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Can One Teach “Political Literacy”?*

In the burst of conscientious attention to the needs of society that appears to seize academics whenever the supply of students threatens their bread and butter, any discoveries about the usefulness of what they claim to know arouse a special interest. Would it not resolve many of the conflicts of today if the population at large were educated to the point of “political literacy”? A group of people in British public life have thought so and have published a report. Minogue however sets about this report with a profound scepticism and a deft and witty touch; his commentary, in which he predicts that the report will merely make of schools and universities “a breeding ground for quarrelsome bores,” is almost unflinchingly quotable. He dismantles the doubletalk that endows such terms as ‘neutrality,’ ‘activity,’ and ‘deference’ with quite arbitrary merits and demerits, and castigates the report for its blindness to what it is feasible to teach and what is not. The context of his remarks is the current political scene in Great Britain; but their applicability to the proper treatment of cant in higher education, like the incidence of that phenomenon itself, is universal.

The news from the polls is bad. It turns out that people are very misinformed about politics. Some think the Conservatives are the party of nationalisation, others that the IRA is a Protestant organisation. Lots of people never seem to know the name of the prime minister. Some think he was called Harold, but aren't quite sure if his other name was Wilson, or that charming Macmillan they saw on television the other night. The Dorset cottager who thinks we are still ruled by Ethelred the Unready is no doubt an eccentric, but several authenticated cases of confusion between Mrs. Shirley Williams and the Virgin Mary have come to light. Whatever can be done? Fortunately, a Committee has turned up with a timely Report.¹ The teaching profession will once more save the day by developing amongst children the subject of political literacy.

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The subject of *what?* Yes, it is an odd expression. A tiny dwarf called “political” is trying to pass itself off as tall by riding around on the shoulders of a giant called “literacy”. The inventors of this unlikely circus act are a “Hansard Society Working Party” and what they are working on is called a “Programme for Political Education.” The fruits of their labours have just been published by Longman. Within the covers of this Report will be found a discussion of the new concept of “political literacy,” guidelines (even better, “general” guidelines) and frameworks (better yet, “overall” frameworks) and (as the pages turn) syllabic dreams of classroom adventures. The main recommendation is an expansion of political education (“a modest requirement of timetable hours,” as the Report cautiously words it) and more investment in the training of teachers who can make us all politically literate; and if that doesn’t wipe the smile off your face, you’re incorrigibly frivolous.

Now the very first element of political literacy — its ABC, so to speak — is to recognize that nothing is quite what it seems. Here in this Report we seem to have a collection of public spirited teachers who have discovered a dangerous void for our society where political involvement ought to be. They present us with a plan for solving the problem. The plan turns out to be a bid for money and time. It has significant costs. Teachers have for many generations encouraged debating societies and given a bit of direction to fledgling political societies after hours. The Report is in tune with the times in seeking money and professional status for a long-standing amateur enthusiasm. It is inevitable that this particular use of public money and curricular time will be disadvantageous to other competing interests. Since the main conception of a political problem found in the Report is in terms of conflict of interests, the reader may appropriately perform the function of reflexivity on behalf of the writers of these recommendations. What seems most appropriate of all is to consider the document as an exercise in persuasion.

The persuader’s trump card is to convince his audience that they don’t really have any choice at all: *necessity* dictates what the persuader seeks. This old friend of an argument turns up as early as page 5:

“The question is not really whether it is done at all but whether it is done well or done badly . . .”

Another old friend among these rhetorical shifts is to suggest that what is generally regarded as a matter for specialists actually concerns us *all*. And along the lines of “personal freshness matters,” we get an insistence that politics is not just something that happens at Westminster, but an activity that affects everyday life. The notion that politics is about conflict, and especially conflict of interests, a notion with great appeal to the pedagogic sense of realism, threatens here to turn every family row into a demand for constitution, negotiated settlements, free collective bargaining, a children’s charter, and (to get a bit of practical work done) school assemblies to negotiate with the headmaster or head-

mistress. The Report is quite explicit that political literacy and autocratic Heads go ill together.

Teachers on politics

There is however, an overwhelming problem about the whole enterprise. Teachers in schools are authorities to whom children go to learn the dates of battles, the imperfect subjunctive of irregular verbs, and how to solve quadratic equations. They are not, however, authorities on politics, because no such things exist. There used to be a vogue for a carefully deodorised version of politics to be taught in schools under the name of "civics." It was largely descriptive, and it encouraged liberal and democratic values. Educationally, it was useless, and most children were bored by it; but at least it was unpretentious, and it did little harm. The authors of this Report, however, indict it as a timid evasion of the facts of politics, like sex education limited to a recital of anatomical truths.

