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Arnold and Thatcher:

A report on contemporary educational policy

Abstract

Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government is planning legislation to initiate a radical overhaul of the education system in Britain. State schools could begin to break away from Local Education Authority control in late 1989. The ideas of Matthew Arnold on one level demonstrate the advantage of grounding present concerns in their history, and on another level highlight for educationists aspects of the current debate. Two of Arnold's major statements on education are briefly revisited; this is followed by an extended commentary on what Arnold might think of Mrs. Thatcher's current proposals were he alive today. The paper concludes by pointing out the correspondence between nineteenth-century issues and the shape taken by contemporary reality, as well as how the situation in Britain reflects fundamental notions of perennial relevance for those involved at all levels of education.

Résumé

Le gouvernement conservateur de Mme. Thatcher entend soumettre un projet de loi pour effectuer une refonte totale de l'enseignement en Grande-Bretagne. Les écoles d'État devraient commencer à se scinder des autorités locales responsables de l'enseignement (local Education Authority) vers la fin de 1989. En plus de démontrer l'avantage qu'il y a à replacer les préoccupations actuelles dans leur contexte historique, les idées de Matthew Arnold font ressortir pour les spécialistes les points saillants du dossier. L'auteur réexamine brièvement deux déclarations importantes d'Arnold sur le sujet et poursuit en imaginant les réflexions que lui auraient inspirées les propositions de Mme Thatcher, s'il était encore en vie. L'auteur souligne ensuite la corrélation qui existe entre les enjeux du XIXe siècle et la situation actuelle et explique comment la situation qui prévaut actuellement en Grande-Bretagne reflète la pérennité des notions fondamentales pour les protagonistes de l'enseignement à tous les paliers.

The business of your Inspector is not to make out a case for that system, but to report on the condition of public education as it evolves itself under it, and to supply your Lordships and the nation at large with data for determining how far the system is successful.

Matthew Arnold

Report to the Committee of Council, 1854.

Introduction and Historical Background

One consequence of Margaret Thatcher's return to power in the last British election has been to raise the temperature of the debate over key social issues. Her victory has thus intensified, not lessened, the clamour surrounding education in particular, an issue on which her government has proved most entrenched. In fact, Kenneth Baker, Mrs. Thatcher's Secretary of State for Education, was quoted as saying that his Party's proposals constituted "the most radical reform to the system since it was conceived in 1870" (*The Times*, May 20, 1987). For example, key planks in Mrs. Thatcher's pre-election manifesto proposed that, when re-elected, the Conservative Party would make provision for a national core curriculum with testing at ages 7, 11, and 14, would allow state schools to drop out of Local Education Authority (LEA) control, and would see to it that governing bodies and headmasters would control their own school budgets within five years. With these proposals, Conservatives were saying that state-run education in Britain was a disaster, and that a cure would largely consist of allowing individual state schools to drop out of local authority control and begin to assume direct economic responsibility for themselves as separate units. Under this system, each school so choosing would become a charitable trust, would set its own teachers' rate of pay, and would have the ownership of the school premises transferred to it. If legislation goes forward at its anticipated pace, the first state school could become independent as early as September 1989. It is intended to give, in this article, closer attention to what is at stake here later, as well as to spell out some of the likely results of such a move. First, however, this writer will pursue more fully remarks of Richard Hoggart which speak directly to the educational situation in Britain and which at the same time will permit crucial aspects of this emotional debate to be highlighted.

In his essay "Matthew Arnold, HMI", Hoggart (1982) advances the notion that to re-read the series of annual reports Arnold wrote during his tenure as Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools (1851-1886), is to be impressed by their richness and also by "their great present pertinence" (p. 87). He states that in these writings Arnold returned frequently to two overriding concerns: the importance of introducing students to their literary heritage, and the kinds of schools required by each of the classes in society.

