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Progress and Controversy in Britain
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Progreso y controversia en Gran Bretana

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Résumé de l'article

L'auteur présente un débat dans lequel lui et Sir Kenneth Berrill, président d'un conseil privé (Think Tank) étroitement lié au gouvernement discutent des priorités pour l'éducation des adultes. Tandis que Sir Kenneth défend la position selon laquelle les priorités gouvernementales doivent s'orienter vers des programmes de recyclage de main-d'oeuvre, B. Groombridge, quant à lui, défend une politique d'éducation plus vaste qui peut répondre à des besoins sociaux autres que ceux exigés par le marché du travail.

Progress and Controversy in Britain

B. Groombridge

Adult education in Britain—promoted by the Universities, local education authorities and many volontary organisations—is well over a hundred years old. But in the last ten years there have been considerable advances, with large new constituencies for education coming into existence. To give three examples out of many : (1) Every year 40 000 people over 21 apply to get into the Open University, and about half are accepted. Ten years ago the Open university did not exist, and there were many sceptics who expected it to fail; (2) A recent literacy campaign (in which broadcasters and many field organisations co-operated) prompted 120,000 men and women to say they wanted help with reading and writing. A mere four years ago people concealed their illiteracy with deep shame; (3) This year 110,000 men and women are expected to benefit from the Training Opportunities Scheme, run by the Official Manpower Services Commission, to enable people to change jobs or get back into employment. The School population is falling; the number of adults becoming students grows every year.

In Britain, as elsewhere, this development is accompanied by controversy, the arguments about priorities being exacerbated by the economic recession. This controversy has been reflected by a new magazine, *Learn*, which is in itself an interesting phenomenon. The most significant fact about *Learn* is that it is adressed to the general public (most other journals about education are for teachers and other professionals) and that it is not just about the education of schoolchildren. So it is in itself an instrument of popular education on the subject of education. The editorial in the first number (March 1978) declared :

> Learn *is a magazine for people of all ages who like to stretch their minds, and for users of formal and informal education services whether they be adults interested in courses, parents concerned for their children's schooling, or teenagers who want to get more from their studies.*

In six months *Learn* proved that Britain was sufficiently interested in education, as a lifelong process, for such a publication to be commercialy viable.

Along with practical articles with titles such as I'm 25 : where do I take French? or 'Learn from Home : TV and Radio in March', the first issue also contained an interview with Sir Kenneth Berrill, the eminent Chairman of what is popularly called the Think Tank, an intellectual resource for central government. Sir Kenneth strongly advocated the importance of what in French terms would be *formation continue* or *recyclage*. I was invited to criticize Sir Kenneth in the second issue, which I did, charging him with one-sidedness and, in effect, stressing other aspects of *éducation permanente*.

A glimpse of the complex continuing education

scene in Britain, and the flavour of one of the current controversies, is conveyed by two extracts from the magazine Learn, starting with the interview :

Sir Kenneth Berrill, Think Tank head, spells out

Why old dogs need new tricks

In an interview with Richard Bourne, Sir Kenneth argues that most of us must master new skills at work, and that micro chips are only one of the reasons why.

Sir Kenneth Berrill is head of the Central Policy Review Staff, attached to the Cabinet Office in Whitehall, which is still better known as the Think Tank. And when I called on him there he made absolutely clear his conviction that one of the top priorities for Britain, if we are to maintain our standards of living, is improved training for adults throughout their working life.

« My interest is very much in retraining », he emphasised. For this reason he was reluctant to use the term « continuing education ». In his view adults are quite well served for liberal education not only in the adult classes that take more than a million people. For the first time, thanks to television he pointed out, almost the whole population could see the full canon of Shakespeare's plays at the flick of a switch, without even needing to leave the family living room.

Sir Kenneth's growing concern for a vocational training that marches in step with technological change relates to his own experience as a practising economist. When he became chairman of the University Grants Committee in 1969 he encouraged the universities to do more updating courses for adults. Now such courses are not neglegible — with some 270,000 people taking them full time, and another 300,000 doing them part time. Then, as Chief Economic Adviser to the Treasury from 1973-74 he inevitably had to think harder about what could be done to increase the country's economic competitiveness. At the CPRS since 1974 he has brooded increasingly on the paradox by which so much of Britain's educational investment is concentrated on 5 to 16 year olds while adult training has been neglected until recently. And, with the government's commission to the CPRS to examine the social and employment implications of silicon chips — it reported on these in November — his concern has crystallised further.

« Microeletronics are a very important part of technological change, but there are lots of other bits going on at the same time. Technological change will be unprecedentedly fast in all industrial countries. But if anything the rate of technological change needs to be faster if Britain is to stay competitive. It is increasingly not possible to get all of your training in one large dollop at the beginning of your working life. It needs to be spaced out », he explained to me.

