity for forming one’s own. Its object is to manufacture an outlook, not to develop a mind.

The degree to which education is used as an instrument for the furtherance of political ends is also the degree to which it is perverted from its true function. It is not suggested that all the evil things which have befallen education under the dictatorships are likely to befall it here, but as the rearmament programme proceeds some will befall. The Government’s programme involves the reorientation of the whole of industry, business and finance. Logically, it cannot
stop short of the regimentation of the nation, a regimentation which will leave no room for dissentients and no tolerance for the expression of pacifist opinions. The teaching of peace in the schools will be regarded as tantamount to treason and the Sedition Act will be invoked to deal with offenders. Teachers and their organisations will be expected to lend their aid to recruiting schemes and to spend their holidays in army training. Meanwhile, the teaching of controversial subjects, such as history, will be increasingly devoted to the promotion of certain opinions; the formation of character to the production of certain behaviour. In all these ways education will suffer from the growth of rearmament and the spread of the military spirit.

IS THERE NO ALTERNATIVE?

We believe there is. The arms race can be arrested and the menace of war averted if only a sufficiently powerful public demand can be created for constructive policies designed to establish the conditions of peace. And this task must engage the energies of every responsible citizen—both as an individual and through the organised bodies with which he is associated.

Teachers have a particularly responsible part to play in strengthening the forces working for peace. First, as citizens they must enter fully into local and regional peace work now being organised by Peace Councils, League of Nations Union branches and other peace societies. Their abilities are urgently needed in organising “peace weeks,” demonstrations, pageants and all the day-to-day duties of active service for peace.

Further, as members of professional organisations they have important work to do. Their Unions are powerful, and they have all repeatedly declared for a strong peace policy, for general disarmament and support of the League of Nations. It is the duty of individual teachers who care for peace to see that their organisations are to the fore in all peace activities and that the full weight of their influence is thrown on the side of peace.

Thirdly, it is the task of the teacher to keep the child’s mind open to the permanent truths, to train him to think constructively, and to strengthen his capacity for independent judgment. The teacher must stress the economic, cultural and scientific interdependence of mankind and show the possibility of a world in which, by the growth of international co-operation, war has really become anachronism. Unless this spirit informs all teaching it is indeed narrow and sterile, but the growth of a strong movement for the teaching of citizenship and the existence of junior branches of the peace organisations in the schools, provide specific opportunities of which teachers should take full advantage.

The disparity between our aims and the world as it is becomes greater as the armaments race accelerates. We are therefore brought back to the urgent necessity for arresting the present drift towards war. This can only be done by resistance to competitive rearmament and exposure of its dangers to peace and social and educational progress. But resistance must be accompanied by the demand for a constructive policy as the only safeguard of peace. Teachers should join in demanding bold and precise action by Great Britain designed:

To re-establish the authority and influence of the League of Nations;

To secure a rapid and general reduction in armaments;

To deal with the economic and financial conditions which underlie and provoke the race in armaments and are leading the world to war.

Here is a policy on which all peace-minded teachers can unite. If, in unity with other sections of the community, they make their demands heard in no uncertain voice, they can provide a practical and powerful contribution to the prevention of war.

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