

reviewed by DESMOND HAWTREY

## The Decline of English Education

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**Black Papers** (three volumes), edited by C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson, London: The Critical Quarterly Society. Vol. 1, 1969, pp. 80; Vol. 2, 1970, pp. 160; Vol. 3, 1971, pp. 126.

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MY father, who had come from Ireland illiterate, but who had burnt midnight oil teaching himself to read, often said that to be educated puts man above the animal. Be educated and you will be respected. Appreciate the world's great contributors to man's progress and you will be envied by your fellow. He died before disillusionment set in, but in the last thirty years I have seen education itself fall into disrepute and mild contempt, ignorance made a virtue, and serious study and cultural interest openly mocked. I have found all this extremely depressing, as have a group of educationists and teachers in England, who have written a collection of essays and articles on English education called the *Black Papers*, in three volumes. The feeling throughout is one of pessimism, and I believe the future outlook is bleak.

In volume one, the case is put quite clearly. It is that the introduction of free play methods in primary schools (5 to 11 years), compulsory comprehensive schools, the expansion of university education, and the loss of status of the teacher due to a fall of at least thirty percent in his purchasing

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power since 1940, have all led to declining standards. But the real tragedy sensed by these writers is not the change for the worse but that the change itself is regarded by so many socialists and liberals as real progress. Among the contributors to the *Black Papers* is Sir Cyril Burt, whose book *The Backward Child* is a recognized standard work; John Sparrow, Warden of All Souls College, Oxford; Professor H. J. Eysenk, head of the famous Maudsley psychiatric hospital; Max Beloff, Professor of Government at Oxford; R. R. Pedley, head of St. Dunstan's College; Kingsley Amis, the novelist; and Robert Conquest, whose books exposing the horrors and brutalities of communism are classic works. There are many others, famous and not so famous, who have taught the infant and the student. All are unanimous in their condemnation of modern education. It is becoming rotten. From the infant school to the university a new cult has arisen, politically motivated, called anti-knowledge. It is no coincidence that during the hate riots in American universities often the first room to be ransacked was the library.

Amis believes that what the left-wing student fears most is the ability of the moderate and the right-wing student to think for themselves. He cannot understand that anyone can live without the *Thoughts of Chairman Mao*. The effect of the liberalism of modern education has been to make the progressive student afraid of accepting real liberality of thought, as this would make demands on his conscience that he would be unable to face. Subconsciously, he demands the very thing which he in practice opposes, that is, imposed discipline of the most repressive kind. Hence his worship of Castro, Guevara and Mao, under whose regimes no

freedom to think outside the politically imposed norm is allowed. Thus the insult hurled at police officers is always "Fascist pig," never "Communist." Conquest has said that there is no difference in reality between communism and fascism, as their objects are the same—absolute control of the individual. That modern education has not shown beyond all reasonable doubt that these regimes are inherently evil and therefore anti-education is, in the minds of the *Black Paper* writers, a menace so far-reaching that only a drastic re-appraisal of objectives, and a clean sweep of all who put approval by the student first, and educational integrity second, can stop the slide backwards into totalitarian conformity.

For the purposes of this review I will deal with what the writers consider the most alarming features in education today. First, free play methods in primary schools (for pupils 7 to 11).

IN the modern primary classroom emphasis is on "modern methods," "new maths," "creative English," "learning to learn," "discovery techniques," *ad nauseam*. Stimulate the child, increase his interests, make no demands on him, allow him to find his own attainment level, speed of thought and work; these at first seem to be laudable objects. Anything "old-fashioned" is out. So is spelling, neatness of handwriting, punctuation and comprehension, mathematical tables, accuracy in arithmetic, and general neatness and order in the writing and presentation of work. G. W. Crawford has thus summed up the trend in primary schools and, I think, very fairly. The critics have, in reply, said that too much regimentation leads to dull and uninterested children. This may well be, but Crawford nails this one by stating that the opposite can very often be much worse. A strict but lively and enthusiastic teacher can always produce hardworking children interested in the art of learning. He is absolutely right when he says that the teacher's own confidence and faith in the glory of learning can be the greatest adversary the progressive philistine dreads. Activity methods are often a mask

