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CABINET.

FUTURE EDUCATIONAL POLICY.

Memorandum by the President of the Board of Education.

1. This Memorandum deals with certain problems to which I have recently been giving thought, since they appear to me to be of some educational and political importance and to be matters likely to call for Government decision and possible action before long. My immediate object in circulating this Memorandum is to acquaint my colleagues with the situation as I see it and to seek their advice. I do not ask for an immediate decision upon the issues involved, and it may be found convenient, after such general discussion as the Cabinet may desire, to invite a few of my colleagues to go into matters with me in greater detail and to report their conclusions to the Cabinet at a later date.

2. At the last General Election the National Government appealed for a free hand to deal with the national emergency. But at the next General Election, whenever it comes, the National Government will scarcely be able again to base their claims for renewed support solely on any such general ground, but will almost certainly have to defend their record in some detail and to give some indication of their future policy in particular directions. It would accordingly seem neither irrelevant nor premature to consider what is to be the Government's standpoint in regard to education.

3. During the two and a half years since the Government have been in power all their acts in regard to education have been directed towards reduction of expenditure. Some of

these (e.g. the cuts in teachers' salaries, restrictions in loan expenditure) have been of a temporary character; others (e.g. secondary school fees and free places, reduction in numbers of elementary teachers) have been of a more permanent kind. These restrictions have on the whole been well received. Even many friends of education have not been averse from a temporary halt as affording time for stocktaking; and no doubt, as financial conditions improve, the temporary restrictions will gradually be removed. The initial agitation against the more permanent economies (e.g. secondary school fees) has died down and, it is reasonable to hope, will not re-emerge in an acute form, though some political use will certainly be made of them. But as things stand at present, the broad judgment on the educational performance of the Government will almost certainly be that our policy has been one of restriction and unfriendly to development, and the Government at best will be able to argue that the restrictive measures were financially necessary and reasonable in themselves. Moreover public judgment on our performance in the educational field will tend more and more to be critical as it reviews it in contrast with policy in other spheres. In other Departments of local government progressive measures (e.g. slum clearance, rural water supply) are already being initiated. Even now there are complaints that the Government are adopting a markedly non-progressive attitude as regards education, and it is certain that complaints of this sort will grow in force and volume unless some definite action is taken. If the National Government are to recapture, or at least to hold, a good deal of valuable opinion on their side, it is in my view important that they should show themselves not unmindful of educational as of other needs.

4. I recognise that in any proposals that may be made at the present time, it is necessary to have full regard for financial exigencies, as well as for what is likely to be politically feasible, and the suggestions which follow are framed in the belief that they may represent what is at once financially practicable, educationally and socially useful, and politically expedient.

5. If there is any direction in which up to now the Government policy on education has caused serious concern to moderate and thoughtful persons, it has been because it has inevitably involved the substantial holding up of the policy of re-organisation, which is designed to meet the evils of the "misfit" and of "marking time" by bringing the elder children together in sufficient numbers to permit of a reasonable measure of classification according to abilities and aptitudes, and in particular to facilitate the development of practical instruction (carpentry, cookery, gardening, etc.). This policy, as is pointed out, has long been accepted by all parties in the State, by Local Authorities, and on the whole by Voluntary Bodies. The Roman Catholics do not like it, nor do some members of the Church of England, largely because of the capital expenditure involved in the adaptation and extension of buildings. But educational opinion, which is expressed even among the denominations, is alive to the value of the re-graded school, recognises that the re-organisation of schools opens the way to real educational advance and desires to see this policy carried through to something like completion. Relaxation of the present financial restrictions would enable progress to be accelerated; but I feel great doubt whether we can content ourselves with this, because advance cannot proceed very much further without bringing into prominence two other

questions which, for other reasons, are already being actively canvassed, viz., some raising of the school age and some provision for capital grants towards the improvement of voluntary school premises. Before the next General Election it will be necessary for the Government to define its position upon these two problems, which both involve legislation.

6. To take first the question of capital grants for Voluntary Schools, it will be remembered that Roman Catholics conducted active propaganda before the General Election of 1929. In response the Unionist Party publicly promised immediate legislation, if returned to power. A large number of members of all parties committed themselves more or less definitely to some support of the Roman Catholic claims; how numerous they were was shown by the discussions on Sir Charles Trevelyan's School Age Bill. At the General Election of 1931, in view of the national crisis, the Roman Catholics deliberately refrained from any similar propaganda. It is none the less probable that a number of Members did express a hope that the Roman Catholic problem would be dealt with as soon as normal conditions were restored, and I should suppose that the great majority of the present House of Commons would welcome a solution of it. It must be assumed as certain that the Roman Catholic agitation will be renewed with energy before the next General Election. The Unionist Party at least will be expected to repeat the promise made in 1929.

7. If the problem is to be dealt with in such a way as to be a valuable political asset at the next General Election it must be dealt with, if not by agreement, at any rate in such a way as to leave no serious bitterness behind it. And past experience suggests that the attitude of Nonconformists, Local Authorities and Teachers will be materially affected by whether or not this measure is linked up with some provision for raising

the school age. Raising the school age would not only strengthen the case for capital grants but would provide all the parties just mentioned with something for the achievement of which they would be prepared to make substantial concessions.

8. As regards the question of raising the school age, there is no doubt that the idea has in the last year or two received increased support from many quarters as providing a method of dealing with certain aspects of the unemployment problem, and particularly with the problem of physical and moral deterioration amongst juvenile unemployed. From this point of view the essential thing is to keep the children between fourteen and fifteen in school until they get a decent job.

