Problems of crowd control

One could characterize our times by an intense curiosity and an increasing knowledgeability about the forces that determine change in our societies, coupled with a persisting sense of our helplessness to control them. Much of the writing in this issue has been based on the premise that schools can make things happen; it is an assumption that has been seriously brought into question by learned writers in the last decade or so. The same learned writers might however concede that schools do keep making the wrong things happen (and thus of course concede the point).

Nevertheless there is a persistent confidence in these pages that things in society at large can be put right by the right use of schooling. Thus schools are constantly being thought of as more than merely the instruments of an obscurely self-maintaining culture. Does a human society really have the capacity to straighten itself out, if the direction things are taking is not to its taste?

Many of our present customs and institutions, far from being the manifestations of deep forces in the culture, have merely acted to freeze some temporary aberration of power into a lasting distortion of the body politic. The fact that we have public schools at all, and that all of them are organized in vast bureaucratic systems, does not mean that they came into being because they had demonstrably served a need of society to regenerate itself - only that some people in power meant that they should.

An alternative to tinkering with an old engine or massively rebuilding it is to throw the thing away and get a new one. This solution seems especially attractive when new sources of energy are about. We are nowadays contemplating with dawning interest an education completely in the home, without schools, for it offers both

the neat technology of the computer and an alternative energy resource in personal motivation, rather than compulsion by agents of the state. As a bonus, it promises to relieve us of those problems, seemingly inseparable from schools, that arise from their management of socialization, selection, and custody of the young.

One could draw up a few criteria to be met by any attempt to bring about through education a successful self-correction of culture or society. The enabling institutions must be durable. The people who carry it all out must be thoroughly professional. The undertaking must be on a large enough scale to affect the entire related nexus of customs and beliefs.

Now the commercial system that has brought computer technology to its present state of feasibility for education is one of the two major and rival institutions in our society, the other being the government that runs the schools; and some would say that it is the more durable. The scale on which the government of Quebec has undertaken its revolution in schooling is huge, admirable, and effective; the scale of the computer revolution is world-wide. But can the professionalism of the personnel (including the teachers) in a system bureaucratised from top to bottom compare with that of the agents of high tech in a free enterprise market?

The chances for home education winning out seem good. The educational function would be better served; the functions of custody and selection would no longer be required of institutions in the same way. There remains the function of socialization, which if not required by society would certainly continue to be served by the peer group. The togetherness created by a school is for many of the young its single positive feature; no one seems to have thought of what to do about **that** need, once the schools have all been closed.

J.K.H.