Although the working through of technological change may mean that people change jobs more often — and there were anyway 8 million changes of employer last year in an adult labour force of not much over 20 million — Sir Kenneth sees the main requirement for training and adaptability as lying within the individual firm of industry. Experience with computers, a more expensive and less sophisticated technology than microelectronics, points to this strongly large numbers of people have already had to learn to do a different job, whether in handling the computer directly or in doing the new tasks which it has made possible. The story of technological application so far, and the difficulty of predicting the real rate at which it will be diffused, makes Sir Kenneth reluctant to prophesy any doom of high unemployment. Neither certain optimism nor certain pessimism are justified.

While he favours more flexible retirement ages on general social grounds, Sir Kenneth is against earlier retirement, or greater time off work for loose educational purposes not specifically tied to retraining, as a response to possible job losses caused by technological change : « If people are being released just for general educational courses it is not much different from increasing their holiday entitlement. Then you are straight into problems of cost. People are not prepared to have lower wages to pay for such time off and if they don't then it would be inflationary. »

But although he is passionnately committed to the need for continuous retraining Berrill is under no illusion that it is an easy concept to sell when unemployment is felt to be high, or that there is any single way of meeting it. When a person comes back from his retraining he has got to be acceptable to colleagues in deploying his newly learnt skill. But higher unemployment alone can make people more resistant to changed working practices where there is any risk that individuals will lose jobs. And, both nationally and internationally, the employment scene is not rosy. At home the bulge among job-seekers and the surge of women who want to get in or stay in the labour force is putting a premium on the creation of new jobs. And world-wide recession and high inflation rates are not making things more encouraging for British employers.

Sir Kenneth does not want to see any centralized training operation in Britain : much training has always gone on within industry and inside particular firms, and that is all to the good. Furthermore there is now a diverse apparatus, ranging from industrial training boards to the Manpower Services Commission, from the Department of Education to local technical colleges, which amplifies the work going on inside the firm.

But what he *does* regard as a continuing challenge is the question of awareness of what any new technological process can do to help a particular firm, and how the management can equip and train itself to make use of it. « On the whole the problem is greater with smaller than larger firms », he considers. A manager needs to know whether computer-aided design can help him just as, at a humbler level, he has to know how many letters to send before it is worth having a franking machine. When the answer suggests that he should do something about a new process the manager needs to know where to go himself, or to send someone else to learn about it. « The big firms do a lot of this in-house, but the medium and smaller ones can't. »

Berrill's unrivalled experience and authority in this field make his plea for a high priority for continuous retraining, on

strictly economic grounds for Britain's economic survival,one that must not go unheeded. Others may contest his sharp distinction between education and training. Future issues of *Learn* will not only extend the debate, but will look in more detail at what individuals can do to help themselves as old jobs disappear and new ones come into being.

You are wrong, sir Kenneth!

Brian Groombridge, Director of Extra-Mural Studies at London University, challenges key White hall attitudes towards adult learning.

Even the head of the Think Tank can be wrong. At least, as reported in *Learn* (March issue) he is dangerously one-sided. Sir Kenneth Berrill is, you say, "for adults troughout their working lives", on strictly economic grounds.

He is quite right to dismiss the archaic notion that schools can somehow adequately prepare anyone for life. As chairman of the University Grants committee, he encouraged universities to do more updating courses for adults, but he won't use the term "continuing education" because that would imply a comparable commitment to liberal education for adults. Sir Kenneth reckons that provision of that kind of education is already adequate, especially as British television is so good ("Shakespeare's plays at the flick of a switch" in the editor's interview).

If he will forgive my being personal, Sir Kenneth manages to combine forward-looking attitudes essential to this country's survival (as an economic entity) with regressive attitudes that would put survival at risk (as a civilized society). However, I must give my reasons.

They are, briefly, three: that when Sir Kenneth asserts that adults are "well served or liberal education", he won't find anyone well-informed to agree with him that the contribution of broadcasting to our enlightenment, while impressive, is no substitute for a balanced service of educational opportunities for adults and that both the needs of society and the difficulty of maintaining anything like democratic government make liberal education *every bit as important as recurrent industrial training.*

All post-war Sercretaries of State know that liberal education for adults has been, for all those years, the Cinderella of the service. It was partly because she recognized this that Shirley Williams set up *Acace*, the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education under the Chairmanship of Dr Richard Hoggart ("and continuing" because it is important not to be one-sided in the other direction, and seem to care only about what used to be called, in a quite deplorable bureaucratic phrase, "non-vocational adult education"). Mrs Williams has promised to heed its advice, and seems to be ready to do so.