Arnold made these themes more urgent by linking them with the pressing need to train a guiding elite (a "clerisy") who would be expected to provide a responsible lead for the country. Hoggart's paper illuminates both strands in Arnold's thinking. He goes on to pronounce Arnold's views of the former concern substantially correct, but states that although time has disproved Arnold's approach to the latter concern, it is "still more suggestive and challenging than the great bulk of educational writing today" (p. 88). Challenging, because for Hoggart it is easier in these days when "elites are out" to laugh at Arnold's asking us to face up to the need for a clerisy than it would be to answer it properly. Thus the result of inquiring into the contemporary relevance of Arnold's writing on education is to undertake once more a search for the "one thing necessary" among the noise of competing ideologies. In fact, Hoggart expresses well the issue around which any renewed inquiry may ultimately hinge. He suggests that were Arnold alive today, "he might say that the crucial test of both the educational and social health of this country will be its success or failure with comprehensive schools. Getting them right is overwhelmingly the most important national issue of the day" (p. 92).

Hoggart's invitation to review key elements in Arnold's writing on education incurs some distinct and immediate advantages when set against Mrs. Thatcher's proposals to "privatize" schools by giving them the freedom to pursue their own economic and educational destiny. It allows us on the one hand to ground our thinking on current problems historically, an advantage that Gerald Grace (1985) has pointed out makes visible "the relations between educational structures and processes, and wider structures of power, economy and control in particular periods of social change" (p. 4). On the other hand, it enables us to view the school as an important site of ideological struggle within a wider debate over the constitution and tenor of the nation itself.

For example, on her appointment as Minister of Education in 1970, it took Mrs. Thatcher only three days to issue circular 10/70 which removed the obligation of the LEA to submit plans for comprehensive reorganization. There is little doubt that in this initiative Mrs. Thatcher had been influenced by the series of "Black Papers" on education which first appeared in 1969 and which decried the decline in standards, charged schools with political indoctrination of pupils, and lamented classroom violence and pupil delinquency. Likewise, by later encouraging the momentum for a "grammarization" of the comprehensives by stressing, among other things, the advantages of tracking or streaming, she hoped to offset the distressingly egalitarian features of the comprehensive system, features which continue to represent for her a socialist society in miniature. In other words, as Roger Dale (1983) states, one consequence of Thatcherism in education is that "[i]t accepts, and wittingly reinforces, social stratification and social inequality,

purposely and explicitly doing more for some than for others" (p. 240). From Arnold's viewpoint, however, and although it can be shown that he could not always sustain the idealism that envisaged a society transformed by education, schools erected to serve private or sectarian interests were anathema to him. One of the important tenets of Arnold's humanism was the need for social equality. As a "Liberal of the Future," Arnold deemed that social equality "was the prerequisite of a truly national education" (Connell, 1950, p. 277), and that by seeking to include all the individuals in society, education would ensure "the diffusion of culture throughout all its members" (p. 277).

To have traced an initial comparison between Arnold's mid-nineteenth-century views with some of Mrs. Thatcher's current beliefs and practices, is to appreciate with increasing clarity the historically embedded nature of contemporary British educational debate. If Hoggart (1982) is correct in his opinion that Britain does not have an education system but rather an education-and-class system, it follows that, "We are still, at the least, two nations: and the crevasses between the main groups are hardly less deep than they were when Disraeli wrote" (p. 45).

The remainder of this paper will briefly revisit two of Arnold's better-known reports on education: his introduction to *The Popular Education of France* (1861) entitled "Democracy," and *The Twice-Revised Code* (1862). The concluding section will consider more fully the likely impact and import for Britain if Margaret Thatcher's present course of action is fulfilled. It may be demonstrated that, in spite of arguments which could show that on some issues Arnold and Thatcher might occupy much common ground, on other issues Arnold can be evoked as a formidable critic of policies which had their roots in Arnold's own historical context and are being replayed in a new key today. Thus, if Mrs. Thatcher's vision for education seems at this particular moment in the ascendancy, there is also a significant number of dissenting voices willing to criticize that vision. Perhaps, to recall Matthew Arnold as a witness is to add another dimension of candour and humanity to this critique. And further, that if we attend very carefully, echoes of Arnold's voice will once more make themselves heard unmistakably above the clamour.