for inferior teaching, and a resulting inability to concentrate. This in turn leads to considerable boredom and only a superficial interest in any selected subject. Crawford believes that young children are happiest when being trained in the basics of education. The progressive often leaves the seven or eight year old to his own devices in the classroom, not realizing that this approach leads to inability to observe, read, understand, assess, and remember. Crawford says what any primary teacher worth his salt has known for years—that a bored and listless child is reacting against a freedom that he not only does not want but fears. "I do wish Miss would tell us what to do."

On "discovery methods," G. H. Bantock is even more scathing and deplores the tendency in liberal political circles to make the school a substitute for the home. At its very best, a first rate school can give a child something to which he can look forward, an island of security and justice not provided by his parents. These new methods may be useful in arousing interest in a child coming from a home lacking the environment conducive to the pursuit of knowledge and happiness, but real learning comes only through study. Rousseau's dictum: "Let him not be taught science, let him discover it" is false, inasmuch as if taken literally, it would mean denying that greatest of human achievements: the ability to build on the achievements of others. Teachers have been bullied by dogmatists and until today the main discontent in schools is, apart from the question of salaries, based on confusion of ideas and policies, a lack of confidence in the political control of education and a firm belief that the only people interested in education are teachers.

June Wedgwood Benn wrote a long letter criticizing *Black Paper One* but was forced to admit the brutal truth contained therein: that teaching children was not only a tiring job but was becoming a dangerous one. We have not arrived at the stage where armed police officers are on patrol in the corridors of comprehensive schools (as in Chicago), but today in many overcrowded industrial cities the school is a place where few people

wish to teach. With the coming of high wages for unskilled work, even the dimmest student knows that his teacher gets less money than he will when he leaves school, which he is determined to do at the earliest possible opportunity. Egalitarianism in the school brings derision from the neighborhood, and a belief that education is not really necessary. When a liberal teacher conveys the impression that "I am just like all of you" he is asking for trouble.

THE prospect of comprehensive schools has caused more animosity, and is more closely linked with political dogma, than any other educational belief. But here let me describe briefly what the term "comprehensive" means.

The 1944 Butler Act gave compulsory secondary education to all children over eleven. Up to that age they attended primary schools but then, on the results of an examination erroneously called the "eleven plus," were sent to grammar, technical or modern secondary schools. Hardly any of the *Black Paper* writers lamented the passing of the eleven-plus examination, but what caused such bitterness was the amalgamation of the three types of secondary schools into one building. This was called a comprehensive and was to give an equal education to all. R. R. Pedley, and all head teachers of well-run secondary modern schools as well as technical and grammar schools, consider this so retrograde a step that it borders on the disastrous. To put a talented, alert student in the company of a below average one will not be a stimulus to the latter but a brake on the former. For the policy is now clear. Streaming students into classes according to their range of ability will go. C. S. Hilditch (Head of History, Balshaw's Grammar School), John Todd (Balliol College, Oxford), and Arthur Bell (Cheltenham Grammar School) view this policy as nothing less than a calamity. To destroy first rate schools with wonderful records of achievement in every field is to play politics of the lowest kind.

In an age of pop, tinsel, and trivia, and Rent-a-Crowd opinions, it is essential that

high standards be aimed for even though they might not always be achieved. The advocates of the comprehensive say that the class divisions that bedevil English society will disappear with the introduction of egalitarianism in education. The school should be used as a political weapon appears to be the primary purpose of such a building. Mr. Michael Duane, head of the notoriously violent comprehensive called Risinghill, said that "we must use the schools first to destroy our existing society and then build a new one." (*Black Paper* 3, page 28, col. 2). Since, with non-streaming, the dull student could not possibly keep up with the bright one doing calculus, Mr. D. Marsden makes a plea for a "common curriculum"—that is, the abolition of intellectually taxing subjects. With Britain's economic survival in the future dependent largely on the well educated and qualified student, such remarks might call into question not only the educational qualifications of such men but their political loyalty as well.

