

"Sérénité"

# Adult Education or Training?

# Public policy returns to first principles

Education in its wider sense has always been the prerogative of more leisured people; for those who had to work to live, the most that was ever considered, from Plato, on was training for a job. Only by taking advantage of this distinction, however, has the federal government of Canada been able to get its foot in the door of adult education. (Responsibility for education was given to the provinces in 1867). But Keane is apprehensive that the unhappy experiences of working class "education" in the 19th century are about to resumed, under a different rationalization, perhaps, but with the same effects. In an intriguing historical sketch of the mechanics' institutes of Victorian Canada, he conducts us through one more episode in the time-dishonoured efforts of governments to keep the second-class citizenry in their places. He thinks it is all happening again.

The British North America Act of 1867 left responsibility for education with the provinces, and responsibility for the economy with the federal government. Concerned largely with public school education, and this in a liberal arts tradition, the new act made no apparent impact on adult education. Since that time, however, federal policy has increasingly influenced the education of adults, largely because of growing national concerns with labour market needs.

After 1951, fiscal transfers for universities from the federal government were justified in legal terms by using somewhat arbitrary designations of "training" rather than "education". National economic growth and equity were to be promoted by training people for the essential professions, although the humanities were accepted as a necessary corollary of that preparation. Similarly, in adult occupational training, academic upgrading courses such as Basic Training for Skill

Development (B.T.S.D.) were accepted as an often necessary corollary. The federal acceptance of these "liberal" components, prompted by university and provincial program specifications, appears to have been hesitant, but the net result was that federal funding became an accepted part of an education for adults not limited to any narrow definition of vocational training. It might indeed encompass either basic literacy or modern literature. Recent developments, however, stemming from a stricter allocation of federal resources, are serving to redirect the education of adults back to an earlier, narrower, and once rejected, concept of training.

### "Training" is not education

The purpose of this paper will be, first, to explore the rise and fall of the utilitarian philosophy in adult education, and then to indicate some of the contemporary specifics which suggest that we have not learned from experience in seeking to "train" rather than "educate" adults. Following a brief review of the classical heritage and of the pressures for educational change which followed the Industrial Revolution, the paper will concentrate on the forms of adult education then deemed suitable for the new working class by the promoters of Canadian mechanics' institutes. Their perceptions of "suitability" are seen as critical to the inquiry because of the influence this term wielded in the era of voluntarism, and because of the residual influence now to be seen in current federal policies. The issue of "practicality" will also be considered, bearing in mind the novelty of the Victorian programs in terms of their objectives, content, and clientele. This will lead to the fundamental question of the relationship of such utilitarian and prescriptive objectives to the work force of an increasingly democratic nation.

The arguments for providing an education limited in terms of its economic utility can be traced back to classical Greece. Plato and Aristotle had proposed that liberal education for the leisured governing class be supplemented by a limited form of vocational training for the craftsmen and slaves.(1) The latter might need some specific training for their assigned productive roles in society, whereas the former needed cultural stimulation and leisure to facilitate a leadership role. This antithesis between culture and utility, or between liberal education and practical training, was to influence Western thought for centuries.

By the nineteenth century, the growing interest in and the provision of education still reflected the principle that its content should be influenced by the social class of its recipients. The grammar schools, lycees, colleges, and universities provided a largely classical education for the middle classes, while the common day schools taught the Three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic), perhaps preparatory to an

apprenticeship, to the fortunate children of the lower classes. Chance and ability might blur these distinctions, but they remained influential. In adult education, however, the general lack of institutional forms reflected both its low status and a concomitant absence of thought as to its "proper" content. A major challenge to the centuries-old concept of the prescriptive-normative function of education was however about to be posed by some of the outcomes of the Industrial Revolution.