The school reports

In his post as Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools, Arnold found himself being able to make his reports carry the extra weight and authority which came from first-hand experience. He was also able to gain from his travels around England at that time a broader perspective on the fears of the middle class, as well as being able to gauge the aspirations of a burgeoning

working class and its need for an education to satisfy its desires. With this education in place, Arnold thought that English society could be prevented from destroying itself from within through the anarchic tendencies he felt lay barely suppressed beneath its surface. So it is that his school reports, particularly those alluded to earlier, embody many of the concepts in embryo which comprised his later master-work *Culture and Anarchy* (1868-1869).

From an intellectual standpoint, "Democracy" is a cornerstone of Arnold's writing on education. In this work Arnold offered his justification for the central idea upon which his recommendations hinged: namely, that if there was to be any real progress in popular education, it must largely come through state intervention. With this idea Arnold ran counter to contemporary utilitarian notions of liberty and laissez-faire economics. Although his language was designed not to give offence, he refused to flinch from drawing unfashionable conclusions. It was the state where the high ideals once considered the sole province of the aristocracy ought to reside. The state must preserve that "ideal of high reason and right feeling, representing its best self, commanding general respect, and forming a rallying point for the intelligence and for the worthiest instincts of the community, which will herein find a true bond of union" (Arnold, 1973, p. 107). The dangers incurred by not investing the state with these ideals are the dangers Arnold feared in all mass democratic movements: paternalistic government and the arm of authority in society functioning independently of people's wishes. Arnold saw little danger in English democracy being overwhelmed by the state; and even if there was a danger, the solution lay with the middle class itself. It must seize this opportune moment to transform itself and to fulfil its destiny by providing the leadership England required. Arnold scathingly criticized the middle class, those "Philistines" as he would later call them, for their fixed ideas, intellectual sloth and lack of culture. They might rule society by their energy, "but they will deteriorate it by their low ideals and lack of culture" (p. 112).

At this point Arnold plays heavily on middle class fears over the disruptive potential of the masses below them. His final warning is that "[i]f these classes cannot win their sympathy or give them their direction, society is in danger of falling into anarchy" (p. 112). Thus, if "Democracy" may fairly be characterized as a preface to his ideas for the universal establishment of popular education, its ideological underpinnings emerged from the mind of an enlightened Philistine himself, one who aimed his offensive at the chinks in the psychological armour of a predominantly Philistine audience. Although there were times when Arnold tended to confuse equality with homogeneity, and despite the fact that in practice very few of the working class could have hoped to raise their social standing through education, Arnold considered the transformation of the middle class

as a precondition to the transformation of society. Thus, according to Ismelda Palmer (1979), Arnold did not subscribe to "a theory of social equality, but of social harmony" (p. 90).

Indeed, it could be argued with some fairness that Arnold sought not a classless society through the initiatives of his proposed state action, but instead sought to keep control of society firmly in the hands of the class whose manifest destiny it was to assume that authority. But if middle class education was to be the concern of the whole society, how could society be brought to see this? The fervent moral note that is sounded as a descant to Arnold's otherwise level-headed rhetoric was meant to signal that time was running out for the middle class to seize the only feasible mechanism for administering increasingly large numbers of people. By endowing the middle class with the status of guardian and preserver of that liberty so favoured by Englishmen, Arnold clearly wished to mollify the suspicious attitudes of the bourgeoisie towards the pejorative connotations in the concept of The State. Moreover, Arnold felt that a partial surrender of liberty was a step worth taking in the name of a more equitable access to education. The modern spirit which was inexorably imposing its will on long-established habits, required "openness and flexibility of mind" (p. 115) as the cardinal virtues needed to adjust to its dictates. Much as Arnold saw the inevitability of change, he sensed that the middle class might take too long to transform past prejudices into future potentialities.

