

The Canadian Educational System — A Personal View

BY KEITH JOHNSON

"ATTENTION!—STOP ALL WORK!" A metallic voice cuts sharply across an over-crowded classroom.

Forty pairs of eyes switch automatically toward the wall speaker. Forty pencils are poised, frozen in mid-air. It is a conditioned reflex: the voice—the eyes—the pencils.

"Some children persist in talking while standing in line for the washroom. This must stop, otherwise firm disciplinary action will be taken."

The message ends, forty pencils move again in quiet unison, and the Canadian educational process continues.

This scene, and many others of a like Orwellian nature, is re-enacted many times daily throughout Canada in all types of schools. This semi-military atmosphere of group conformism is far removed from the idealistic concept of the school as a small community of happy young people in the text-book tradition of the English college of education. Yet this is Canada, 1966.

I had been teaching for four years in London before deciding to emigrate to Canada. I set myself no definite period to teach there. I simply wished to go there to observe the methods of teaching and to contrast them with our own by working within the Canadian system on a non-exchange basis.

I believed then, as I do now, that the emigratory urge is a basic human desire for geographic change—a hereditary instinct as yet uncrushed by the influences of our over-sedentary society. I mention this fact because general opinion appears to regard emigration as a "means to a better life" or as "getting on." Like all popular opinion, it fails to appreciate the numerous motives that impel an individual to take a course of action.

I set out for Canada to experience, and, wherever possible, to evaluate. I find now, as a teacher returned to Britain, that I can view the Canadian educational system in better perspective.

The first reaction of an English teacher to the Canadian system is one of bewildered amazement and incredulity. Amazement changes slowly to disillusionment, disillusionment quite often to anger; seldom, if ever, does an English teacher accept this system, so fundamentally different from his own.

What is the main objective of the Canadian educational system? In order to examine a particular objective of any society, we should first obtain a general picture of the total objectives of that society. It always surprises me when people view education as a totally separate process within society—unrelated to social stratification and economic and political change. Power groupings within society ensure that the educational processes are working in harmony with the main objectives of that society. This

is vividly apparent in a totalitarian system; not so apparent, and subtly disguised, in a democracy.

Canada, a country of immense wealth and economic strength, possesses an ever-expanding industrial and agricultural economy wherein the trend in all spheres of activity is towards "bigness." It is fast evolving as a technocracy, as is its closest neighbour, the United States. The big demand is for the specialist, and competition for top jobs is fierce and ruthless. The labour market is even more impersonal than it is in Britain. The total objective, therefore, of Canadian society is economic expansion, and, in consequence, the prime objective of its educational system is the expansion of its output of skilled technicians.

To get on, however, you must first get in the competitive race. For this a college degree is essential. "For the Canadian or American youth who really wishes to succeed, a college degree has become a basic requirement. Unlike in previous decades, however, the degree is no longer so much a help in competing for a good job as it is a requirement to enter the race." (Arnold Green, Pennsylvania State University).

Hence we find the motto of the Canadian educational system is "Learning is Earning," and this motto is chorused not only by educational departments, but by school boards, universities, parent-teacher associations, private-industrialists, and many other bodies.

With the college degree as the final objective prior to entering the race, the means to achieve that end is the educational factory wherein every child is fed with subject material which has to be digested in a uniform and systematic manner. If, as often happens in some schools, subject materials cannot be digested within a tightly-knit yearly schedule, a child must repeat his grade. Sometimes a "repeater" will stay three years in one grade. Consequently, the child who cannot keep up the pace falls away. As in Britain, there is a wastage, difficult to measure.

It is in the teaching method, however, that the English teacher finds the Canadian system widely at variance with his own. In Britain the learning process is adapted to the interests and aptitude of the child; in Canada, despite the use of excellent audio and visual aids, the child is rigidly adapted to the learning process. Canadian children tend to adopt a spectator role during lessons, and seldom participate.

This is reflected in their creative work. They lack initiative and originality when given the opportunity to work on their own. All subjects are taught in a rigid and systematic manner (I possessed forty-one text manuals alone) and deviation is not liked by the Inspectorate. Not even desks can be moved. Displays on walls and notice

boards (very wisely *not* over-estimated in Britain) are in Canadian schools symbolic of progress and work. Any form of "externalisation" (usually visual) is accepted as a creditable achievement for the teacher. It is in this sense that Canadian schools begin to assume an abnormal, commercial atmosphere. Wall displays, nearly always executed and arranged by the teachers, become an advertised display of themselves. I was even more surprised when I discovered that the Inspectorate *expected* this!