# The emergence of "mechanics institutes"

The Industrial Revolution created tremendous pressures and possibilities, to which traditional educational institutions proved unable to respond either adequately or promptly. Thus a burgeoning interest in the marvels of science and technology found little expression in traditional curricula, while a host of newly-spawned trades arose without any apprenticeship traditions. Pressures for the development of a broader educational base were now prompted by diverse and often conflicting motives, of which the utilitarian and technological were but one group. There were also moral and religious pressures to promote a greater study of the Bible and an acceptance of established society, and social and political pressures to promote an awareness of democracy and the potentialities for substantial change and improvements in society. Just as the latter pressures provoked an expected hostility from conservatives, so too did any proposed acceptance of the status quo provoke hostility from radicals.

In this context, the advocates of the utilitarian and technological reasons for educational change tended to adopt a compromise position. Arguing that a wider knowledge of scientific principles would facilitate technological change in industry and agriculture, they contended that a new system of adult education should be devised based on a community of interests between employer and employee. Change was seen as inevitable, but also as potentially beneficial to both parties and ultimately to the nation, if an educational compromise could be effected.

This compromise was indeed effected, first, as might be expected, in Britain, home of the Industrial Revolution, but quickly thereafter in the land that was to become Canada. It involved the provision of a limited form of adult education to a limited clientele. It was intended to improve the competencies of that specific group of individuals upon whom future technological progress was seen to depend - the literate, skilled mechanics and apprentices. From them had come many of the idealized, self-educated folk heroes; their learning interests had certainly transcended their occupation, and they had shown an interest in the growing public lectures and demonstrations in the sciences. Similarly, whereas educational philanthropy had till

then been devoted largely to the moral and religious education of children, it was now argued that the new movement was also in the national interest and so deserving of support.

Advocates of the compromise were not disappointed by the response to their proposals. Taking their name from the "mechanics' institute" established in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1823, similar bodies were soon established in Britain, present-day Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Supporters included the self-made and increasingly prosperous factory owners, hoping to produce a new middle rank of technical personnel, and reform politicians anxious to channel the evolving working-class consciousness away from radicalism. Philanthropists, appalled by the workers' squalid living and working conditions, also contributed to the new foundations as an investment in social harmony.

Opposition, often more latent than expressed, came from equally diverse sources. There were those opposed to any popular adult education per se, and others opposed to particular aspects of the movement. Some religious (particularly Anglican) opposition was voiced concerning its emphasis on scientific instruction, while radical opposition attacked the many exclusions from the curriculum which the compromise involved.

# Reactions to "useful knowledge"

The curriculum was enveloped in the term "useful knowledge", for reasons similar to the present federal programs being enveloped in the term "training". "Education" was then regarded by many as the responsibility of the churches, as today it is regarded as the responsibility of the provinces. "Useful knowledge" was therefore interpreted to mean those things for which traditional education made little if any provision, in much the same way as early federally-funded "training" has been. More specifically, useful knowledge meant those arts and sciences which had a direct bearing on the occupations of skilled tradesmen. The term was held to exclude instruction in religion and politics (and on occasion, economics) specifically, and implicitly to exclude any provision for recreation or leisure. Fundamentally, the curriculum was intended to supplement apprenticeship training by updating skills and increasing productivity. If, in conception, this differed little from the principles of training espoused by Plato and Aristotle, in practice it proved sufficiently novel to attract international emulation. A striking similarity in objectives, modes of operation, difficulties, and successes was to be the hallmark of the mechanics' institutes of several countries.

In British North America, mechanics' institutes were to be established from Newfoundland to British Columbia, with over 300 in Ontario alone by the end of the nineteenth century.(2) The early foundations often attracted influential support. For example the Montreal Mechanics' Institute of 1828 was aided by

Sir James Kempt, the Lieutenant Governor; Louis Gugy, the City Sheriff; Louis Papineau, then Speaker of the Assembly; and John Molson, the steamboat pioneer. Additionally, as early as 1831 (provincial) government grants began to institutes in Quebec and Montreal, in 1833 to Halifax, and in 1835 to York and Kingston.