In *The Twice-Revised Code* (1862) written a year later, Arnold not only recognized the state as the overall mechanism for spreading educational opportunity, but he also viewed the state's responsibilities as more all-encompassing than the narrow pinch-penny attitude of Lowe's Revised Code. As J. Stuart Maclure (1965) reminds us, in his "General Report for the Year 1867," Arnold had sounded off against the effects of the Revised Code in terms which we would do well to remember as we consider later the possible repercussions of Mrs. Thatcher's proposed policies for the schools.

In a country where everyone is prone to rely too much on mechanical processes and too little on intelligence, a change in the Education Department's regulations, which, by making two-thirds of the Government grant depend upon a mechanical examination, inevitably gives a mechanical turn to the school teaching, a mechanical turn to the inspection, is and must be trying to the intellectual life of the school. (p. 81)

Arnold's entire attack focused on the pusillanimous thinking that had attempted to divorce curriculum content from the schools' larger concerns for the socialization of the pupils. Through a reduction of the grants contributed

by the state towards the support of schools for the poor, the Code would only pay for the reading, writing, and arithmetic actually taught and later measured by testing. Thus, the so-called "maintenance" grant, which supported teachers in consideration of the school's efficiency, discipline, and character, would be stopped, creating the tyranny of "payment by results" (Arnold, 1973, p. 30) and of "cramming" for education. In this way the state would be compelled to spend a disproportionately large slice of its educational budget for mere supervision of the schools, hence promoting a top-heavy administration as well as losing sight of its true function. This, in the name of a false economy, seriously undermined the very keystone of popular education, the maintenance element, which in Arnold's view, was its greatest asset.

In the light of this it is clear that Arnold's sociological antennae were well tuned to pick up the noises of grumbling and dissatisfaction within the English working class. Such a demonstrably discriminatory scheme as payment by results imposed from above could do nothing but harm, not only to the general cause of popular education, but also to the schools' particular function of socializing working-class children. Beneath his obviously humane concern, one again senses his preoccupation with social order and tranquillity, and it may be that Arnold saw the Revised Code as one more justifiable grievance which might have helped foment further social unrest.

Even based on the brief and general evidence we have been able to glean from this selection of school reports, much of Arnold's thinking may become clearer. That he was greatly disturbed by what he saw as England's dividing itself into a nation of even more desperate "have-nots" in opposition to the new, but still socially unresponsive "haves," needs little repetition. And he was too much a man of Europe not to wish upon the English people a way out of this dilemma, particularly in the face of the well-publicized educational successes in France and Germany. Arnold sensed that his own epoch might well have been a decisive one in European history, and that such opportunities for real **human** progress, as opposed to what he was fond of calling "mechanical" progress, must be grasped. If all that stood in the way of such progress was an antediluvian fear of the state, then small wonder Arnold felt constrained to emphasize in so many diverse places, the ultimate benefits that would accrue from participation instead of from suspicion.

Arnold and Thatcher

Much has been altered since Arnold submitted his school reports, and we should not expect that a comparison with contemporary issues in Britain would wholly parallel the conditions out of which those reports were

initially derived. Indeed, one significant outcome of the last century that now assumes a taken-for-granted character is the intervention of the state into many areas of social and private life where perhaps it has no right. On the other hand, Roger Dale (1983) sees Thatcherite education "as not so much anti-statist, as anti-universalist and anti-social democratic" (p. 249). Yet there probably are sufficient reasons to conclude that were Arnold charged with the responsibility of submitting a report today, he might have a great deal to say to Mrs. Thatcher, and that his observations would prove both accurate and timely. A discussion of that imaginative report will occupy us in this concluding section.

