THE CONTROL OF EDUCATION

by B.S. Roberson*

AMONG the many writings of Professor W.O. Lester Smith is a book called 'To Whom do Schools belong?' (Blackwell, 1945). This seminal work reviews the development of schools in England in relation to their foundation. It examines the individuals, groups and movements which influenced the growth of establishments, and offers some material to consider the fundamental question of who controls education.

This major topic has been discussed often enough, and it is not proposed to re-examine it here. It is an educational truism that schools are a function of the society they serve. It is almost axiomatic that in a dictatorship the schools are planned by the dictator, and in a democracy they are organised on democratic lines. The young eskimo learnt in the school of experience and bitter cold: the Australian aboriginal in that of the tribe and tropical heat.

In all but the simplest communities, the major pattern of education is set by the state. The size of school, the breakdown between different age-groups, the varying proportions of elementary, secondary and technical education are broadly on a national scheme, which is altered by national decisions. In England there is a certain dualism, whereby both central and local government can shape the institutions where the young can learn. Outside this dualism private enterprise is also permitted. Within the limits of decency and sanitation, almost anyone may establish a school. This has resulted in a few scandals, famous experiments such as that of A.S. Neill at Summerhiil, and some recently founded public schools such as Stowe.

There is within this major pattern a secondary aspect of education, and it is the purpose of this article to examine its control in English education. Such examination may have interest for those teaching in areas which derive their educational system partly or

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wholly from this. To those accustomed to the continental system, it is a surprise to find that the content of education, the detail of subject matter, even the specific subjects taught, are not laid down by the state, with the exception of certain provisions for religious education. The head teacher, and in turn his assistants, is responsible for what is taught in his school. This apparent, and very real, freedom is hedged about by a variety of influences, some subtle, some crude, and all interplaying.

The situation in the primary schools, which children leave at about age 11, is perhaps simpler than in the secondary schools. With the abolition of the 11 plus selection system, which allotted children to the then various types of secondary school, examination influences, with their considerable stress on literacy and numeracy, have disappeared. There has resulted a certain polarisation between the traditional and the progressive, between those who would place ample stress on reading, writing and arithmetic and those who would have little formal definition of content, with much timetable space allotted to projects and interdisciplinary activities. Perhaps the latter predominate, and it is significant that the comparatively few small fee-paying private schools which are emerging teach reading and writing firmly, in response to parental demand.

This is a very controversial issue, which teachers, colleges of education and parents debate vigorously. This may be a good thing, but it can only exist in circumstances where no specific ruling exists. There is an uneasy balance of opinion between the teachers, 'experts', and parents, but only in extreme conditions is any final decision taken. The rare case of the William Tyndale school exemplifies this. This ultra-progressive school, with virtually no formal organisation or subject matter, was closed after parental outcry, and only after prolonged inquiry and appeal procedures were the teachers finally dismissed by the local authority, in this case the final arbiter.

There are several specifically identifiable factors which affect the content of secondary education, and a major one is the public examination system. Technical and vocational education, which mainly begins after age 16, has its own system. Its content is self-defining, and is not considered here. For the so-called liberal or general education, the awards of the eight senior examining boards are paramount. These are accepted by the professions and universities as entrance requirements, and are recognised by most

employers as a valuable criterion of achievement and ability. The syllabuses for A level, therefore, have substantial control of the content of education for most pupils who remain at school until 18, particularly during their last two or three years of school life.

The boards are independent, and subject content is decided by specialist sub-committees. Nowadays these consist of a majority of practising school teachers of the subject, with the active assistance of university teachers. The influence of the latter varies, but the committees must give considerable weight to such members, who are at the forefront of the subject knowledge concerned. Although there are other consultative procedures, these committees are something of an oligarchy. The teacher members are mainly nominated by the professional associations, and a considerable variation of personnel results. Individuals or groups can dominate, so that new ideas can be implemented against the wish of the many, or contrariwise diehards can resist change which many urgently desire.

Against this somewhat sinister picture must be set many checks and balances. Several boards adopt a very active consultative policy, and drafts of proposed new syllabuses are circulated to all concerned for comment. All teachers submitting candidates may give each year their opinions on the papers set, and this steady stream, often of vituperation, has considerable effect. None the less, the ordinary teacher who is not active in these matters can often feel he is in the grip of a mechanism he is unable to influence. He is at least free, if he can persuade his headmaster, to change to a board more in sympathy with his own views.

In the case of A level only, the Schools Council, of which more later, is empowered to give ultimate approval of syllabuses. This power is used rarely and gently, and in any case is exercised virtually by its own subject committee, which may well be composed of individuals who have already taken part in the previous discussions. In the event of a head-on collision, the more prestigious boards are likely to get their own way, and differences are adjusted by private consultation between administrators.

The syllabuses for O level, taken at age 16, are shaped in much the same way, but the Schools Council has no veto. The university influence is less, teacher influence greater, and a less formal academic flavour is apparent in some cases. There is current a proposal to merge the O level examination with the lower grade Certificate of Secondary Education, so to this we now turn.