To balance such official endorsement of the movement, there was also some cynicism about its feasibility, some criticism of its "seditious" tendencies, and the establishment of some rival agencies. Thus at a time when the establishment of the Halifax body was being mooted, in 1829, a local newspaper noted the presence of those who were "so bigoted and illiberal as to deny the utility of raising the character and enlarging the capacities of the middling and lower classes of society".(3) Similar fears that the movement would upset the status quo were apparent in Saint John, N.B., in 1844. There, a lecturer before the mechanics' institute spoke of the movement being "condemned for supplying information of an extremely superficial character, degenerating into mere training schools for revolutionary democrats, and proving the hotbeds of infidelity".(4)

Opposition by the "family compact" to the York Mechanics' Institute led to the establishment of the York Literary and Philosophical Society, under the presidency of Archdeacon John Strachan.(5) The latter, who had delivered pioneer evening lectures on the sciences as early as 1807 in Cornwall, Upper Canada, was nevertheless to oppose the utilitarian and (in his view) radical flavour of mechanics' institutes. For him, it was clear "that Christian virtue is the first distinction among men, and that useful knowledge is the second".(6) Such opposition to the exclusion of religion from the program prompted the development of "institutes catholiques"in Quebec and of the YMCA/YWCA in other provinces.

Evidence for any explicit early working-class opposition to the movement in Canada is sparse, if only because a definite working-class consciousness was still evolving. Certainly, the Mechanics' Magazine which adorned the shelves of most institutes had concluded as early as 1824 that "all systems of education are false which do not teach a man his political duties and rights".(7) One can only speculate whether inhibitions of this kind prompted the initial hesitancy of tradesmen to join the York Mechanics' Institute in 1831. Certainly, the local carpenters and joiners displayed no such diffidence, two years later, in joining another novel Upper Canadian institution - a trade union. This claimed to have enrolled "most, if not all, the best workmen in York".(8)

#### A Victorian dream falters

Despite the different emphasis and different intended membership, the sponsors took their educational formats from their existing middle-class literary and philosophical societies. These comprised a library, a museum, and a lecture series, each sufficiently novel to attract both the curious workingman into membership and an assortment of volunteers to administer it. The lectures were to be as scientific or technical as the volunteers could manage, while the library and museum collections would depend on occasional selective purchases and assorted donations. The assumption was that a program of this nature would provide sufficient theoretical background in the developing sciences to enable mechanics to make significant contributions to technological change.

This Victorian dream of a swift educational transformation is apparent in the words of Egerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendent of Education for Upper Canada. In 1849, he told the members of Toronto Mechanics' Institute that "An educated mechanic may essentially advance the interest of society, by discoveries, inventions, and improvements in mechanical arts".(9) Certainly, institutes in the shadow of major industrial establishments, like the Halifax naval dockyard or the locomotive sheds of Hamilton, U.C., aspired to develop substantial programs of practical local utility.

Once launched, the aspirations and assumptions of the movement were quickly put to the test. The program's success depended on such matters as voluntary provision of the necessary human and material resources, development of an effective teaching and learning model, and continuing acceptance by the students of the prescriptive and limited objectives of the partnership. However, the novelty of the movement saw it expand quickly into the small market towns of British North America, where resources were limited, mechanics were relatively few in number, and the occupational complexity was seldom susceptible to an improvement by "useful knowledge". Although science and technology were then in their infancy, particularly in the educational realm, this did not render the teaching and learning task an easy one. Even in the major urban institutes where resources were not at such a premium, it was soon recognized that despite the often rich practical experience of the students, they lacked the study skills that adequate formal schooling might have provided. Such difficulties provoked both experimentation in some institutes and disillusionment in some students.

In the institutes, attempts were made to supplement lecture programs with formal evening classes, wherein the students' learning difficulties might be identified and overcome. However the difficulty of obtaining competent teachers, either volunteer or paid, was overshadowed by the difficulty of enrolling and retaining adult students for such classes. Increasingly, however, the success of a few major institutes in

sustaining a broad, graduated program (notably Toronto and Montreal), served to emphasize the chronic inability of the remainder to attain the objectives once set with such enthusiasm. Voluntarism, aided by token government support, was not transforming the products of apprenticeship into the Victorian dream of a race of inventors, experimenters, and single-minded seekers of the proclaimed scientific truths. This was attributable partly to the magnitude of the task and the paucity of the resources. More significantly, it could be attributed also to the growing disenchantment of the students with a curriculum circumscribed by utilitarian training objectives.

