

# EDUCATION OF TO-DAY

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## EDUCATION IN CITIZENSHIP

*Spencer Leeson*

I AM here to-day on behalf of the Association for Education in Citizenship.

You will find at the bottom of the Hall a quantity of papers in which are set forth the aims and methods of this Association. I will begin by reading out this statement to you. It is as follows:

“To advance the study of and training in Citizenship, by which is meant training in the moral qualities necessary for the citizens of a democracy, the encouragement of clear thinking in everyday affairs and the acquisition of that knowledge of the modern world usually given by means of courses in History, Geography, Economics, Citizenship and Public Affairs.”

That is the object which the Association sets before itself; and the methods by which it proceeds are as follows:

(1) “To collect information as to what is being done in regard to training in Citizenship in Schools and in other educational institutions, both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere;

(2) “To compile bibliographies; to maintain a library of suitable books, and to arrange, where necessary, for the production of new ones;

*Education in Citizenship*

(3) “To compare present methods in training in Citizenship and to work out new ones; to suggest courses; to promote discussion in educational conferences, in the press and elsewhere;

(4) “To make representations with regard to training in Citizenship to bodies having control of education; and lastly

(5) “To co-operate with the Historical Association, the Geographical Association and other kindred bodies as regards common objects.”

This is the bare official statement. In what follows I will endeavour to enlarge upon this statement, with particular reference to the three great topics, which if adequately treated would cover the whole matter—namely, the moral qualities necessary to good citizenship; training in clear and correct thinking; and the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge which every citizen should possess. But it is first necessary to say a word about one fundamental conviction which the Association takes for granted in those who are interested in its work.

The Association is in the widest and broadest sense non-partisan. It tries to unite members of different parties in its service; it does not seek to recommend the dogmas of any political group. But there is one matter in which we are partisans and one dogma to which we hold as to an article of faith. We believe in the English political and educational tradition. What does this mean? It means this. We have never, either in education or in politics, sought to create an artificial mass-type—a body of boys and girls pledged as a matter of discipline to worship this ideal or that. We have never thought or taught in this country that there is one way of thinking about politics or anything else which is right and that all other ways are wrong. We have proceeded on different lines. We believe that the schools should try to train boys and girls in habits of careful, humble enquiry and independent

*Education in Citizenship*

3

judgment on politics as on other subjects and that it is not our business to mould them to one pattern, to recruit them to one cause, to make them Fascists, Conservatives, Liberals, Socialists, or Communists. We believe in freedom of thought, not indeed as an end in itself, but as a means to a greater end; and we desire our pupils, as members of a free state in which individual personality is respected and individual opinion carefully weighed, to look at public questions as questions which touch not only their interest, but their moral being, as questions to be settled by discussion and consent in a broad spirit of toleration and responsibility and reverence for law. That is the only uniformity we should desire to see.

This is the English tradition of government, and it is reflected in the schools. At no time have they been consciously used as the instruments of a policy. It is quite otherwise in many places elsewhere to-day—Russia, Italy, Germany. There—I am not condemning or even criticising them but simply trying to state what appear to be the facts—the schools are made into instruments of policy. It is not their business to train an independent, balanced, broad-minded judgment, but to turn out enthusiastic recruits for the armies, civil, technical or military, of the totalitarian State. There have been other examples in the past. The system devised by Napoleon for France under the Consulate had the same method and the same end. That is not our end nor is that our method. In education, as in politics, we hold that the object of all activity is to assist the development of the individual soul towards the good, or as I should prefer to say, towards the fullness of God; seeking to make political and economic organisation serve that end.

The individual is an end in himself; the State is not. But the individual cannot attain the full measure of his development except as a member of a community. Therefore, though citizenship—the art of living well as a member of a community—cannot be regarded as the primary end of education, yet it is a secondary end of high importance, and the primary

I-2

end cannot be reached without it. How then can we train boys and girls in citizenship—the art of living well not only in England, but in Harrow, not only in Harrow, but in the British Commonwealth of Nations, and indeed in the wider unity far described beyond that?

How can this task be undertaken, and how, as practical teachers, should we tackle it? It falls into three parts. We must encourage, if we can, the growth in our pupils of certain moral qualities. We must train them in habits of clear and balanced and unprejudiced thinking. In the third place there is certain positive knowledge which every citizen ought to possess and which the schools therefore must make it their business to impart.

