

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08615-8 - The Rise of a Central Authority for English Education

A. S. Bishop

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1

THE YEARS OF INCIPIENT  
STATE INTERVENTION

There are other enemies of liberty than the State and it is in fact by the State that we have fought them.

– L. T. Hobhouse

In 1899, just as the Victorian Age was drawing to its close, a relatively minor but potentially valuable piece of legislation received the royal assent. This statute – the Board of Education Act – marks for the social historian both the beginning of a new era in the development of state intervention in English education and the ending of an old. On the one hand it laid the foundation upon which a national system could be built, on the other it can be regarded as the coping-stone of a structure that had taken almost a hundred years to erect. The nineteenth century, which closed with a growing acceptance of education as being a legitimate function of government requiring central co-ordination and unified control, had opened with the firm belief that the state constituted no fit instrument for the task of educating the people. So strongly held and so powerfully supported was this belief that three generations were needed to change it, based as it was upon theories of human nature which, in sum, encompassed virtually every aspect of life. Although these concepts were interrelated, they may, for convenience, be grouped under four main headings.

First there were the political doctrines. One of the more unfortunate legacies of the eighteenth century was the conviction that government interference tended to be incompetent and government expenditure tended to be corrupt. This feeling, to which was added a general dislike of ‘centralization’, was shared by men of very different political persuasions. To Tories and conservative Whigs the institutions of local government were sacrosanct: hence any encroachment on local autonomy was to be fiercely resisted; to liberal Whigs and moderate reformers the function of government was not to lead but to follow public opinion; to Radicals a strong central government was thought likely

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08615-8 - The Rise of a Central Authority for English Education

A. S. Bishop

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2

## RISE OF A CENTRAL AUTHORITY

to be oppressive; and common to all these groups was a natural antipathy to the higher taxation that would be an inevitable consequence of increased activity by the central authority.

All these arguments were reinforced by events on the Continent. Paradoxically, the fact that a number of European countries already possessed national systems of education operated rather as a deterrent than as an inducement to following their lead. The French and Prussian models, particularly, seemed to serve as a warning of the dangers in allowing the state to use education as an instrument of policy. Moreover, the fate of minority groups in those same countries confirmed the fears of any such in England who were similarly placed, and who in the past had been penalized by an autocratic government.

In circumstances such as these, *any* government would have found difficulty in extending the range of its activities. As it happened, the problem did not arise. Britain for the first three decades of the nineteenth century was under Tory rule, and if every Tory did not subscribe to the view that all change was to be deprecated, the majority felt that innovation and reform were unnecessary. This was, in Dicey's phrase, a period of 'legislative quiescence', attributable as much to the prevailing mood of complacency, if not optimism, as to a dread of revolution.

Related to these political attitudes were the tenets of the various religious denominations. The Established Church claimed the exclusive, not to say divine, right to educate the nation's young, and regarded state interference as an invasion of her legitimate preserves. The dissenters quite understandably resisted this claim; furthermore, having previously suffered from authoritarian intolerance, they had no wish to see government control of education. Thus both clerical pretensions and sectarian rivalry effectively blocked the path leading towards any national system financed and guided by the state.

These religious and political arguments were in turn supported by the prevalent economic theories concerning the function of government. The doctrine of *laissez-faire* largely determined the course of legislation throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. It was based upon the conviction that general happiness would be promoted more surely by self-help than by regulation. Private enterprise was the talisman that would lead inevitably to progress and prosperity. This belief, first applied to commerce,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08615-8 - The Rise of a Central Authority for English Education

A. S. Bishop

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INCIPIENT STATE INTERVENTION

3

gradually invaded other spheres of human activity, including that of education. It produced a distrust of what was termed 'grand-motherly' legislation; and it generated the idea that any restrictions imposed by law or custom which interfered with the liberty of the subject were not only ineffectual in promoting industrial advance and social well-being but positively injurious. In fact, many influential economic thinkers contended that the state was actively malignant in addition to being incompetent.

Complementing this somewhat negative view was that of the statesmen who presided over the nation's financial affairs. Part of the reluctance of successive administrations to assume wider responsibilities lay in the firmly-held creed that government must be conducted as cheaply as possible. The less it did and spent, the better. Any extension of state action must necessarily involve increased public expenditure, and, in an age when 'Economize' was an abiding watchword, such a prospect could only be regarded as undesirable.

