

# Education In A Free Society

*As I See It*

By A. J. CARTER

ADVOCATES of a single tax on land values are usually also believers in a free economy. When the products of labour and capital are the full property of individuals—when, that is, the economic rent of land is the sole source of public revenue—there will be neither reason nor, probably, funds to operate a massive bureaucracy. Individuals will not have a third of what they earn confiscated to build Cunard liners, or to be lavished on the steel industry or indeed on family allowances or Blue Streak rockets. Every man will be able to buy what he needs and the State will be forcibly taught the beginning of wisdom—to housekeep with a limited income. Many of the State's activities will then again be undertaken by private enterprise, as they would always have been if the British economy had not grown twisted at the roots. Privilege, State interference, and needless restrictions will vanish, and the economy, securely founded on an accurate assessment of community and individual rights, will be free, sensitive and healthy.

We are growing so used to the impersonal benevolence of the State, and to all that is done for us by national and local government, that, for example, the collection of refuse by private firms is almost 'unthinkable'. The State is an organ of collectivism: it takes from some and gives to others. We tend to overlook that, irrespective of whether what is taken is given away (less costs), compulsory taking is wrong. Things should only be run in a collectivist—or socialist—way if individuals cannot provide or choose for themselves. A single-tax nation should be a nation of individualists, not a charity machine.

The general principles are plain enough but, as with all principles, there is controversy over exceptions. Education has a strong claim to be an exception, but before that claim is accepted we must make sure that it is valid and that we do not support it merely because our thought is inadequate to picture education administered and paid for independently of the State. What people do with themselves and with their property is their concern and — unless there is good reason to the contrary—no concern of the State. Children, however, are neither part of their parents nor the property of their parents but human beings in their own right, and therefore the State has a justifiable interest in them.

The State exists to uphold human rights, chief of which is the sovereignty of every individual over his own thoughts and actions. Men have this sovereignty naturally, and the function of the State is not to alter natural justice or create rights by allocation, but to maintain natural justice by preventing interference by one man with the rights of another. The State, in short, is an instrument by which natural law is enforced. No human being, not even a child, belongs to another human being, so that

although it is proper for parents to have a great deal of control over their children, this control is not absolute but is exercised in trust for the children. If there is danger that parents will seriously fail to serve in the clear interest of their children, the State should act, for the same reason that it acts when a citizen is attacked or robbed.

THE criterion of who should make decisions on behalf of children while they are not yet responsible should be the good of the children themselves. It is necessary to emphasise this because of two false assumptions: the first that children are chattels of their parents, and the second that they are the property of the State, to be herded into schools and if possible universities so that Britain can swank about her clever population—clever but not educated, for their minds are as narrow as when the process began. It is difficult to judge which of these feelings is more prominent, but both are very prominent, and both are very wrong, the kind of fallacies that could arise only in a society straitjacketed by protectionism.

A child's range of choice is widened immeasurably if he is taught reading, writing and arithmetic. These are the tools with which all further learning is acquired, and he who would compel a child to master them is wise, for it is difficult to imagine teenage youths giving thanks that they are unaccomplished in these elements. Education is a broadening of the mind, and consequently something of great value, which every child should have the opportunity and the training to acquire. The first defect of leaving education to be provided by parents is that many children would not be sent to school and would find themselves at the age of fifteen illiterate and unable to calculate. To learn the three R's at that age is far more painful than to learn them in infancy, and ten years—the ten years when learning is most easy—would be lost.

The second defect is that a child would receive the kind of education for which his parents were prepared to pay. Children of selfish or relatively poor parents would be given only a bare education in schools that would probably be a disgrace. There are, it is true, many parents who would willingly undergo almost any material deprivation for their children's sake; but there are also many who would much prefer their betting and their beer to making any effort towards having their children educated. The sins of the fathers would be visited on the sons, and there would be privilege instead of equality of opportunity. Provided that the lowest level of education is that offered by the State, as now, and that that level is high (as is open to doubt), the freedom of parents to educate their children privately should be maintained. What is intolerable is that some children might receive an education markedly inferior to the level prevailing.

Education is not a sacred idol, but it is a good and necessary thing. All children should be given at least a basic education, and no child should receive a poor education compared with the general level. These ideals would not be achieved if provision for education were left to parents and private schools. What, then, are the vices and virtues of State education?