First, of the moral qualities, the State exists to preserve good life. The second great commandment given by Christ is not only a maxim in ethics, it is the supremest wisdom in politics as well, and to teach this by example and precept must be our first care. We must make those for whom we are responsible see that love of their neighbour is something more than a pulpit platitude; that it will not do to look upon the State either as a universal provider or as a tiresome intrusion, but a living family claiming their service. Not “Service to the Community”, as a large and windy abstraction, but service in this or that concrete form, this or that definite direction. We must cure them of an unworthy quietism, or desire to live their own lives in their own way. Their lives are not their own. As members of a democratic society, public questions are their concern. It is they who in the last resort direct public policy, and public policy cannot be soundly based except on the free consent and co-operation of individual wills, not acting with an eye to their special interests. Side by side with the duty of taking broad views, is the readiness to undertake responsibility in different spheres of administration. Much must of necessity be left to the expert; but it is of the essence of a democratic state that in it the expert advises, but does not rule. There is a vast sphere of work open to all here and by one of

*Education in Citizenship*

5

the noblest of our traditions practically all of it is unpaid. To this unpaid service, as members of Local Authorities, Hospital and School Management Committees, as Justices of the Peace and in hundreds of other less obvious and more personal ways, our pupils will be called; and it is for us to see that they do not refuse.

The schools have sought to train boys and girls in this sense of responsibility and service. This has been a specifically English contribution to educational practice, and our prefectorial system, our committee system, and the like have been devised with an eye to this end. Indeed so strong have we been for the community and the type, that we have fallen into the opposite peril of overriding the legitimate claims of the individual, and the erratic genius to whom the world owes so much is said to find no home in the English schools. But whatever may be our faults in that matter, we have at least the tradition of service and the means of encouraging it and that for our present purpose is an asset indeed. By itself it is not enough—it needs to be supplemented and reinforced by the possession of certain specific forms of knowledge; and it is apt to assume sometimes a demeanour that is almost patronising—a semi-feudal condescension *de haut en bas*, when what is really needed is a spirit of equal service in the rank and file, and proud to be there—service not ‘for’ but ‘with’.

These are the moral qualities on which true community life, real citizenship is founded. There is no sympathy between them and the qualities on which a dictatorship, whether of the Right or of the Left, can be built. These qualities we need first of all to strengthen in ourselves, and then in those we try to teach, in schools of every sort and kind; and they will bear fruit by God’s grace in an eager responsiveness to the calls of public and private obligation and also in a healthy disinterested public opinion operating over the whole field of national and international affairs. Policy will answer for good or ill to the movements of public opinion, as reflected in the press and in Parliament. There was a conspicuous example of this in the

forties of the last century, when the conscience of the nation was thoroughly roused over the iniquities of child and female labour in mines and factories, and reform at once followed. There is another shining example of it in our own time—the loud demand from men and women of all parties and classes for housing reform. No amount of machinery will serve unless the spirit is there. When the spirit is there, difficulties collapse like the walls of Jericho. It is for us to help to evoke that spirit.

To moral qualities we must add intellectual qualities; and of these the first for our purpose is the power of clear and balanced thought—not the power of searching out subtle and over-ingenious lines of argument, nor the power of accumulating masses of learning—but the Greek gift of looking things straight in the face and seeing them as they are. In the want of this lies one of the great dangers to intelligent democratic citizenship. We are in peril from propaganda, and the instruments for the diffusion of propaganda are to-day terrible in their efficiency and range. Truth may be distorted and suppressed to serve a cause; events may be torn from their context or actually and deliberately misrepresented because the end is held to justify all means, and citizens need only be told what this or that leader or newspaper editor thinks it good for them to hear. In old days kings used to tune the pulpits; in our time we have seen the press, the cinema, and the wireless tuned so effectively that a whole people can apparently be made to shout with one voice the same words. We have escaped the worst forms of this assault in England, and it is easy for those that try it here to over-reach themselves. But the danger is there. There is a sturdy independence about an Englishman's judgment and a natural distrust of propaganda, as soon as he recognises it as such. But we are not proof against catchwords and slogans, and great masses of men and women may easily be swept off their balance. Our six hundred years of political experience has immunised us to a certain extent, but we cannot claim to be wholly free.

*Education in Citizenship*

7

How can education for citizenship insure us against this? It is not an easy question, especially for those schools which lose their pupils at fourteen—and those the pupils who will in the future make up the large majority of the electorate; and unfortunately, it is not always true that the accurate training of the reason in this and that branch of knowledge does anything at all to train the faculty of cool and unprejudiced thought about politics. No doubt, as in every other department, we must depend most of all on the attitude of the teacher, his sense of fair-mindedness, his distrust of vehement partisanship, his strenuous search for truth, and his instinctive shrinking from vulgarity and blatancy wherever displayed. It is suggested from time to time that we should have set classes in formal logic and in psychology, to show how the human mind normally works and to tabulate its fallacies. I feel a doubt about that. We are dealing with immature minds, and immature minds abhor abstractions. It was once said that there should be no set teaching of psychology or philosophy in any schools, but that both should be allowed to ‘peep out’ from time to time, when the opportunity suited. The skilful teacher will make his opportunities. Something may be done by the analysis of some shoddy piece of thinking in book or newspaper or conversation, so as to illustrate its fallacies. Thouless’ *Straight and Crooked Thinking* does this very well. It takes a conversation between three educated men on current problems and shows them falling into all sorts of mistakes, mistakes such as we can hear or make any day in the train, mistakes of prejudice, over-statement, unverified assertion, confusion of metaphor with literal fact, and so forth. Of course the danger of this is that it may lead to priggishness and a horrible, bloodless, superior ‘rationalism’. The best guarantee against that is the good judgment and sense of humour of the teacher; and this reminds us again of the terrifying truth that in the last resort it is the character and attitude of the teacher that matters most.