These views found ready endorsement from the rising middle-class entrepreneurs. They argued that state interference would stifle individual initiative and weaken character by reducing incentives to personal effort. Besides, education cost money and produced no immediate return on capital; its value in commercial terms was difficult to measure. Most manufacturers, who in other respects showed much astuteness, stubbornly believed that an educated labour force would result in greater industrial unrest, not more efficient operatives.

Echoing such sentiments were those who saw in both education and its promotion by the state twin threats to social stability and cohesion. Upon the eighteenth-century notion that the poor should never be trained for anything but honest toil was superimposed the early nineteenth-century concept that popular education would prove a fertile source of social unrest. Out of an instinctive need for self-preservation, the ruling classes resisted the educating of the 'lower orders', seeing in it, if not the seeds of revolution, then at least the erosion of their own privileged position.

Even those who did not subscribe to such conservative views, and who felt that education was a beneficial rather than a pernicious influence, found themselves in a genuine dilemma; that of deciding what agency should be employed for its transmission. There was

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08615-8 - The Rise of a Central Authority for English Education

A. S. Bishop

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4

## RISE OF A CENTRAL AUTHORITY

among them no general agreement as to whether the individual parent, or a religious body, or the state, should be held primarily responsible for a child's education.

Finally, there was during this period a strong faith in the many voluntary institutions that provided such social services as then existed. These organizations were held in high esteem, both in themselves for the principle they enshrined, and in their capacity as bulwarks against state compulsion and control. Moreover, while voluntary effort, unaided by the state, had achieved much in the field of education, it created, at the same time, vested interests which constituted a formidable obstacle to the development of a national system.

Powerful and numerous these forces opposing state intervention may have been; they were nevertheless being challenged by a whole battery of arguments which grew more compelling as the century advanced. Providing the evidence upon which this counter-movement rested was the impact of rapid industrial change; supplying the energy with which it was pursued were the efforts of a few determined reformers.

By the introduction of factory methods the Industrial Revolution had disrupted the old social order. Formerly, the nation's young had been exposed to the educative influences – albeit limited in their compass – of a peasant culture. Now, the creation of an urban proletariat, lacking roots and ill-equipped to deal with the problems of adapting to a totally different and less healthy environment, made the need for the civilizing effect of education – other than that provided at the mother's knee – a matter of vital and immediate concern.

Moreover, the very concentration of large numbers of workers in towns had led to their combining to press for an improvement in the conditions of their employment. In consequence it was surmised that the dangers of a little learning might well prove less alarming than the hazards of total ignorance. And among the wealthy there grew an uncomfortable feeling that it was unwise, if not unjust, to permit the steadily increasing majority of the population to remain uninformed and socially depressed.

Some manufacturers, too, began to acknowledge the need for their labour force to be equipped with at least a rudimentary education. Also, with the coming of machinery, apprenticeship, which had previously afforded some sort of technical training,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08615-8 - The Rise of a Central Authority for English Education

A. S. Bishop

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INCIPIENT STATE INTERVENTION

5

became less and less important, and a new system of general and technical education had to be devised to supplant it.

In any event, the coincidence of a rapidly rising birth-rate and of the gradual growth of factory legislation meant that the streets in the overcrowded towns were swarming with children. Schools would, at the very least, keep them out of mischief and away from corrupting influences for most of the day. The fact that the first effective Factory Act and the first state grant for schools occurred in the same year was no mere accident.

Meanwhile, a small number of men of very different political leanings were endeavouring, both in print and in Parliament, to change the climate of opinion in favour of state intervention. As early as 1776, Adam Smith had warned that the state must take positive steps to reverse the process of degeneration observable among the poor. That warning took on a new and urgent significance as the side-effects of the Industrial Revolution became so alarming that they could no longer be ignored. Subsequently, and at about the time when that other revolution which had convulsed a continent was becoming less of an obsession and more of a challenge, a handful of missionaries took up Smith's lead. There were the progressive Whig leaders, Whitbread and Brougham; the Radical philosophers led by Bentham; and the articulate champions of the working classes, Robert Owen and Francis Place.<sup>1</sup> By their constant efforts these men, and a few others similarly inspired by humanitarian motives, paved the way for state intervention.