For political and educational beliefs obviously go together, and nothing raises emotional steam more in a *Black Paper* hater than the charge, so often made but so often ignored, that to be "progressive" puts the political expediency of egalitarianism before the desirability of the best possible education for all.

Richard Lyon, Research Professor of Psychology, Dublin, takes a bitter anti-American stand and equates the possible low standards in American comprehensives with the superficial and shoddy aspects of American society. This may well be true, but he forgets the enormous practical difficulties of, say, a city like New York that, since 1920, has had to house, feed, educate and employ over four million immigrants from a dozen countries, a problem that has never faced any English city. Whilst the Blackboard Jungle High School may have lower standards than William Ellis Grammar School, London, the William Ellis Grammar School has no problems, tension or violence due to racial, religious or ethnic antagonisms. Professor Lyon might have explained why America has so many magnificent achievements



*Founder's Day at Harrow School*

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to its credit in almost every field of real higher education, such as space research, theoretical mathematics, astronomy, science and literature in general.

But here the "progressive" goes astray. Politically, very left and, without exception, bitterly anti-American, he finds himself in a quandary that has so far not aroused much comment. Anti-American in everything? Yes, but not in education. Squatting in his armchair in his all-white suburb and taking his opinions ready made from the radical-apologist weekly *The New Statesman*, he shrieks about the iniquities of schools based on ability and objectives. "We will never have a classless society unless we are all equal in schools." Thus the comprehensive school will undo all the "harm" done by the grammar schools, like high literacy, appreciation of the arts and successes un-

limited in the competition of life. The fact that thousands of working class homes are not bothered by anything except a desire for money and anything that does not require thought, escapes him. The shattering fact that the communist countries he admires so much put their gifted children into elite schools and are quite ruthless in their methods of selectivity, he refuses to accept. He believes that the class divisions of British society are caused by traditional schools, which taught each child according to his ability. In fact, the structure of British society depends on many factors and it is these that are reflected in British education. A wealthy family, whose wealth is invested in land, property and shares in large corporations, would choose a very selective school for their child, a school which educated children from environments similar to their

own. It is political thinking of the most prejudiced and shallow kind that believes that egalitarianism in education will lead to a classless society.

WHILST no one laments the passing of the eleven-plus examination, many contributors to the *Black Papers* regret the passing of the secondary modern school. Attended by children at one time thought unable to benefit from an academic education, most of them, faced with staff shortages and parental indifference, have achieved, since 1945, records of excellent educational attainments. They made great efforts to do their best for every child and if some children left the school not as educated as they might be in a utopian society, the fault lay not at the door of the school. In truth, the grammar school, with its emphasis on self-discipline, study of the classics and examination ambitions, acted as a stimulus to the different secondary modern. Since 1945, English education has always been the first social service to suffer financial cuts, almost all schools had long periods of gross overcrowding, and the teacher the last social contributor to get the pay raise. Many a secondary modern school improved its reputation enormously by endeavoring to emulate the best aspects of the secondary grammar. The examination system, based on Ordinary or O level or Advanced or A level, was adopted by the secondary modern as an object that would give the school something for which it could aim. O level passes became common in the Secondary Modern and there certainly was no disgrace in a child attending one.

This, however, was not enough for the left-wing progressive. All children must go to the same building. All children must receive the same education, children of widely differing levels of intelligence were to be taught together in the same room, as education based on willingness to learn and degrees of intelligence were signs of social snobbery. The claim that the bright and intellectual child would stimulate the slower ones and the civilized child would inspire the uncouth one are, in the experience of

Arthur Bell, Head of the excellent Cheltenham Grammar School, complete fallacies. Selection based on ability seems to be the only crime in the educational world. Selection and rejection by the pupils themselves is an activity that seems unknown to the Labour Party. The children from homes that value education will not mingle with children whose parents regard education with contempt. Children are generally a reflection of their parents and if there is an exception to this rule, it lies not in education. Children, like their parents, associate with children of their own level of intelligence and similarity of outlook. The doctor does not dine with the garbage collector, nor the professor with the cab driver. Egalitarianism was shown up most brutally in a new town in Essex county, Harlow, when housing, municipally owned, was offered to doctors, garbage collectors, professors and cab drivers.

