



The Text-book Board

The apologia issued by the National Curriculum and Text-book Board in reply to criticisms of the way it has been functioning has been rejected by an influential body of teachers as an entirely inadequate explanation of its failings. The teachers are right to point out that no excuses could exonerate the Board from its failure to live up to the trust reposed in it.

The criticisms against the Board are directed not only at the quality of the text-books it has sponsored but also at the methods of distribution it employs. Wretchedly written and badly produced and illustrated, the books would be a disgrace to any community with any sense of its obligations to the younger generation, and to make things worse, the Board has been directly responsible, because of its inefficiency, for the growth of a blackmarket in text-books which is a real shame. Books for primary schools are meant to be distributed free, but the teachers and guardians have been complaining for months, they never reach the pupils in time and sometimes never at all.

At higher levels where books have to be paid for, they cannot be obtained unless the buyer agrees to purchase at great cost the key-books which have been formally banned.

Furthermore, the writers hired by the Board to write the text-books are chosen according to criteria in which favouritism allegedly plays a large part. The so-called reviewers are also said to be similarly selected, so that books replete with wrong information and composed in unsuitable language pass muster as material on which the country's youth is to be fed intellectually.

The position, as we have pointed out on several occasions in the recent past, is particularly unsatisfactory, in English. The series called 'English For Today' intended for lower secondary, secondary and higher secondary classes takes no account of the fact that English is a foreign language reflecting a background and environment utterly different from ours, and has a grammar and idioms equally different from the grammar and idioms of Bengali. The complete exclusion of authentic English writing by native speakers, even from Book Eight which is meant for young men and women in their teens, is an astonishing feat of intellectual failure which is impossible to pardon.

The Text-book Board was set up in the hope that it would help remove abuses with which private publishers used to be charged. But in the event, the Board has given rise to a situation much worse than any for which private firms could be held responsible. What needs to be reexamined today is the wisdom of creating an organisation of this kind and investing it with monopolistic rights. Book production is a business like any other which a group of educationists or civil servants who have had no experience in the line can hardly be expected to manage efficiently. The excuses offered in the apologia to which we have referred demonstrate quite convincingly that what the Board lacks is expertise. To say that it has been unable to ensure uniformity of production or guarantee the quality of the products because it has no press of its own is, as the critics have said, only to prove its ignorance of the techniques of book publishing.

We are persuaded that the best guarantee of quality would be free competition. The Text-book Board's function should be to announce in advance that it needs and choose from among the entries submitted the best. Monopoly would not work, if what we desire is an improvement in the quality of the contents and in the standard of production.