

Turning Schools Back Into Schools

--Oliver Letwin

NO doubt, like every industrial dispute, the teachers' strike will be resolved in due course. But the real question is: what will be the main result of this country's schooling in this "industrial" in which workers for their rights rather than a profession in which teachers follow a vocation?

The answer is not far to seek. Since the 1944 Education Act, the vast majority of our schools have been in effect nationalized. True, they are run by local authorities rather than directly by the Department of Education; but then, the steel industry is run by its board rather than directly by the Department of Trade and Industry. True, too, the schools get a good deal of their money from rates instead

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of national taxes; but then, the steel industry gets a good deal of its money from rates instead of taxation. All in all, schools are just about as much a nationalized industry as the steelworks are.

And, being a nationalized industry, they behave like one. Nobody knows who spends how much on what. And nobody knows how to make the staff believe they are part of the organization rather than downtrodden serfs subject to hostile masters. It is all reminiscent

of training? A more sensible, down-to-earth curriculum? The government is trying all of these and no doubt they will all help. But will they really crack the problem? Won't we just have, temporarily, a better nationalized industry, likely to relapse into its old ways?

There is a different, more fundamental solution at hand. Imagine a set of schools which in themselves, entirely free from interference by all public officials except Her Majesty's Inspectorate. Imagine that, in these schools, the best teachers are paid well above the amount they could earn in our present maintained schools. Imagine that these schools have no strikes, no disruption of classes

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and constant communication between staff and managers on the spot. Imagine that pupils from the poorest families receive a good, entirely free education. Imagine these things—and then rejoice, because they have already come true.

In 1981, when Mark Carlisle was Education Secretary, the government set up an "Assisted Places Scheme". It enables the children of poor parents, and parents with middling incomes, to go to excellent independent schools. A child on the scheme whose parents earn less than £6,376 a year pays nothing at all. The schools involved are managed just as they were before the public funding was available: no need to deal with a local education authority; no interference except the Inspectorate's insistence on standards; a budget of their own; the managers on the spot; the best staff, paid over the odds. So far as can be ascertained, not one of these schools has been disrupted during the present dispute.

If the contrast between the schools on the Assisted Places Scheme and the ordinary maintained schools is so stark, why doesn't the government build on the experience, and expand the scheme—or replicate its principles inside the nationalized sector? The argument usually put forward against doing so is that pupils with well-off parents have to pay high fees in Assisted Places schools, whereas everybody goes "free" (i.e. at the taxpayers' and ratepayers' expense) to nationalized schools.

Of course, in theory it is absolute nonsense for the taxpayer and ratepayer to be providing "free" schools for the children of the well-off and rich. Everyone from every part of the political spectrum knows that. But this does not prevent people using "free" schooling for all" as a political shibboleth.

That is the political problem Sir Keith Joseph needs to solve. It is not as difficult as it looks—because the basic principles of the Assisted Places Scheme can be applied to the nationalized sector without abandoning "free schooling" for all who want it. Schools that are at present

nationalized can remain free of charge to all those who enter them. The self-management which is enjoyed by our present independent schools can gradually be replicated in the nationalized sector by providing each child with a "fully assisted place"—a sum paid to the school by the taxpayer and ratepayer for each pupil there. That way the school can become a financially independent entity, with a capacity to raise funds automatically by attracting more pupils.

Cambridgeshire is already moving towards this goal by providing its schools with their own budgets; other areas could follow. There is real chance, now, of turning our maintained schools gradually into independent, professional institutions whose clients' fees are fully paid by the state, instead of fragments of a vast nationalized industry, woefully mismanaged, strike-bound and desolate. (THE TIMES)