It was a dismal failure but one might sympathize with the intellectuals of the Labour Party if they practiced what they preached. But what has separated this red-tinged sector from the general public is its hypocritical doctrine of "Do not do as I do, but just as I say." Apart from living in very high class, exclusive suburbs such as Hampstead, they also believe, as do almost all members of the American Congress, in sending their children to exclusive fee-paying private schools. Similar action by conservatives, who believe it is a man's moral right to do the best for his children, is condemned as perpetrating class division. The socialist author C. P. Snow, when questioned as to why he sent his son to the most famous, traditionalist and conservative of private schools, Eton, said that it was necessary as his son would, when adult, associate with other adults who had received an education similar to his own. No *Black Paper* writer ever said anything so cynical or reactionary.

BUT, if all I have written appears depressing, what is most alarming to the *Black Paper* contributors such as Arnold Beichman, Angus Maude, Michael Swann and D. C. Watt, is the decline and fall of the univer-

sity. Thirty years ago, the universities were conservative, very traditional and proud of the fact that they produced a young man who had not only a knowledgeable mind but a trained and perceptive one as well. To the public, a university student was someone to be admired as he had acquired by hard work something the working man had long envied—an education. The student in his spare time often indulged in social and humanitarian work such as doing social work among the destitute and the unemployed. Although conservative politically, he was greatly concerned that there was so much distress of all kinds in his own country, but firmly believed that his own country was good, and that real social progress could come only by improving and changing things for the better.

I have drawn a simple picture but an accurate and fair one. Today, the opposite is the case. No student demonstrates for a social cause, only a political one. He is more concerned for the imagined plight of the South Vietnamese peasant than for that of his old age pensioner at home. His admiration for police states is boundless, providing they are communist and not fascist. The Vietnam war has been caused by America, and America only, and the possibility that there might be another side of the argument other than the communist one, he refutes. Unable to convince his providers, the taxpayers, he resorts to the very thing that proves the shallowness of his outlook and the shoddiness of his education—mob violence. The chief source of discontent and intolerance is the London School of Economics, described by Maurice Freedman, Professor of Social Anthropology, Oxford, as an outpost of Red China. Few will question his view, though many may regret it. Their violent and intolerant behavior closely resembles the Chinese Red Guards inasmuch as they have the same objects in mind for destruction: old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. Not since the dark

days of Hitler and Stalin has there been such a wanton and inhuman invasion of the private political opinions of the teacher. But whereas previous investigations of the lecturer were done by agencies of the state, such as the secret police, recent ones have been perpetrated by students who at one time defended the teachers' right to free speech. Today no teacher of anti-communist or right wing views would be tolerated, and even attempts by conservative and right-wing speakers to address students have been prevented by violence. Today's student hears only what he wants to hear.

The reasons why the student has taken on such an ominous Marxist and often Maoist slant are easy to state but harder to prove. Contrary to popular belief, the English student, though dirtier and scruffier than previously, is not the pampered cossetted beat who drugs and fornicates through his semesters. He receives grants and allowances but is by no means as wealthy as his counterpart in the U.S.A. Michael Swann, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Edinburgh University, takes a more benevolent view of student uprisings and believes that general dismay at the iniquities of society has been caused by the failure of science to make man a happier creature. The young are right to be involved, but are mistaken if they think that the terrorizing of a right-wing chancellor will bring any improvement. It will bring in someone they dislike even worse. There is no short cut to progress. The future lies in collaboration between student and teacher in order to produce the complete and educated man. Tolerance on both sides, humility in the face of the contributions given us by the great minds of the past, and a belief that there is no sin greater than ignorance will produce a man educated in every sense of the word.

But I fear that that day is a long way off. The *Black Papers* have made their point crystal clear. Now let their opponents answer.