## What did working students really want?

Once the novelty of this venture disappeared, the students became increasingly conscious of its limitations and of the extent of the commitment expected of them. Their initial enthusiasms were sorely taxed after a ten or twelve-hour working day. While an entertaining lecture and demonstration might prove appealing, regular class attendance with examinations and certificates exposed their lack of formal schooling. Even lecture attendance could prove inhibiting when a degree of middle-class decorum was imposed. For those who made the commitment, particularly younger apprentices influenced to attend by parents or employers, the new discipline was frequently contested. Thus, at Toronto Mechanics' Institute, we learn that in 1856 "complaints were received by the directors about the conduct of junior members..."(10)

The rebelliousness of younger members was to be a fairly constant theme in the institutes, but even the older members came to display a growing degree of scepticism. By proposing to teach scientific principles as a supplement for the practical instruction of apprenticeship, the institutes had contributed to a divorce between theory and practice. They had also anticipated a greater degree of specialization than was to appear in Canada before the later nineteenth century.

But finally, adequate recognition by industry seemed lacking, both for any institute's concern with graduated class instruction in the sciences and for members' commitment in having undertaken such programs. Employers seemed much more supportive of the underlying moral preachment of the programs, of their support for the work ethic, for temperance, for law and order, and for established institutions and the status quo in general. It was the often explicit attempt to limit the educational program and its resources to a narrow training role, supportive of the status quo, that disillusioned many members and led to the collapse of institutes.

From the outset, there had been some degree of pressure from students to admit broader cultural and recreational components to institute programs - in effect to replace training

with education. An initial vagueness about the term "useful knowledge", coupled with a willingness to compromise in order to launch the institutes, had postponed recriminations. However, the objectives had been essentially the product of one group identifying another group's learning needs - of an assumed community of interests forged in the absence of any grass-roots alternative.

#### Expansions and contractions

Even before the fundamental difficulties in delivering a limited program to a limited clientele became apparent, both program and clientele showed disturbing signs of alternating expansion and contraction. On the one hand, the often painstakingly assembled institute museums began to gather dust, as initial enthusiasm for scientific curiosities evaporated. (11) A similar fate tended to befall the libraries' collections of reference, scientific, and technical works, although there was often a dramatic circulation of more general works, particularly of the often very limited collections of fiction. (12)

The library became a microcosm of conflicting pressures, displaying both the potentiality to become the most popular department of the institutes, and yet a venue for the most acrimonious disputes over the suitability of books. For example, at the small "useful knowledge" society in rural Pictou N.S., which numbered the future McGill College principal William Dawson among its lecturers, it was resolved in 1838 that a work by Boston theologian William Ellery Channing "shall be immediately removed and sold as soon as possible".(13) Channing's advocacy of a socially responsive Christianity indeed led to the banning of his books by institutes on both sides of the Atlantic, for it seemed to challenge the very basis of the status quo to which the institute directors were committed. Other institute libraries tried encouraging a reading of "polite literature", encompassing bowdlerized versions of Shakespeare's works, but many viewed fiction as essentially corrupt and contrary to their mandate.

The lecture program likewise underwent a reappraisal once its novelty disappeared. Not only were the indifferent or boring lecturers now criticized for their delivery, or favoured with ever-declining attendances, but efforts were made to replace predominantly scientific lectures with a much wider range. The very breadth of some programs was in turn criticized by others for its shallowness, or for its entertaining qualities. Thus, in the 1830s and 1840s the lectures of the self-educated Joseph Howe in Halifax could encompass astronomy, commerce, education, eloquence, history, poetry, scientific exhibitions, and travel.(14) But an 1832 proposal at Halifax for a lecture on constitutional issues was rejected by the administration because of "its tendency to lead to a political discussion". Similarly an 1848 proposal at Toronto for a lecture on "The Rights of

