

To a desert island
with eight floppy discs
and two quaint books

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A period of economic recession is both a good time and a bad time for fresh thinking on education: a good time because it should encourage a critical examination and a sharp focus on priorities and a bad time because little financial resource is available to effect necessary improvements. This latter aspect was the obverse side of the verbal coin which Sir Keith Joseph spun before an appreciative audience at the last North of England Education Conference and elaborated subsequently. It is not easy to see why the Education Secretary's speech should have been accorded quite so enthusiastic a reception, unless the acclaim was given in the spirit of the form prize for progress, there having been little previous cause for cheer from that quarter. Clearly all but the most misanthropic should welcome a situation where it is envisaged that 80 or 90% of pupils will get better results through a system based on absolute rather than relative standards, where the aims of the curriculum in each subject and at every age are clearly defined, the whole enterprise being manned by a corps of better trained, higher quality teachers. If, as Sir Keith hopes, the outcome is less boredom, higher pupil motivation and less hooliganism, that is an agreeably acceptable bonus.

Such aims, however, are laudable but limited. It is essentially 'middle-ground' activity. Moreover, given the present social and economic malaise of much of the United Kingdom we may merely be placing more highly qualified but ultimately equally frustrated youngsters to join the ranks of the unemployed or, as 'other ranks', to garrison Goose Green, but this is terrain over which Sir Keith's write does not run and in itself no argument against the proposed improvements. We find, however, little evidence of basic, deep radical thought on what should be the nature and goals of education for our age. Education inevitably reflects society, but it also shapes it, whether by intent or neglect. The identification of goals and the fostering, even the pursuit, of values is difficult in a society which seems to lack any unifying principle. We have long ago thrown off the domination of a religious ideology and thus far we have escaped the tyranny of a political one - our 1984, mercifully, is not Orwellian. We do have, however, an increasingly fragmented and directionless society with, at the government end, the gross national product and at the individual end, consumerism, as perhaps the only discernable and enunciated common values. We are cynical and suspicious, probably rightly, in regard to philosophies, values and ideals. Moreover the difficulties are compounded by economic and social conditions. Despite or perhaps because of the difficulties the task needs to be essayed. We need to consider now in basic terms what kind of education we should provide for the citizens of the twenty-first century. Our system at present is geared towards selecting the minority who will proceed to higher education and, hopefully, equipping the residual majority to be sufficiently literate, numerate and disciplined to secure and hold down a job. That the school system is skewed by the former aim is a matter of frequent comment, whilst the prominence of the latter aim in a society where there will be more leisure, enforced or otherwise, is increasingly open to question. In the last century whilst the 'public' schools spoke of producing 'Christian gentlemen' and stressed 'manliness', first as against childishness and, later, with the quickening tempo of imperialism, as against effeminacy, the elementary schools of the general public turned out 'hands' adequate to service the industry of 'the workshop of the world'. These relatively clear aims may strike us today as quaint, misguided, derisory, or even dangerous, but alongside them was at least one notion which has relevance to our situation - the idea that education was necessary for the operation of a democracy.

The 'public' schools saw themselves producing leaders through 'character building' whilst the elementary schools equipped the common citizen with basic skills to enable him to get by. It is a perilous and perhaps mistaken undertaking to reduce something as complex as education to a simple slogan but the notion that we are educating citizens for democracy might give some focus, unity or goal to educational activity. Within that aim obviously could be subsumed, for instance, an awareness of cultural heritage on the one hand and the contemporary, technological environment on the other. It has, moreover, an obvious relevance for now and for the future: people may or may not have jobs, they may or may not have more leisure, only a few will go on to higher education, but one hopes that all will be engaged not only in preserving but in operating a democracy. Moreover, there are indications that people increasingly want to participate actively, to exercise their rights as citizens, to help shape the policies and destiny of their community and country. To be an adult free citizen means nothing less. Education should actively help in pointing the way towards greater participation and self-determination. Education for democracy will, it goes without saying, ensure that it is not side-tracked into a 'saluting the flag' patriotic syndrome. It will consider the workings of central and local government, the legal system, the financial institutions indeed, the whole anatomy and metabolism of the country should be common and central concerns. Political studies, peace studies are controversial, so we stick to French and welding for beginners, each of which may be admirable, even useful, but less crucial for an active democracy and a fulfilled citizenry. This may not be the right vision, and vision and ideals may seem to be luxuries in, say, a tough

inner-city school where 'survival' may be a more basic consideration, but the maxim that 'where there is no vision the people perish' is, one senses, as applicable to education as it may be to any other area of activity. Now, despite the recession, might be the time for the government to establish a broadly based independent think-tank to give radical consideration to the kind of education we should provide for the next century - broadly based because one suspects that education is too important to be left entirely to politicians and teachers. Meanwhile, away from the complex and difficult sector of full-time school education and its future, there is an area where the government could take immediate steps to improve the educational well-being of the nation, namely part-time adult education. The case for adult education scarcely needs to be made: the increasing trend of one or more career changes, the need for retraining, unfulfilled potential at school, the acquisition of new interests, the realisation that learning is or can be a life-long activity these currents, already strong, will, presumably, grow stronger in the future. Yet we hear that funds for University Extra-Mural Departments, the Workers' Educational Association and the Open University are being reduced. The latter, hailed as 'the university of the second chance' is increasingly open only to those who can afford the fees since the University's Financial Assistance Fund is now unable to meet the needs of all the applicants who cannot study without its help and great numbers have to be turned away disappointed, unless they are registered unemployed, in which case government funds are available. Adult education, then, is another area which requires imaginative development but instead we find insensitive pruning.

In this pruning we find perhaps some indications of the government's values in education: a utilitarian and materialistic approach leads it to regard more benignly the scientific, technological and commercial areas - they are said to have economic and vocational relevance. Are the humanities dispensable frills and are there, one asks, other kinds of 'relevance'? C.P. Snow, currently given a new topicality through TV, warned of the 'two cultures'. The government's approach, rigorously pursued, would lead to one culture or none at all. Roy Plumley's future guests will, presumably, choose eight floppy discs for their desert island and will find the Bible and Shakespeare novel, even incomprehensible, whilst by the time Mr Neil Kinnock is in a position to return the Elgin marbles the more topographically erudite of the electorate may believe that some objects are being despatched to the Moray Firth area, perhaps as a concession to Scottish nationalism, whilst others may imagine that the Return of the Elgin Marbles signals but the latest indoor game to win commercial sponsorship and wonder why they missed it on TV first time round.