**E**DUCATION should aim primarily at the mental development of the child, not at teaching him to do a job and not at filling him with as many facts as he can absorb. The present travesty of education produces men and women who are clever at solving isolated problems, but who are unable to see in perspective. (This cleverness at solving problems while lacking the ability to relate them to a broader context—missing the wood for the trees, as we call it—may well be one of the reasons why there is a glut of economists who follow Kenyes but few who see the justice and efficacy of land value taxation). Schools have become, today, almost solely concerned with examinations, and a large part of the curriculum is distorted to try to push as many pupils through the impending exam. as possible. The 11-plus examination is the outstanding example of this folly. Everyone has heard tales of parents who are desperate that their children should 'pass' the 11-plus, and one would think that to 'fail' was to be doomed to everlasting torment. The truth is that the 11-plus examination is a means of selection, to which the words passing and failing should not be applied. Nevertheless, parents grow so disturbed by it that teachers have had to pander to them, and there now seems to be no alternative to abolishing the beastly thing, or at least amending it so that those who 'pass' are not angels and those who 'fail' poor devils beyond redemption.

It can scarcely be too firmly stated that education is to broaden the outlook of individuals, not to train specialised workmen because society wants them. The misconception is so widespread that the proposal to raise the school-leaving age to sixteen—embodied in the Education Act of 1944 and repeated recently in the Crowther Report—has met with almost unanimous approval, three objections having been ignored. The first is that freedom of choice is restricted for a year. If they feel it will be worth while fifteen-year-olds will volunteer to continue their studies; in pronouncing that young men and women shall stay at school another year, society denies them the freedom to earn a year's wages, and this it has no right to do. The second is that it is absurd to spend millions of pounds belonging to taxpayers (including childless readers of *Land & Liberty*) to compel boys and girls to undergo a further year's education which may be useless to them. The third is that there are more pressing priorities. The raising of the school-leaving age should not even be considered until classes have been reduced to a size in which children are people not units.

All these failings are in administration, and do not affect the question of whether education should be pro-

vided by parents or by the State. If the examination complex had vanished, classes were small, and education factories had become schools, the number of children who would be thankful for having been taught the rudiments of education would be much greater than the number of those who wished they were rid of it. Not all take advantage of the opportunities which a basic education gives, but at least let the opportunities be there.

**T**HE conclusion is that education cannot be left to parents to provide at their discretion but should be maintained compulsorily by the State. The present system, however, has one fundamental injustice, which is that those without children must subsidise those with children. This results largely from the view that the purpose of education is to create skilled labour for the good of the nation, and is typical of the collectivist thinking which all of us who favour a free economy dislike. It is strongly to be hoped that, with the curtailment of many of the State's activities, education could be paid for out of the revenue from the land value tax. If this is not possible there should be an annual levy of so much per child from the age of five to fifteen, payable by his parents and entitling him to a good State education for ten years. Parents who are willing to bear the cost of educating their children privately should be allowed to contract out of this levy. Private schools—'public' and otherwise—must be subject to frequent inspection without notice.

Always in discussing education we should avoid eulogising it. Education of the right kind is beneficial indeed, but we must be careful not to fall into the trap of regarding book-learning as a panacea for all the ills of the world. Let us not forget that Sir Winston Churchill was a dunce, or that Henry George, who left school at fifteen, would hardly have written *Progress and Poverty* if he had attended a university. Citizenship is something that is not taught at school.

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Earlier contributors to the "As I See It" series have included Major Oliver Smedley (A Liberal on Free Trade Areas) and Mr. Lyndon H. Jones (The Yarn Spinners' Agreement). The editor will be pleased to receive further articles (not exceeding 1,700 words) from readers for possible publication in this and also the Personally Speaking series. The latter will be resumed next month. Guest contributor is Mr. Philipp Knab, of Vienna.

#### LATE NEWS

**Mr. Basil Spence, R.A., P.R.I.B.A.** likened land speculators to "profiteers who corner the bread supply in a besieged city" in his presidential address to architects at Manchester, June 16. **N.A.L.G.O.**—the local government employees' trade union—adopted resolution condemning present rating system and urging executive to seek an alternative in keeping with present needs. Executive Council of **National Union of Ratepayers Associations** decided (June 23) not to aid the Rating Reform Campaign.

To be reported more fully next month