Labour" was rejected after the intended lecturer declined to submit his material to censorship.(15)

It was symptomatic of an often changing response to perceived interests (rather than to the founders' prescriptive utilitarian objectives) that Toronto would pay an \$850 lecturing fee to the popular American preacher Henry Ward Beecher in 1873, and yet later decline Alexander Graham Bell's offer to lecture on "his new contraption known as the telephone" (17). Other institutes proved unable, or unwilling, to adapt to changing public interests, and so as voluntary bodies faced extinction. Thus, that at Hamilton, Ontario, was said to have been "poisoned by the condescension and contemptuous patronage of the city's elite... (and so it) withered and died".(17)

#### Rescue by government?

Considering the general inability of this movement to realize its proclaimed objectives, whether in Canada or elsewhere, hindsight suggests that those objectives were impracticable. They rested on a great many untested articles of faith, and any accommodation to changing perceptions of reality tended to be regarded as heresy. Realizing regretfully that unaided voluntarism lacked adequate resources, it was then contended that these objectives could still be ?`alized with government assistance. But in an era when the costs of apprenticeship had been traditionally borne by parents, employers, and private charity, governments felt obligated to give the institutes no more than occasional and essentially charitable assistance.

One major exception to this policy was in Ontario, where a conscious attempt was made after mid-century to redirect the institutes to their utilitarian objectives. Tending to equate with incompetence the inability of voluntarism to sustain those original objectives, the government believed it had the means to ensure a return to first principles. Commencing in 1868, regular annual grants were offered to those institutes which joined a government-sponsored Association of Mechanics' Institutes of Ontario, and which submitted to a series of rules and regulations together with the attentions of a government inspector. Lists of recommended textbooks were circulated, the active promotion of class instruction undertaken, and the principle of accountability introduced into funding. experiment seemed promising, for the province had a growing perception of its industrial and commercial potential, and also the largest concentration of mechanics' institutes in the new dominion.

By 1880, the government inspector, in maintaining that grants were intended "principally for the establishment of evening classes", concluded that of 15,261 enrolments between 1870-1880, only 2,735 (17.9%) could be considered to be in technical subjects.(18) Of the remainder, 2,178 (14.2%) were in

liberal or recreational subjects, and 10,348 (67.8%) were in elementary or basic education. The inspector concluded that "the education of the working classes has been neglected... The majority of the so-called mechanics' institutes are only circulating libraries, and that too for the dissemination of light literature".(19) Under the stimulus of government grants, institutes continued to increase in number until there were 311 in 1895, but class programs actually declined after 1886.

The Ontario experience demonstrated that institutes could fill a growing demand for a broadly interpreted adult education. It demonstrated also that not even government directives and funding had been successful in channelling adult learning interests into "useful knowledge". Recriminations that large numbers of blue-collar workers had "failed" to enrol in classes in physics, chemistry, or drawing were based on the assumption that this was the type of "improvement" to which they were plainly suited. The institutes' "success" in meeting more general cultural and recreational interests, particularly the seemingly insatiable desire for library materials, was regarded as an aberration. Neither the original middle-class promoters nor the succeeding governments felt that it was appropriate to promote a form of adult education other than that calculated to improve technical competence or social responsibility.

The mechanics' institute movement was therefore regarded generally as a failure, although it left the foundations for Ontario's public library system and for other public libraries from Halifax N.S. to Vancouver B.C. - but only one remaining independent institute in the Atwater Library of Montreal.