To moral and intellectual qualities we have to add certain

specific forms of knowledge which will make the citizen feel most at home in the world of 1935 and most able to control its currents to good ends. This brings us to the third part of our enquiry. I have no desire to criticise existing schemes of organisation or curriculum, or to plead for a modern course as against a classical course or a science course; the subjects I am going to mention should, it appears to me, form part of the course of every boy and girl for whom anything in the nature of higher education can be provided. What can be done for those who leave the elementary schools at fourteen—the great majority—I have not the experience to discuss; I must leave it to those who know those schools, but I believe they will agree that something on the following lines is roughly what is required, though the conditions under which the elementary schools work—want of time and so forth—would impose many limitations and modifications.

In secondary schools (the term includes public schools) it would, I hope, prove practicable to introduce at some stage or other for all boys and girls instruction in the following subjects:

(i) Modern English and European History—modern in the sense that it merges into current events; the latter to be treated as an organic part of the course, not an occasional frill for a dull period.

(ii) Political and Economic Geography.

(iii) Modern Languages, or to put it in a fairer way, a study of two modern European countries, based on a knowledge of their languages, spoken as well as written; no doubt in most cases the countries would be France and Germany.

(iv) Elementary Constitutional Law, or to put it in a simpler way, How we are Governed; this should have reference to the Dominions and Colonies, as well as to this country. It will explain what Democracy means and what Liberty and Equality before the law mean; and special pains should be taken to describe the machinery which has been devised, by the reform of local government and in other ways,



*Education in Citizenship*

9

to cope with social problems, and so to bring into view the wide field of service that lies before the citizen in his own town as well as at Westminster.

(v) Economics. Pretty well every political question to-day is at root an economic question. I do not yet feel sure what place should be given in the schools to the teaching of economic theory—as a teaching subject it is in its infancy and we have not yet the experience to guide us; but modern economic history, and what may be called descriptive economics do not present the same difficulty. How many boys know what a trade union is, or what a bank does, or have ever analysed the Budget?

(vi) We should ask teachers of Science to include among their aims the task of explaining what Science has already done and may shortly be expected to do in reducing the demands made on human labour of all kinds. The next age must be prepared for its new leisure before it arrives, else when it does arrive, it will overtake an empty mind. Here is the immense importance of education for leisure. If the prophets of technocracy are right in predicting that at some not far distant time the working day will not exceed four hours, either it is to be a leisure filled with satisfying employment or an *ennui* that will destroy us all. Christ knew the human heart; and when He spoke of the seven devils worse than the first who took possession of the soul that was empty, swept, and garnished, He was speaking of a peril which on a small scale is in the experience of everybody. We must devise in good time some protection against it.

This is what we ask in the matter of positive knowledge; and we shall have to face two objections. First, that there is no time, and secondly, that it is impossible to teach political and economic subjects or even very modern history without a danger of bias in the teacher. These objections deserve consideration.

I do not think the difficulty about time is a serious one, and many schools have been able to overcome it. Several of the

subjects can be and are treated in the ordinary course of common-form time-tables and it is simply a matter of the spirit and attitude in which they are approached. Moreover, if we are convinced of the importance, the necessity, of these subjects, we shall agree that time must be found for them, and for all boys and girls, no matter what may be their line of specialisation. Indeed anything that will compel us to modify the rigour of specialisation is to be welcomed; this rigour is one of the chief dangers which education has to face in our time. It benefits neither the subject nor the pupil, and it is based upon a mistaken and even a mercenary view of the purpose of education. Here, as in so many other ways, it is the spirit that counts, not the time-table. If the teachers are imbued with the modern spirit, if they really belong to 1935, it matters not whether they teach Classics or Mathematics or Science or History or Languages; they will find time for the essentials of which I have spoken.

The fear of bias in political and economic teaching reflects great credit on those who feel it. It bears evidence to the fair-mindedness of the majority of English teachers and will always protect us from the grosser assaults of propaganda. What to a Russian or Italian or German teacher would be counted for righteousness—that he was creating in the school a nation of Communists or Fascists or Nazis—would be to many English teachers a sign that they were betraying their trust. This fact is in itself the best answer to the objection. The purpose followed, as I believe, by the majority of the teachers of religion as well as politics and economics is to put before their pupils with fairness as many different views as are held on this subject or that, and not to conceal their own convictions; but to leave the final decision to the judgment of each individual boy or girl. No other method would work with English-minded people; blatant propaganda in schools or universities as a rule defeats its own ends.

I do not think either of these objections are really valid; and the more we consider the signs of our time, the more