While the grant of 1833 is generally regarded as the first deliberate governmental action in the field of education, it should not be thought of as an isolated occurrence; it was, in fact, a logical outcome of a whole series of preceding events as well as the point of departure for succeeding ones.

If we ignore the Commonwealth period, when Treasury grants-in-aid of education were originally introduced, the earliest, albeit abortive, attempt to persuade Parliament to intervene in educational matters was made by Pitt in 1796. His Bill to provide a

<sup>1</sup> Bentham's remedy for curing social problems – inquiry, report, legislation, administration, inspection – was to be enthusiastically adopted by educational, as well as other reformers.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08615-8 - The Rise of a Central Authority for English Education

A. S. Bishop

Excerpt

[More information](#)

universal system of schools of industry within the framework of the Poor Law was not even put to the vote.

Partial progress came in 1802 when for the first time the state accepted a modicum of responsibility for the education of apprenticed children in the northern textile mills; but this intervention did not come about as a directly educational issue. It arose as a reaction against the exploitation of child labour in factories and mines, and it is in fact in the earlier factory legislation that the genesis of state action in education is to be found. The pioneering statute, Peel's Health and Morals of Apprentices Act, was designed to regulate children's employment in certain trades, and required that elementary instruction should be given during part of the day. As events turned out, the Act was easily evaded and imperfectly enforced. Yet it proved of value, for it demonstrated that the state was prepared to intercede on behalf of some children in certain circumstances. The precedent had been created and a principle established; the needs now were to build upon the precedent and to extend the principle.

But the time for such an assumption of further obligations had not been reached by 1807, when Whitbread introduced his Bill to provide parochial schools throughout the country. This measure passed the Commons but was rejected by the Upper House. Nevertheless here too something was achieved, for the representative (if unreformed) chamber had placed on record its support of the idea that the state should exercise some responsibility, admittedly indirect, for popular education. Cracks in the apparently solid edifice of parliamentary apathy or antagonism were beginning to show.

On Whitbread's death in 1815 the leadership of what was derisively labelled the 'education-mad' party passed to Henry Brougham. The following year he began his crusade in the cause of education by persuading the government to appoint a select committee whose brief was to 'inquire into the Education of the Lower Orders of the Metropolis and to report their observations thereon'. Seemingly, the money granted for meeting the expenses of this committee was the first to be voted on education since the Commonwealth.

Having completed their investigation, the committee 'found reason to conclude, that a very large number of poor Children are wholly without the means of Instruction, although their parents

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08615-8 - The Rise of a Central Authority for English Education

A. S. Bishop

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INCIPIENT STATE INTERVENTION

7

appear to be generally desirous of obtaining that advantage for them'.<sup>1</sup> In consequence of this finding the committee made a vague and tentative recommendation for government action. They felt 'persuaded that the greatest advantages would result to this Country from Parliament taking proper measures, in concurrence with the prevailing disposition of the Community, for supplying the deficiency of the means of Instruction which exists at present, and for extending this blessing to the Poor of all descriptions'.<sup>2</sup>

The 'prevailing disposition' in Parliament was to take note of the information gathered and then to ignore it. Yet the labour had not been wasted. In the first place Brougham had begun to arm himself with the statistics he needed to stir the government into action; in the second he secured the renewal of the committee's powers and the extension of the inquiry to the remainder of the country; finally, he had in the course of his investigations discovered numerous disquieting facts concerning educational endowments, discoveries which prompted him to demand a full-scale inquiry into their administration and disposal.<sup>3</sup>

The select committee, reappointed in successive years, issued its final Report in 1818. Although its recommendations brought no immediate response, they are important in that they foreshadowed the line of least resistance adopted by the government of the day fifteen years later. Thus, having 'clearly ascertained, that in many places private subscriptions could be raised to meet the yearly expenses of a School, while the original cost of the undertaking, occasioned chiefly by the erection and purchase of the schoolhouse, prevents it from being attempted', the committee conceived 'that a sum of money might well be employed in supplying this first want, leaving the charity of individuals to furnish the annual provision requisite for continuing the school'.<sup>4</sup>

They then offered alternative proposals as to the method by which this public expenditure might be disbursed. 'Whether the money should be vested in Commissioners, empowered to make the fit terms with the private parties desirous of establishing the schools, or whether a certain sum should be intrusted to the two great Institutions in London for promoting Education, your

<sup>1</sup> *Parliamentary Papers* [PP] 1816, IV, 3.<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*<sup>3</sup> See chapter 10.<sup>4</sup> *PP* 1818, IV, 59.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08615-8 - The Rise of a Central Authority for English Education

A. S. Bishop

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Committee must leave to be determined by the wisdom of Parliament.<sup>1</sup> When the time came, Parliament, in its wisdom, chose the latter course; in this decision lay the roots of the dual system.