#### Repeating history in the 1980s

Some tell us that history never repeats itself, while others say its study helps us to avoid repeating past mistakes and to anticipate future events. In the case of adult education, one suspects some degree of repetition is upon us. Another attempt is being made to delimit the content of instruction in terms of the occupational role and social class of the recipients. This attempt is the outcome of two 1981 federal government reports: Labour Market Development in the 1980's (Dodge Report) and Work For Tomorrow (Allmand Report).(20). In the absence of national educational policies per se, we may well find that federal "training" policies will influence a decided shift in priorities toward a more narrowly "useful" education for adults. Labour market forecasting is becoming an idol, comparable with the Victorian idol of scientific progress - all must design their programs to follow it. Projected economic needs are to be served, even at the expense of immediate social needs; thus those who have the necessary social and educational prerequisites will benefit, rather than the 28.4% of our population aged 15 and over who are regarded as functionally illiterate.(21)

Whereas the Allmand Report showed an awareness of the many adults disadvantaged both socially and economically by the lack of a general education, the Dodge Report produced a set of federal guidelines for skill training that would divert federal funds from any academic or general preparation. Both reports suggest that future policy may emphasize the growth of such bodies as the Ryerson Polytechnic Institute, while curbing the development of universities - in essence resurrecting the utilitarian philosophy of last century. By renegotiating Established Program Financing, it could become possible to channel the clearly provincial jurisdiction of higher education away from "useless" areas in the Arts into "useful" areas in technology. (The ultimate logic of this approach may be noted in the University of Malta, where the faculty of Arts and Science no longer exists.) Already the B.T.S.D. (Basic Training For Skill Development) and B.J.R.T. (Basic Job Readiness Training) programs have been phased out, and there is little likelihood of provincial governments expanding their adult education provision to correct any imbalances so created. Indeed, the reports recommended modernized and expanded provincial apprenticeship programs to reinforce the "new" policy.

The traditional responsibility of employers for such training, already in decline in the Victorial period, continues at a low level - the Allmand Report noting that less than 20% of industry does any substantial training. So although federal occupational training expenditures have been projected to rise from an annual \$800 million to \$1 billion, the budgetary pressures at the provincial and municipal levels, and the general recession in industry, are likely to combine to increase the impact of the "new" 9tilitarian philosophy.

# Planning for second-class citizens

There is a long (middle class) tradition of seeking to implement a utilitarian philosophy in adult education, and there has been over a century of stubborn refusal by working class students to accept its imposition. Whereas voluntarism clearly lacked the means to sustain the utilitarian philosophy, and the Ontario experiment achieved only modest success, present efforts seem much more likely to attract impressive resources while other programs suffer from a variety of restraints. Lacking national educational policies as such, we may thus be embarking with unbalanced emphasis on employment planning, supported by doubtful statistical projections (and with economic growth and human equity in conflict). It would follow that the liberal or academic component of adult education will come to be regarded as a luxury, ill-suited to popular needs in the 1980s.

If one believes that all citizens in a democracy should have continuing access to a broad education embracing "wisdom, moral values, a spiritual or religious dimension, and an aesthetic sense", then those effectively limited to programs circumscribed

by their "utility" become second class citizens. (22) If human potential is to be fully developed, one may seek "insight, perspective, critical understanding, discrimination and creativity" at the same time as seeking, in recognition of the need for marketable skills, the possession of "geometric proof and qualitative measure". (23) The dangers of the utilitarian approach were noted in the famous adult education report of the British Ministry of Reconstruction in 1919:

"Too great an emphasis has been laid on material considerations and too little regard paid to other aspects of life. Getting and spending we lay waste our powers. Technical efficiency is but one element in national wellbeing. Our powers ought to be directed into wider channels in order that the intellectual and spiritual treasures of the race should be the heritage of all rather than the possession of the few, and so that the social virtues and the social spirit shall enjoy freedom of growth".(24)

Acceptance of the utilitarian philosophy might well jeopardize much of our heritage, for in democratizing adult education we have been urged to make it yet more responsive to adult needs and interests by such leaders as Paolo Freire, Malcolm Knowles, and the late J. Roby Kidd. This we cannot do if public policy is guided by the precepts of a class society in the Aristotelian tradition. Such a return to first principles augurs ill for a democracy.

#### NOTES

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Patrick Keane has a special research interest in policy studies in the evolution of adult or continuing education. He coordinates the graduate program in continuing education at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia.