To say that such things are inadequate is, however, merely to recognise one of the most unfashionable and neglected of truths: that schools are very limited in what they can achieve. In politics, moreover, most people are devoutly glad of this limitation, since no one trusts children to distinguish between the kind of reliability teachers have in genuinely educational matters, and their probable foolishness in matters political, in which they have nothing that can be called knowledge, and no experience. And it is a truth on which all rational men will agree, wherever they are on the political spectrum, that there are a lot of screwballs around; and that some of them are to be found in classrooms. What is to be done when such people are licensed to guide the political opinions of their tender charges?

The report is sublimely equable about this problem. Frontal assaults, they tell us with an odd echo of the language of pornography, are not likely to be successful. Deliberate indoctrination seems more likely to cause apathy and cynicism than enthusiasm. It would be nice to see a little argument for this belief, which would undoubtedly come as news to all the Nazi and Communist indoctrinators who have not been all that unsuccessful in this century.

It would be nice, I say, to see a little argument on this point; evidence would perhaps be too much to hope for. But all we face is a blank. And this very blankness is another old friend from the repertoire of persuasive devices. If one refuses to take an objection seriously, brushing it aside with impatience as too silly to be considered, one has a good chance of bluffing a critic into thinking that it isn't a very serious objection. In fact, it is very serious indeed, and its avoidance is an object lesson in how the British pedagogue deals with realities.

Even apart from "frontal assaults" of doctrine, the Report does not get the question right. The National Front teacher who spends his time in an exegesis of Gobineau and Rosenberg is one thing; the engineering of attitudes by way of

sneering asides about darkies is another thing altogether. If a teacher is adept at this kind of communication he will often carry his pupils with him. And so can any other hot gospeller in the schools — able to convey by sneer and derision what he thinks is a respectable attitude, and what he thinks is too silly for any intelligent person to consider. In this way, whole ranges of possible thoughts have often been made, as it were, “radio-actively” sterile, for many children, for many years. Even the best educators sometimes have this effect. The worst can turn the mind into a devastated area.

In genuinely educational subjects, those in which children learn a discipline of thought having clear criteria of what counts as a good reason, the question of balance or neutrality does not arise. Teachers do not have to guard against “bias” as they teach Latin, physics, or mathematics. Aesthetic judgment in English is not decisive in the same way, but nothing extrinsic to education threatens to swamp an appreciation of the qualities of Hamlet or the “Ode to a Nightingale.” And even the dangers of dottiness in modern history are at least limited, however loosely, by considerations of evidence. But the subject of politics combines a maximum of sinister, interested, outside interference with a minimum of agreed criteria of sound judgment.

This does not, indeed, make it unimportant; but it does make it a dubious subject for schools, in which the point of the exercise is training people how to think by immersing them in educationally worthwhile forms of thought. Vast quantities of political discourse consist of worthless and dishonest waffle. Children may have to encounter it at some point, and some may even develop a taste for it, but it is the very last kind of discourse which can stand as an example of clear and critical thinking. And it is necessary to report that these particular teachers of politics, who must be regarded as models of what the subject might be, the *crème de la crème*, as it were, are not always as clear and critical as they might be.

It is obvious that classrooms are as attractive to people with messages as harems might be to Don Juan. How, then, do we formulate the moral responsibilities of a man of strong political opinions who finds himself in charge of a class? The Report formulates the question in terms of the voguish word “neutrality.” It does indeed have fears that there may be “gross bias” in the classroom, and thinks that the teacher ought to criticise his own bias and to compensate for it in his teaching. The few words on this theme are a good deal less thunderous than the imposition of a clear duty to avoid bias — a duty such as we might expect to be invoked for a profession, such as teaching, which is not tethered even by such a thing as a Hippocratic oath. A quiet invocation of the idea of professionalism is all we get. These widely acceptable sentiments are undercut, however, by a rather bolder theme:

Neutrality is not to be encouraged: to be biased is human and to try and unbias people is to emasculate them.

There is something "politic" in the bad sense about combining pious advice about the need for fairmindedness with the suggestion that every redblooded human will let his biases rip. The latter suggestion will find support (and is indeed supported in the Report) in the currently fashionable pop epistemology which jumps from the logical characteristics of observation (that it invariably involves selection) to the conclusion that, since "everybody is biased" or non-neutral, everybody can be as happily partisan as they like.