A major element of Margaret Thatcher's self-confessed political mission is to divest Britain of all traces of socialism and, where possible, to return to the individual citizen control over those areas of his life where now the state holds sway. As well, her desire for privatization is one of five major ingredients identified by Roger Dale as constituting the essence of Thatcherism, an essence which when distilled, gives her educational policies their particular flavour. Sir Keith Joseph, Mrs. Thatcher's chief ideologue for the notion of privatization, has stressed that under this version of conservatism, not only are citizens able to act in their own best interests, but that: "Inequality is the inevitable and tolerable result of social freedom and personal initiative" (Cited in Bosarquet, 1981, p. 334). To encourage these outcomes, Mrs. Thatcher has sold off state enterprises such as British Telecommunications and British Airways, and under her Right-to-Buy scheme more than a million homes were offered to tenants at preferential rates.

Thatcher's moves on the educational front may be seen as co-extensive with, and analogous to, her moves on the economic front. Hence the fact that a plank in the Conservative Party's manifesto on education allows for schools to opt out of LEA, highlights only one feature of Mrs. Thatcher's thinking on education, but one that has been consistently held since her term as Minister of Education in 1970-74. Moreover, if Mrs. Thatcher goes ahead with her intention to institute a national core curriculum in line with the Department of Education and Science's (1987) recent consultation document, one likely outcome will be that "cramming" and teaching to the exam will become standard practice. In addition, privatization will mean that where individual schools set the rate of teachers' pay, one yardstick by which to judge the success of teaching will be to inspect teachers' competence as manifested in student performance on national examinations.

Clearly, "the inevitable and tolerable result of social freedom" is heavily stacked in advance in favour of schools situated in socially and economically privileged areas of the country. Therefore, those schools in the

south-east of England and the Home Counties would be more likely to attract and keep highly qualified teachers, thus making it virtually certain that some schools would prosper at the expense of others. From Arnold's point of view, it is likely he would not only hear echoes of payment by results, but would consider the move allowing schools to opt out of LEA control with great suspicion.

First of all, Arnold's reading of de Tocqueville convinced him that, in Fitch's (1898) words, "the great desideratum was to seek out and devise that form of democracy which on the one hand most exercises and cultivates the intelligence and mental activity of the majority, and on the other breaks the headlong impulse of popular opinion" (p. 203). The general supervision Arnold recommended as part of the state's function in public education has, as its corollary, an increased emphasis on local control, but a form of local control which considers with greater degrees of impartiality the requirements of that majority, and seeks to re-direct populist tendencies away from a narrow parochialism. Secondly, Arnold never tired of exposing the fallacy in the Philistine belief that Britain was likely to remain a well-educated country if only "we give free play to local initiative and private enterprise" (Fitch, 1898, p. 220). In this view there was no reason for education to be "taken out of the general law of **individual action and free competition**, and put under a system of **public superintendence and compulsory support**" (Cited in Connell, 1950, pp. 42-43).

Likewise today, the replacement of Keynes by Friedman as the preferred economist entails a major shift in conceptualizing the nature of expenditure on education. In fact, as Morris and Griggs (1988) show in their analysis of expenditure on education for the years 1973-1986, British education has already suffered the consequences of this shift by languishing under appreciably lowered levels of funding for items as diverse as special education, school textbooks, and the libraries of polytechnics and universities. Finally, one of Arnold's main criticisms of governmental response to education in his own time was that it lacked a social consciousness. He based his advocacy for effective local authority control on the notion that only at this level could any real concern for the broadly-based needs of a community be fulfilled. Mrs. Thatcher, influenced by sectors in her Party that would see schools employed as sites where the moral regeneration of Britain can commence, is motivated not so much by a desire to spread more equitably the net of educational opportunity and social justice, but rather by more narrowly moralistic concerns aimed at redressing what is seen as a serious decline in the nation's moral health, a decline she believes has been caused by prolonged exposure to the coddling effects of the "welfare state."