Canadian teachers are, in the main, conformist towards the system, and tend to be indifferent or non-critical of its wider abuses. Nurtured in a rigid educational environ-

ment, they generally lack the dynamic approach needed to liberalise such a rigid system. Interchange of teachers and easier facilities for mutual exchange of views can help a great deal to loosen the rigidity of the Canadian system, but much remains to be done to expose its faults.

There is a desperate need for both of our societies to re-examine their values and objectives, but most especially with regard to education, for we are witnessing a rapid decline of liberal education, and the forces of the times seem to be conspiring to squeeze individuality and spontaneity from us.

Education should encourage individuality, not crush it.

Exhorters & Exporters

By HENRY MEULEN

THE ROOT CAUSE of the imbalance of trade in Britain today, lies in the fixed price of foreign exchange adopted at Bretton Woods in 1944. The motive for its adoption was to restrain the war-devastated countries from resorting to note printing and inflation as a very present help in time of trouble. Yet I am certain that little credit is due to Bretton Woods for the monetary restraint that followed World War II. The main reason for the smooth transition from war to peace was the unparalleled generosity of the U.S.A. in pouring out monetary aid to the devastated countries. These countries rapidly found their feet again, but the Bretton Woods agreement remains—a striking example of the way nations, like individuals, can get used to chains.

It is everywhere argued today that free exchanges would introduce uncertainty, but the essence of freedom is its unpredictability; that is what we mean by free choice. The Bretton Woods agreement represents a decisive interference with the free market. Instead of allowing the price of foreign currencies to respond to the market fluctuations of supply and demand, we copy the wartime practice of fixing the price of foreign currencies; and price fixing works as badly in this area as it did when it was applied to ordinary commodities. It is worse, because whereas to fix the price of any ordinary commodity affects only a small part of the market, to fix the prices of foreign currencies affects all foreign trade.

Surely we ought not to have to shout from the housetops the obvious truth that we could never import more than we export if the government did not prevent the price of foreign currency from rising when importers were demanding more foreign currency than was being currently earned by exporters. What hinders acceptance of this truth? Is it a dislike of seeing the pound worth more foreign currency—the shame at seeing a fall in the value of the pound? But in a free market, wherever the supply of a commodity diminishes, or demand increases, its price will rise, and this rise represents a fall in the value of money. We might feel shame if the pound falls because we have printed too much money; but there can be no shame if the pound falls in value abroad because im-

porters here are trying to buy more foreign currency than we have earned. All the commodity markets maintain a delicate balance between supply and demand precisely by using a fluctuating price, and nobody has ever seen a flush of shame around Spitalfield, Billingsgate or Mincing Lane.

The present system inevitably leads to recurrent trade imbalances, and governments keep desperately trying one restrictive scheme after the other; and every one of these schemes aggravates our difficulties without correcting the fundamental imbalance. Tariffs, import quotas, export subsidies, and now a payroll tax; all of these measures making work for a host of accountants and tax collectors. They hinder production at home, and they do not prevent adverse trade balances.

The air is full of exhortations to export. Manufacturers proudly announce the percentage of their product that is exported. Those who do not export are upbraided by the Prime Minister for their "sheer damn laziness." But what nonsense this all is. The object of a business is to make a profit, whether the profit comes from home sales or exports. Our exhorters seem to overlook the fact that our exports are another country's imports; and our best customers are today taking equally stern measures to slow down their imports.

What we need to do is not necessarily to increase exports, but to keep exports in balance with imports. When a man is in debt, he can either earn more, or cut down his spending; either method will remove his financial worry. Our Government cuts down imports by imposing import quotas and tariffs and the EFTA countries reproach us bitterly. But a floating exchange rate is much more sensitive in its corrective action. It requires no political decisions, no consultations with economic experts who, as often as not, contradict each other. It allows the pound to fall exactly in proportion to the imbalance of trade. This fall automatically and continually discourages imports and encourages exports. It invites no indignant enquiries from abroad as to when a tariff will be lifted; as imports slacken and exports increase, so the value of the pound abroad recovers, until our foreign trade is again in balance, when imports will again begin to flow in. And the decision lies, not with politicians and economists, but with the foreign traders themselves. Is this why our politicians dislike the proposal?