An academic partisan

The question posed in terms of the misleading idea of neutrality is, of course, one of the central problems of the entire project. Educational discourse has no problem with neutrality because its material does not resolve itself into a choice between competing policies about which one might be either partisan or neutral. But politics is a maze of *pros* and *contras*, in which every humble little fact seems to take its place in some scheme of *pro* and *contra*. Hence the nearest thing a teacher of politics can get to educational remoteness is a kind of controlled oscillation between *pro* and *contra*. It is not merely the only way; it is also required, as a sheer matter of the practical politics of getting the Report implemented, that all political groups be offered equal bites at the cherry. The writers of the Report cannot help but recognise at times that oscillating between *pro* and *contra* is but a thin caricature of the genuine remoteness of educational subjects; but what they do not recognise is that a teacher in a classroom with a captive audience is exercising a form of pedagogic monopoly which makes genuine freedom of discussion impossible. For the condition of freedom in politics is not some set of guidelines about informational neutrality; it is the competitiveness which makes it easy for people with different policies to disseminate them. And that competitiveness is precisely what the classroom prohibits. Neutrality, then, must carry the burden. When it can no longer bear the strain, its employers in this Report toss it away like a squeezed lemon. Its flavour lingers on, however, in the meticulous balancing act performed by the Report in not favouring either of the two *pros* and *contras* it conceives to be the issues of contemporary politics.

Working-class solidarity, for example, is juxtaposed against something called "middle-class moderation." When the badness of an operation called "imposing theory before issues are understood" is illustrated, the three names of theorists used in exemplification are "Burke, Adam Smith or Karl Marx" who, unsuitable as they may be for the exercise since they are radically different *kinds* of theorist, are none the less recognisable standard-bearers for the three main points of some people's political spectra. "We would reject the assumptions of those whether of Left or Right" (the Report fearlessly tells us) "who would have only the correct attitudes taught." And immediately "socialisation" (presumably thought to be Left) is juxtaposed against "tradition" (thought to be Right). This is indeed neutrality of a sort, though a very mechanical sort; and the reader who was enraged by the bold general remarks about neutrality may find

himself soothed in the exemplification. Whether this kind of mechanical seeing “both-sides-of-the-question” (rather than analysing the very terms in which those familiar “both” sides are constituted) constitutes a form of education is the point on which attention should focus.

We are, however, far from having exhausted the difficulties arising from the question of neutrality. For the kind of attitude here called “neutrality” is, by a common sort of misunderstanding, thought to be essential to the academic validity of politics as a subject to be taught in schools. And, given such an assumption, “political literacy” cannot be taught in schools, as civics and religious education have often been taught, as a set of communal beliefs we all share, or which by being taught may reveal to us *our* way of thinking and acting. Thus, religious education used to be an induction into Christianity; but exactly the same sort of misguided attempt to turn it into an academic subject, such as we find in the present Report, is now turning it into “comparative religion.” Similarly, there might be some case for teaching children the way we engage in the activity of politics. To do this would be to embrace a belief that it is better, at least for us, to have a free press, regular elections, an independent judiciary, and all the rest. But this possibility is rejected — and it is worth noting the significantly confused way in which it is rejected.

It would be wrong, we are told, to define a politically literate person as someone who necessarily shares all values of Western European liberalism. That would be indeed a curious up-dating of the Whig interpretation of history into present-day political education.

We might note, as we pass, the pedagogic display of a bit of flashy and irrelevant erudition. This particular bit of erudition is not only irrelevant but sophistical. What is wrong with the “Whig interpretation of history” is that it is a political position distorting historical understanding; but there is nothing at all wrong with Whig politics, the teaching of which has no necessary connection at all with the Whig interpretation of history. Not all Whigs are bad historians.

The wider issue arising from this remark is, however, the fact that if politics is to be taught at all in schools, there is very little else it can be (apart from ideological indoctrination) except an assertion of what is here called “the values of western European liberalism.” Where else can its values come from? The Moguls of India? Confucian China? Genghis Khan? Tribal societies? And in fact the Report does stumble to just this conclusion, except that, having extruded Western European liberalism through the front door, it allows the same thing back through the back window in the form of a tasteless consommé called “procedural values” which it is the business of the teacher to espouse. These values are called Freedom, Toleration, Fairness, Respect for Truth, and Respect for Reasoning. They are in many respects admirable, and in various combinations have no doubt been found in many places at many times. But there is no doubt that this version of them is unmistakably a rather bald summary of what a liberally minded Briton has taken away from his reading of his history.