9. I think that any legislation undertaken would, for various reasons, best proceed from this angle and, unlike Sir Charles Trevelyan's Bill, should contemplate generous exemptions for all who had in fact got decent jobs. A Bill on these lines would probably be more acceptable to the mass of the Government's supporters. It is indeed doubtful how far the country generally is ready for a measure which would prevent all employment before fifteen. Such prevention, even though accompanied by a generous system of maintenance allowances, would certainly provoke a lot of unpopularity in its early days.

10. Six areas in England and Wales have already a byelaw raising the age of attendance to fifteen. These byelaws in practice are operated much on the lines suggested above, that is to say, that the byelaw is mainly used to secure the retention of children in the school until they get suitable work. There is no doubt that the operation of the byelaw in these areas has been beneficial.

11. Admittedly a Bill on these limited lines would not have any appreciable effect on reducing unemployment among juveniles over 15 and among adults, since its aim would be to keep children of 14 - 15 at school until they get a job, not to prevent their taking jobs, when available. Its educational effects would also be smaller than if no exemptions were allowed. On the other hand, it would certainly have educational value and considerable social value. In both these respects it would at least be more effective than junior instruction centres, valuable though their work is. While those who desire the school age to be raised without exemptions would be disappointed at the permission of exemptions, they would almost certainly regard a measure of the kind suggested as being much better than nothing.

12. If time is allowed for preparation, and in particular for Local Authorities and Voluntary Managers to make the necessary alterations and extensions of premises, the "appointed day" should be, say, twelve months after the passing of the Act, and the age should then be raised gradually, e.g. by three equal annual instalments of four months each. On this basis the full effects, financial as well as educational, would not be felt until 1976.

13. I am very conscious of the fact that any proposal, however moderate, for raising the school age may prove very distasteful to some sections of the Unionist Party on financial and other grounds, and also that the necessary legislation may occupy Parliamentary time that can ill be spared. I have accordingly considered the alternative of legislation at an early date only on the Voluntary School problem, with a promise of legislation on the school leaving age at some date after the Election. The question of Parliamentary time alone may be

decisive in favour of this latter alternative. But subject to this, I should on the whole be disposed to prefer simultaneous treatment of both subjects: firstly, because the raising of the school age will be some contribution to the juvenile problem, about which I believe public opinion to be seriously disturbed; and secondly, because the solution of the Voluntary School problem would be facilitated.

14. Any estimate of the cost to the Exchequer of my proposals must be very tentative, until they are more clearly defined, but I hope that the figures set out below will give a sufficiently accurate impression of what commitments may be involved -

(a) The cost of capital grants to Voluntary Schools will largely depend upon the method adopted. If the grants are made by the Local Education Authority, and the Board pay 50 per cent. of an Authority's resulting loan charges, the annual charge on the Exchequer would not probably exceed £50,000 a year. If direct capital grants were made by the Board, an ultimately lower figure of, say, £1,000,000, spread over four or five years, might be involved. In either case there would be some countervailing economy because, in the alternative, Authorities would have to spend more on providing premises of their own.

(b) A measure to raise the school age on the limited lines proposed would cost comparatively little. With generous exemptions no maintenance allowances would be necessary, and the numbers of children to be accommodated and taught would be comparatively small. Probably the annual cost to public funds would not exceed £1,000,000 (say, Exchequer £700,000; rates £300,000), as compared with perhaps £8,000,000 for Sir Charles Trevelyan's Bill.

No appreciable charge would fall on the Exchequer until the financial year 1936-37, and the full charge would not have to be met before 1938-39.

15. Even assuming that the next General Election will not be until 1936, it would still be necessary that any legislation should be passed during the session 1934-35. Some lengthy consideration and discussion would be necessary before final proposals for legislation could be formulated. Any such discussion should begin in the neighbourhood of Easter next. A decision as to the desirability of such legislation should accordingly be reached before Easter. The requisite forecast of Government policy might be made in reply to a Question in the House of Lords.

16. Put shortly, my view is that it is politically important that the Government should be able at the next Election to show that they have constructive ideas in the sphere of education. The relaxation of present restrictions will not suffice. And this involves the necessity of deciding on our attitude towards both the raising of the school-leaving age and the Voluntary School problem.

17. There are obvious political and financial difficulties in the way of any raising of the school age. On the other hand, unless I am wholly mistaken, feeling in the country is very gravely disquieted about the whole juvenile problem, and while welcoming remedial measures such as Junior Instruction Centres, would welcome more warmly action that contributed to the diminution of its scope and incidence by retaining at school all children of 14 - 15, until they get a job.

18. The Voluntary School question also raises thorny problems. The denominational quarrels of thirty years ago are not yet entirely forgotten, but in recent years the Church of England and Nonconformity have shown a far greater readiness to concentrate on their common interests, as evidenced by their common activities in improving religious instruction in Council Schools. I would certainly hope therefore that the difficulties, if tackled with energy and foresight, might be solved in a way which was not only equitable in itself but politically advantageous. I may be wrong, but even if I am, the fact remains that the Government cannot hope for long to evade this issue, especially in view of the promise made at the 1929 Election, and I should accordingly suggest that an honest attempt to face them now might be politically a wiser course than to do nothing now and then to be driven, as we most probably should, to make hasty promises under pressure on the eve of the Election.

H.

BOARD OF EDUCATION,

8th February, 1934.