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CABINET

A FURTHER ADVANCE IN EDUCATIONMemorandum by the Minister of Education

Suez has revealed our weakness. We cannot protect our overseas interests without closer allies, or manage sterling without bigger reserves. To remain a great Power in the twentieth century might seem beyond us if it were not for nuclear power, and the less certain, but potentially tremendous advantages of the Common Market. But have we the resources to succeed in these enterprises? Size of population was never decisive; still less so in an age of science and technology. Education is the soil and the other social services, including Council housing, are the fruit of an expanding economy.

Education to-day

2. Since the war we have just about kept pace with the increase in the number of children, both in providing new schools and recruiting teachers. But the effort has left little margin for reducing the size of classes or improving the quality of teachers. And under present policies conditions in the secondary schools must worsen during the next few years. This deterioration will attract much more unfavourable comment than the recent overcrowding in primary schools, partly because children and their parents take more interest in education as the time to start earning approaches, and partly because the general public is becoming more aware of the need for better trained manpower. We shall not, therefore, be able to claim that we are even holding our own.

3. The 245,000 teachers in the maintained schools are a mixed lot. Too many have had too little training. There is a severe shortage of able teachers capable of getting the best out of sixth-formers, particularly in science and mathematics; this shortage will show up more clearly each year as the "bulge" passes through the secondary schools.

The teaching staff in technical colleges will have to be increased in numbers and improved in quality. An independent committee is examining the problem and is likely to recommend, among other measures, better training for men coming out of industry to teach in the colleges.

4. Compared with other advanced countries, the proportion of our children - about 3 per cent - who go to a university is very low. About 40 per cent of the 17 year olds get some further education in technical colleges, but not nearly enough - only about 1 per cent take full-time advanced courses. Our plans for the universities and technical colleges are probably as much as we can do at present. Even this measure of expansion will, however, be frustrated unless the education in the schools is improved.

Teachers

5. There is no means of raising the standards of education unless the teaching profession deserves and holds a higher place in public estimation. Opinion is moving well and would respond to a further lead from the Government. The recent Burnham award has pulled out the concertina of salaries, but until an honours degree scientist can look forward to as good a career teaching as in the civil service or industry, as he can in Russia, we shall fall behind in the race. There should be more plums in teaching.

The more and better teachers we have at home the easier it will be to recruit for teaching overseas. As the overseas Ministers know to-day we cannot begin to meet the demand.

6. What the schools should teach in the age of nuclear physics and automation is being widely debated. My Central Advisory Council is considering the whole subject, but is unlikely to report before 1958.

In the meantime much has to be done to link the tops of the secondary schools with the technical colleges. This work can only go forward if the means are available to expand suitable courses for boys and girls in their last years at school.

Building

7. Buildings are the outward symbol to parents, children and teachers of the Government's belief in education. The programmes authorised at present do not aim at the improvement in standards demanded by our policy for universities and technical colleges.

Conclusion

8. If it were decided to treat education with the same urgency as we are treating atomic energy, and for the same reasons, then I would ask for something of this order:-

- (1) An announcement by the Government of the place they intend to give to education and an undertaking that the extra resources will be forthcoming;
- (2) a school building programme geared to the work that local authorities could do efficiently and without raising costs: in practice this would mean few extra starts before 1958;
- (3) enough money to improve the training of teachers and to offer a few more plums to attract teachers of the right quality.

9. At this stage I am not asking for any definite sum of money since such a large question of principle has first to be decided.

D.E.

Ministry of Education, W. 1.

7th December, 1956.