Liberalism with its hands tied

Training people in political literacy is, then, a training in liberalism which has exchanged its strong patriotic roots for a mess of educational neutrality understood to have resulted from academic hygiene.

But this is liberalism with its hands tied behind its back. It is no doubt an excellent set of values for those engaged in discussion with other liberals; but like the guns of Singapore, it is a defence against attack from the wrong quarter. One important 20th-century problem is that argument between Western politicians has an entirely different character from, for example, argument between Stalin and Trotsky, Hitler and Captain Röhm, or Mr. Teng and Madame Mao. In all the latter cases, the argument is mere froth in a deadly game of power, and the losers usually end up dead. Given that we live in a dangerous world full of power-hungry exponents of ideological truth whose aim it is to do away with degenerate bourgeois shams like parliaments and a free press, the politically literate man begins to reek of Kerensky and the Weimar Republic. It is all like going into a lion's cage to stroke the nice pussy-cat.

But perhaps a bit of danger is just what the Report flavours. It is mortally affeared that people won't take an interest in politics, and hence it seeks to meddle with the character as well as the minds of its pupils.

The ultimate test of political literacy lies in creating a proclivity to action, not in achieving mere theoretical analysis.

This utterance merely summarises a moral doctrine which underlies the whole Report. At one point, this desirable proclivity to activity is advanced as the Aristotelian mean between passivity on the one hand and rebellion on the other. Among the more bizarre recurrences of this general doctrine may be cited the remark:

Socrates was a good man — who broke the law; so did Jesus . . .

It is a remark which disposes of Plato and the Gospels in one brisk Liberationist *putsch*; it must constitute a milestone in scholarly revisionism. But perhaps the best clue to the significance of these remarks is a line about "a passive and deferential population, who think of themselves as good subjects and not active citizens." Now the *O.E.D.* takes "*deference*" to be "courteous regard, as one to whom respect is due." How, then, can courtesy get tangled up in this grotesque doctrine about the excellence of activity and the badness of passivity?

Deference despised

The cause is no doubt to be found in Bagehot's idea of the "deference vote" in British politics, which has haunted the corridors of political science in the form of a caricature of forelock-tugging peasants moronically convinced that

only their Eton-educated masters know how to rule. This piece of nonsense has the useful role of explaining away the fact that the lower classes do not always vote for reforming or revolutionary parties. The Tory working-man could be patronised as a “deference voter.”

Now the question of why people vote as they do is profoundly mysterious and it is not at all to be confused with the answers people may give to interviewers who ask them for the reasons why they vote one way or another. As with much else in politics, things are not always what they seem, including motives. But on one important such point, most people are more realistic than the authors of this Report. Most people regard politics as a spectator sport, in which the main actors are office-holders or those actively bidding for office. This Report, however, is keen to foster the illusion that politics, like voting and chatting in pubs, is fundamentally participant — cheering and booing are actually taken as politics itself. Now while it is true that no one is necessarily excluded from politics, it is also true that most people will never really take part in politics. It is an activity only for people either with the taste for it, or with very great determination. Any other view is demagogic flattery.

The fundamental presupposition of the Report is, then, a belief in a mode of human conduct called “activity,” and it is from this that the muddles about neutrality which I have already discussed take their source. For *neutrality* cannot help appearing, when caught in the upper and nether millstones of the kind of ratiocination displayed here, as a form of the dreaded *passivity*. Hence, too, *deference* as a form of courtesy disappears from sight because it has been identified with *servility*. Now a culture which misappropriates the vocabulary of courtesy in order to express its disapproval of servility (for which there are plenty of available resources) will turn itself into a breeding ground for quarrelsome bores, and it is the latter type of person who seems likely to emerge as the actual prototype of the politically literate man. For if I discuss law with Lord Denning, or astrophysics with Sir Martin Ryle, on the nondeferential assumption that I know just as much about these subjects as they do, then I shall become very tiresome indeed. No classroom, to bring the matter closer to home, could possibly function unless the children in one way or another deferred to the teacher as a teacher. None of this means, of course, that the remarks of the one deferred to are to be taken as necessarily gospel truth; but if some sort of circumstantial pre-eminence were not given to people in conversations, then conversations would never get going in the first place.