Brougham did, indeed, make one vain attempt to secure the implementation of the committee's suggestions. In 1820 he introduced a Bill for the promotion of education. The project was not even debated; but even if the Queen's trial had not distracted the legislature's, and in particular Brougham's attention, its fate was entirely predictable, for it incurred the disapproval of churchmen and dissenters alike.

For the next dozen years the education question was allowed to rest, partly because Brougham was now as much distrusted by his friends as disliked by his opponents, partly because hopes raised by the spread of the monitorial system remained high, and partly because the explosive nature of the subject had made members cautious of tackling it. An indication of this wariness is shown in the Home Secretary's reply to the call made by the British and Foreign School Society in 1823 for public funds to assist its educational work. Peel declared the impossibility of his advising a parliamentary grant since it might establish a precedent 'extremely inconvenient to Government'.

On the other hand, the problem had been given a public airing, and there gradually emerged an active movement favouring a national system of education. Certainly such a system was needed. By 1830 it was clear to many unprejudiced observers that voluntary effort alone was not, and could never expect to be, sufficient. If, for example, the ability to write one's name provides a crude index of literacy, then some of the marriage registers of the period suggest that the National and British schools were achieving only a very limited success. Government intervention was rapidly becoming a pre-requisite of educational progress, especially as the societies' subscription appeals appeared to be subject to the law of diminishing returns.<sup>2</sup>

It was the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832 that created a situation in which positive action by the state became possible and, in one sense, necessary. The Whigs were dependent for their parliamentary majority upon Radical support, so that expediency,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, G. C. T. Bartley, *Schools for the People*, 1871, pp. 53-4; and the *Final Report of the Cross Commission*, 1888, pp. 3-4.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08615-8 - The Rise of a Central Authority for English Education

A. S. Bishop

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

INCIPIENT STATE INTERVENTION

9

as well as principle, induced them to embark upon a programme of reform over a wide field. In no quarter was the need more pressing than in education, and in none were the Radicals more determined to secure action. The era of state opposition and indifference was drawing to a close; the era of state intervention and support about to begin.

## 2

THE PERIOD OF  
TREASURY GRANTS-IN-AID

This growth of a large administrative department with rules and principles of its own creation, without any assistance from the legislature, is the most remarkable instance of the experimental and empirical fashion in which some of the great English institutions have developed.<sup>1</sup>

In 1833 the Grey Administration was at last prodded into activity. The main credit for this achievement goes in roughly equal shares to two men, Henry (now Lord) Brougham, and a young Radical M.P., John Roebuck. The latter, despairing of any government initiative, took matters into his own hands. On 30 July he introduced into the Commons a resolution calling for the establishment of a national system of education to be controlled by a minister of cabinet rank.

Although so ambitious a scheme could command little support, Roebuck's gesture was by no means a futile one. He succeeded in drawing an expression of interest from the government, with the implication that some action might be forthcoming. Yet Parliament's rejection of the proposal, together with its replacement by the measure soon afterwards adopted, was to have most unfortunate consequences, for it meant that each branch of education was allowed to evolve independently, thus contributing to the administrative confusion that bedevilled English education throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

That Roebuck's initiative was not entirely fruitless was due to Brougham, who had long believed that voluntary effort could make the necessary educational provision if only it were assisted in meeting the initial costs involved. He therefore pressed the Cabinet to sanction a grant of public money for this purpose.

At two o'clock in the morning of 16 August, in a sparsely attended House, Lord Althorp, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, moved 'that a sum of money not exceeding £20,000 be granted by

<sup>1</sup> J. Redlich and F. Hurst, *The History of Local Government in England*, 1958, pp. 190-1.