From its inception in 1964 the CSE examination was to be teacher-controlled, to cater for the average pupil, who was not intelligent enough to attempt O level. There are some fourteen areally based boards, the great majority of whose members are local teachers, elected by their colleagues. Subject content, as before, is decided by subject committees. Any teacher, or group of teachers, who does not like the main syllabus may submit his own, upon which his pupils may be examined, and these are seldom severely altered by the boards.

The very existence of the O level syllabus is a certain restraint on the CSE work, lest pupils making unexpected progress be handicapped upon transfer to O level classes. Other than this, which only applies at the margin, the system has accepted much new content, and even new subjects, of which not all approve. Academic matter, and content requiring deep thought, are naturally omitted. There is as much practical bias as possible: handwork, pictures and the pupils' own folders of work may be submitted for assessment. Some new matter is controversial, and barely recognisable as an established subject discipline. Under the titles of social studies, environmental studies, and science studies, and by choice of set material in English, almost any subject matter, be it the merit of 'comics', the structure of the internal combustion engine, or the local sewage system may be included by the determined teacher.

The Schools Council is an important part of the English educational system. It is financed by central and local authority funds, and is virtually independent. Any recommendations it makes on major issues, such as examination structure, are open to rejection by the Minister. The Council itself contains representatives of all branches of education, and employers, but the National Union of Teachers, the largest professional association, has about half the voting power, and its policies, which may not be those of all its members, can carry the day. The present Minister has proposed changes which will remedy this. The day to day work of the Council is done by sub-committees, which keep a constant review of subject development, and also supervise the work of the Council's projects.

These projects have poayed a considerable part in influencing subject matter in most schools in recent years. Much experimental work was done in the primary schools, in the field already discussed. Each project has a paid director, often a don and nearly

always a person who has already made his mark in education. He is supported by a small staff and lightly guided by his supervising committee. No specific pattern of operation is laid down, but a common one is to pursue a developmental programme in the subject area concerned, carried out in detail in a few schools, or more broadly in many. Most last three or four years. Many have been completed. Some twenty or so are in current operation. Both orthodox subject matter, and the newer interdisciplinary group subjects are handled.

It is not easy to asses s this influence, and no long independent book reviewing the work of the Schools Council has yet appeared, though its activities are widely reported. Clearly many teachers, in schools where a project is operating, come into close contact with the staff and with new ideas. Many others follow the work, by means of distributed circulars, publicity lectures and conferences. The results of a project are sometimes published in book form, or by various suggested schemes of work and material. Other teachers remain splendidly aloof, sometimes knowing little of the Council's activities, but more often regarding them as a waste of money.

The precise location of power at this middle, operational level is almost undiscoverable. There has been bargaining between groups on the Council for nominations to the many committees. Names may be suggested by the committees themselves, by interested parties, or the Inspectorate. The mechanism for proposal of a project is nominally open to all who know of it: its successful establishment would seem to depend upon knowing, or being known by, the right people. One committee at least had occasion to rebuke its permanent staff for taking an initiative without authorisation.

The work of Her Majesty's Inspectors has also been fully considered elsewhere, that of local inspectors perhaps less so. HMI are a cautious, benevolent and impartial body which influences content only by the most general suggestions. Their selection of the subjects and staffing of teachers' vacation courses play a more direct part in shaping content, and their ubiquitous presence makes their knowledge vast and their advice not to be lightly disregarded. Many local authorities maintain a staff of inspectors, often subject or age-group specialists, who are better named advisors. Their influence is direct and practical. They can guide young teachers, run courses, and make suggestions on content. They do not, in spirit or practice, interfere with the teacher's

classroom independence.

Public opinion, that elusive quantity, has little direct effect. Parents may express themselves, with others, through the ballot box, on the wider issues. Parent-teacher organisations are usually firmly told not to concern themselves with the internal organisation of the school. Employers are well represented in the sontrol of the vocational field. Pressure groups can and do exist, acting by puvlicity meetings and membership of committees. There is, for example, a strong environmental lobby, which has managed to establish a few examination options. Commonwealth studies are similarly advocated by its supporters.

What are the lessons of this for the young teacher? In England he has inherited a tradition of freedom in his professional life probably unmatched in the world, limited only by his status within the school of hierarchy. As this article has tried to show, he also has considerable opportunity at higher levels to influence the content of what is taught. To a very small, but undeniable extent, this classroom liberty is today very near licence. Teachers can, and some do, present distorted pictures of society intended to influence the young. The impartiality of history teaching has always been difficult, and now some teachers are more impartial than others. Rather strangely, some English teaching is among the most tendentious. By selection of essay topics, poems and literature a false picture of a place or period is conveyed.

Freedom of growth for the pupil thus depends on the integrity of the teacher. Fortunately among most this is high. They ensure their subject matter carries true information, which is also balanced fodder for the young mind to digest and consider. Long may this continue.