The word “deferential” carries a heavy freight of disapproval which, like many corruptions of our language (such as “disinterested,” for example), threatens to rob us of one of the essential conceptions of civility. Even more fundamental to the line of argument of this Report is the transformation of the idea of *activity*. Through the slow revolvings of thought, by which sparks of meaning pass from connotation to connotation, a new meaning of the word seems to be

slowly evolving. Being active and being passive (or quiet, silent, reflective) used to be two manners of behaviour available to human beings, each valuable in its own way. Now, however, "activity" has come to be identified with essential humanity, while passivity is identified with the character of a thing. (Hence the notion of a "sex object.") To be "fully human" means to strive to get one's way, especially in politics.

Beating the apathy rap

The change of meaning is a leap from one peripheral meaning to another, and the result is a somersault in which the idea turns into its opposite. A collection of people wanting houses, for example, or more money, think themselves most active when they band together in a demonstration which will induce other people to give it to them. But in fact, of course, such behaviour is peculiarly passive (in the bad sense) because it is dependent. It is a demand for wealth sundered from the creation of wealth. One genuinely active response to such a situation might be to build the houses for themselves, as people have so often done before. By a similar transformation, downing tools in a strike or a go-slow comes to be described as "industrial action." The result is not merely paradoxical, it is surrealistic; and a whole generation of simpleminded people have come to believe that they are being supremely active and courageous in taking part in mass demonstrations, which is precisely where both activity and courage are lacking. Now that all the serious Nazis are dead, for example, some thousands of sheep, who would not have said *boo!* when it mattered to do so, imagine themselves to be lions. It is much harder today to cross a picket line; and correspondingly less common.

There is the occasional disclaimer: though the politically literate are allowed the bracketed alternative of "positive refusal to participate", they would have a hard time beating an apathy rap. But the Report finds a great variety of ways of encouraging exactly the sort of ill-considered reforming activism which has been the curse of Britain over the last quarter-of-a-century. Political literacy appears as a struggle against strong tendencies towards passive "quietism" in Britain today. The actual situation is that there is hardly anything in Britain today, from local government to the Health Service, but has been in continuous ferment of hyperactivism. A horde of reformers has been zealously setting about education at every level during this period, and has transformed the school system, not very obviously for the better. There are, it seems, no less than 50 different A-level mathematics syllabuses available currently, with obvious problems for those going into higher education. Far from passivity being the problem it appears in this report, it is rather a proneness to activism which keeps the British in a condition of permanent administrative twitching. "Activity," one might well say, has become the neurotic's protection against activity.

It is thus the final irony arising from the Report's attempt to teach an academically pure form of politics that it should fail to comprehend its own most

important partiality. For in seeking to encourage activism, it can raise its eyes innocently to the skies and point out that it is encouraging “a proclivity to activity,” irrespective of the aims to which that activity should be put. But political activism is, as we have seen, peculiarly appropriate as an instrument by which a dependent population dramatises a claim on public resources. We might almost say that the traditional forms of our political life, revolving round elections and constituencies, constitute one form of modern politics, while street demonstrations constitute another. While purporting to be neutral, then, the Report mobilises a set of arguments liable to encourage little but the production of demonstration fodder.

NOTE

1. *Political Education and Political Literacy*. Edited by Bernard Crick and Alex Porter. Longman, £3.93. The Report is by a variety of hands, but expresses a single coherent point of view. Hence there has seemed little point in distinguishing the contributions of different authors. Nor have I distinguished between the Report itself, the project papers, and the other material collected in this volume.

Résumé

Dans la soudaine prise de conscience des besoins de la société que l'on constate chez beaucoup d'universitaires chaque fois que la baisse du nombre d'étudiants menace directement leur gagne-pain, il est intéressant de chercher l'utilité de ce qu'ils affirment connaître. N'arriverait-on pas à résoudre beaucoup des conflits d'aujourd'hui si la population dans son ensemble avait une culture "politique"? C'est ce qu'a pensé un groupe de personnages publics britanniques qui a publié un rapport à ce sujet. Minogue juge ce rapport avec scepticisme, habileté et humour; on se sent presque obligé de le citer lorsqu'il dit que grâce à ce rapport, écoles et universités deviendront des "élevages de raseurs belliqueux". Il réussit à démanteler le jargon qui dote les termes "neutralité", "activité" et "déférence" de vertus et de torts tout à fait arbitraires et il fustige le rapport pour son aveuglement devant ce qu'il est possible d'enseigner et ce qui ne l'est pas. Ses observations ont trait à la conjoncture politique actuelle en Grande-Bretagne; mais elles s'appliquent tout aussi bien au jargon employé dans l'enseignement supérieur et à l'incidence de ce phénomène proprement dit, lesquels sont universels.