But the recent round of cuts and appeals to local authorities to economize were about as equitable as urging both anorexic and obese people to pull their belts in. One result—according to the inquiry undertaken by Professor Harold Wiltshire and his Nottingham University colleague, Graham Mee, and I should guess, the experience of *Learn* readers, is that in many parts of Britain this local authority service has been well-nigh decimated. In other parts, fee increases are so steep as to represent a major change of policy by stealth—fees used to be for registration, now they often have to meet above-the-line costs of tuition.

The social composition of classes is even more unrepresentative than it used to be: everyone pays through taxes, but only a skewed segment of the public benefit. *Acace*—which does not consist of woolly lobbyists—was so concerned that it remonstrated with the Secretary of State, who did not, in her reply, challenge the case *Acace* was making. Since then the council has gone to the legislative source of the weakness. Although the 1944 Education Act speaks of the education "of the people", the key clauses about "liberal adult education" are vague and flabby. *Acace* wants those clauses strengthened, so that there is a commitment to adult education every bit as explicit as the commitment to schools and vocational further education. That side of adult education about which Sir Kenneth is so complacent, is in fact chronically impoverished because it lacks the protection of the law.

Secondly, broadcasting. Perhaps I should explain that I worked for eight years in the programme division of the Independent Broadcasting Authority, and that I have a long-standing admiration for the educational value of a great deal of the broadcasting on all channels in this country. I am emphatically not one of those educationists with his nose in the air about television and Sir Kenneth is in good company in his respect for braodcasting.

We were alerted, as a nation, to the threat and the promise of microprocessors, not by government but by a *Horizon* programme. And during an epoch when the education system has feared a drift from science, the Davids Bellamy and Attenborough have converted us to it. Mike Yarwood can initiate the former Director of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and everyone recognizes Magnus Pyke. Children put amazing questions to him like "when the clock struck 12, why didn't Cinderella's slippers dematerialize ?"

At the same, broadcasting is for a complex of reasons about as efficient as an English coal fire — most of the heat goes up the chimney. We are endlessly informed by radio and television — but it is astonishing how little we *know*. It was not so long since a survey of young people found just under half of them believing the *IRA* to be a Protestant organisation. None of us should feel superior — in all such surveys the rule is that there is widespread ignorance.

Thirdly, for some purposes, there is no substitute for education : a deliberate immersion as distinct from being vaguely washed by the tides of radio and television programmes. Broadcasting helps to make us civilized — but not sufficiently educated to understand inflation, to assess the controversies between economists, to express an informed preference for nuclear or other kinds of energy, to contribute to a rational debate which in a democracy ought to help governments cope with the difficult tasks imposed upon them. A few other countries do better in this respect. Sweden for one ; West Germany for another ; Tanzania, especially allowing for its poverty, for a third. When Sir Kenneth was at the University Grants Commitee he may remember the Vice Chancellor who

said; « A nation that is backward in educating adults, is in danger of becoming backward absolutely ». And he was not talking about recurrent industrial training.

One of the most important educational events of our time was the creation of the Open University, ten years old this year. Sir Kenneth Berrill recently became a member of its council. He will, I think, find a different set of values prevailing in the Open University than he expressed to *Learn*. The OU has no inhibitions about the phrase continuing education. Last year it organised two major conferences, one with the Trades Union congress, the other with the Confederation of British Industries. Both were forging alliances for the promotion and development of continuing education. The Open Univesity's conviction is so strong that it has set up an Interim Delegacy for Continuing Education, to prepare the way for a major educational enterprise in parallel with its outstanding degree programme (from which 70 000 people are now benefiting).

The university was urged to this bold course by a special comittee chaired by Sir Peter Venables, the same man whose brilliance as chairman of the planning commitee made the vision a practical possibility, and certainly not one to undervalue the cardinal importance of education for industrial strength and economic health. The Venables report offers a simple, comprehensive, pragmatic definition of continuing education.

« Continuing education is understood by the commitee to include all learning opportunities which are taken up after full-time compulsory schooling has ceased. They can be full—or part time and will include vocational and non-vocational study... We have, therefore, chosen to focus attention on education for adults which is normally resumed after a break or interruption, often involving a period in employment. The undergraduate programme of the Open University itself is also largely excluded from this report. We see the centre of the debate as being the question of whether continuing education should be extended by the Open University and if so, how and in which direction... »

It is a different vision from Sir Kenneth. I think it is also a better vision. His has to do with the creation of wealth. The Venables report is interested in the creation of wealth *and* in the wise spending of it but the education of adults does not begin to match the needs of individuals or of society. We must dedicate more of our resources — and the training explosion vividly orchestrated by the Manpower Services Commission shows that resources can still be willed and found — to educate for politics and social understanding as well as for aesthetic awareness and for the complex demands of our so-called post-industrial economy.

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