It was remarked previously how Arnold, the arch "Philistine" himself, attempted to prepare the middle class for assuming power in

society since the aristocracy was quickly going into decline. According to John Storey (1985), "Marx attacked the middle class as representatives of an exploitative system; Arnold attacked them to change them, in order to secure their future – not to close it" (p. 221). Mrs. Thatcher now risks not only further confrontations with large sections of working-class Britain, but risks aggravating an already volatile situation with respect to the predominantly bourgeois teaching profession itself. As the recent bitter, year-long struggle between teachers and the Thatcher government attests, morale in the profession is at an all-time low. In this instance Mrs. Thatcher seems not to have grasped what would be Arnold's essential point.

Arnold warned of ignoring expressions of genuine aspiration from the workers. While paternalism was to be avoided, and all attempts at molding the working class in a bourgeois image eschewed, there were still many areas in that relationship ripe for enlightened leadership. Even today there is a faction within the Conservative Party which likes to invoke Disraeli's name as an authority with which to temper their leader's thinking on just this issue. Here, Disraeli's "one nation" theme contrasts forcibly with Thatcher's self-help rhetoric. According to Robert Eccleshall (1980), in Mrs. Thatcher's view,

Riches are seen as the due reward of those who have expended maximum energy, intelligence and ability in making material provision for themselves. Conversely, poverty is taken as a sign of some innate deficiency, the failure of individuals to exercise sufficient skill to secure comfortable existence; those who prove themselves incapable of seizing opportunities that are equally available to everyone must expect to pay the penalty of a lower standard of living. (p. 4)

As an antidote to this view of conservative thinking, the revisionist position comes close to Arnold's conception whereby the power of the state represents the nation's best self, and can be mobilized for the transformation of society. Consequently, Mrs. Thatcher's conception of Britain as a collection of individuals all pursuing their own self-interest may help to assist in stemming the flow of potential leaders, from whatever social background, into working-class schools and districts. In this instance a further opportunity to improve rather than to worsen relationships between the classes will have been squandered. It is in light of policies like these which caused Douglas McAvoy, Deputy General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), to claim that the dismantling of state education by Mrs. Thatcher will create "insuperable barriers between the haves and the have-nots" (*The Times*, May 20, 1987).

Although Arnold might have applauded the move to rid the educational system of a debilitating bureaucracy, he would have pondered

long and hard over where the leadership and moral vision in society was going to come from. In his own time, Arnold himself became exceptionally clear on this point. It was initially from the state that such a lead must come. The state, in its personified character, must promote an image of the nation as a striving collective, at least if it is to do more than simply administer large numbers of people. Undoubtedly, Margaret Thatcher wishes to portray herself as the one who transformed the schools into places run by educational entrepreneurs responsive and responsible for dealing with local needs and requirements. And yet as Arnold saw, one cannot hope to create a strong national bond nor to foster the idea of leadership if government policies do not reflect the ideals of all the people, rather than reflect the needs of sectional interests only.

As interest increases with subsequent developments within British education, especially developments in those areas that have been highlighted here, it is interesting to consider how uncannily Arnold's concerns are mirrored in the shape taken by contemporary educational reality. The entire spectrum of current issues may be re-discovered within Arnold's agenda: from the role of the school and cramming for examinations, to the effects of paternalism and the release of leadership potential; from direct state intervention and payment by results, to equality of educational opportunity and national moral regeneration. What is abundantly clear, then from this application of Arnold's thinking to the present situation, is that his concern for shared cultural standards and national moral objectives seems a far cry from today's more parochial concerns. And if there is any certainty that the ensuing battles in Britain promise to be long and bloody, it can also be assured that victory, if there ever is such an outcome in social terms, may be at best, pyrrhic.

We will carry a commentary on Thatcher and her policies on educational reform in Britain in the next issue of the *McGill Journal of Education*. (Editor).

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