

Education and the Community

PROFESSOR K. J. W. ALEXANDER

During the Easter Educational Convention at Dunoon an important and interesting paper on "Education and the Community" was given by Professor K. J. W. Alexander, Head of the Department of Economics at the University of Strathclyde and Chairman of the "Alexander" Committee which is looking at the whole field of Adult Education in Scotland. These notes of the address have been prepared by Dr. T. F. Carbery and we are glad of the chance to publish them.

Professor Alexander opened by observing that, in his view, Community Identification is weakening and that the thesis of his address was that Education may well retrieve the situation. Moreover in the course of his argument, he was going to concentrate on Adult Education.

Turning to the concept of Community, Professor Alexander said there were two approaches. The first was the obvious concept of a geographic unit; the other was that of any unit with a common interest. Sometimes the two could be combined. Furthermore the concept of community may be loose or it may be strong. In short the sense of community is complex. The political scientists would say we are a pluralistic society. Thus we form ourselves in pressure groups in order to ensure that the interests of others do not prevail or do not always prevail. There is, therefore, a conflict of interest prevailing within all committees. Sometimes even the conflict is within us ourselves.

Professor Alexander suggested that inflation gave us an example of the type of conflict that could arise within individuals. Thus as wage-earners, salary recipients, workers we want our salaries to rise, but as consumers we want prices to be stable.

How can we check the diminution in collective community identification?

Professor Alexander observed that community identification was and is at its strongest when people acted together. "If", he said, "you have a community which fishes together, pulls up the boats together, harvests together, worships together then you have a strong community". Continuing with his case, Professor Alexander argued that when Co-operatives emerged in such communities e.g. in Scottish mining communities or Danish agricultural co-operatives they were usually very strong. Nevertheless even these communities could have conflict within them. Despite this occasional conflict such communities are or were strong—as was the clan system. For example McNeill of Barra looked after the elderly in the community. The clan system, however, was broken by a mixture of military defeat and market forces.

Now we are finding that our communities are being subjected to great social and technological strains, from increasing paternalism and intervention by Government, the pressure of new and expanding forms of communication media and the ease of travel which opens communities to both influx and exodus. On top of all that there are the pressures of social mobility, e.g. educational and economic

opportunities, the result of which is that people find it much easier than hitherto to move to new occupations, to new environments and thereby to new communities.

Alienation and Unrest

“Community Identification is the antithesis of Alienation” maintained the speaker. People, he alleged, feel alienated when they have no control and when they believe they have no control over what influences their lives. This occurs when people regard themselves as having no responsibility, when people have no commitment to any values and when they cease to comply with the norms of behaviour.

Such alienation was finding expression in much of the present industrial unrest.

The recent strikes—of postal workers, of hospital auxiliaries, of the dustbin men—were screams for recognition of their worth in contemporary society.

“It is true”, said the speaker, “that such consideration, such motivation, was not the only factor. Clearly concern about wages and prices came into the story, but alienation was a very big factor”.

“Television has given us a more widely shared culture”, continued Professor Alexander, “and to that extent has diminished community identification”. For all that he believed that television could do much more than it was doing to build-up community identification.

Then again not many of us who wear the mantles of social concern are willing taxpayers, far less enthusiastic taxpayers. What then can Education do to sponsor community identification? Education is not always cosy, it is not togetherness!! It is essentially critical.

The important point, however, is that Education can reinforce the values of society and that is what people expect of it.

But Education will not necessarily do so—it could change the values of society, it could modify them and it is within the bounds of possibility it could reject them.

Economic Growth

The Professor suggested that one could look at this controversy, and in particular at the dilemma concerning economic growth.

Most economists suggest that this is desirable. It is as a result of this that we are confronted with the concern about growth and are urged to accept Productivity Agreements, Payments by Results and the like.

But growth is not the only possible objective confronting us. It would be perfectly possible to pursue other objectives.

“And”, said the Professor, coming to one of the principle aspects of his case, “to use education to proselytise for one social objective as opposed to another is to indulge in social engineering.

Ideally Education is *both* sceptical *and* debunking and encouraging, enthusiastic, constructive.”

There is here something of a chicken/egg situation. Thus we could not have had shifts in society had it not been for Education and we could not have had the expansion in Education had it not been for the shift in society.

True, the economists have been a little elusive on occasion. It was George Bernard Shaw who said that if you laid all the economists end to end you would not reach a conclusion. But that having been said Professor Alexander maintained that as he saw it the problems of Education were two-fold

- (1) Any expert he averred is generally doing two quite different things
 - (a) Inviting attention to the problem aspect of a situation, and possibly suggesting a solutionand (b) Whether he realises it or not he will attempt to “sell” his standards of values and this will occur either in his presentation of the problem or in the advocacy of his solution.

Should we not endeavour to counter such proselytising or at least acknowledge it and have a pro and con situation instead?

- (2) The second is the problem of Apathy. Now, argued the Professor, there is something to be said for Apathy of people who are being subjected to brain-washing or social engineering.

True the Educationalists would argue that Apathy can be overcome or at least confronted if certain things are done e.g.

- (i) that education—particularly education for adults—should stress the relevance of the matter being taught,
- (ii) that students should be encouraged to develop their individual interests into community interests,
- (iii) that ideally Education should be problem solving and not too academic and/of esoteric and here he commended the B.B.C. series “Living Decisions in Family and Community”,
- (iv) that learning should be done by Problem Solving, by dealing with situations.

While few of us, if any, would disagree with this it leaves the problem of who is to bring about this involvement, these ideal arrangements.

Certainly in the case of Adult Education it is not enough to have the tutor arrive at 7 o’clock and go away at 9. One, here, is envisaging tutor/organisers such as are deployed by the W.E.A. In effect such people are contact-men in that they

put students in touch with ideas, knowledge, sources of learning, think processes and the like and one of the difficulties in the contemporary British scene is that there is no arrangement whereby the social-motivated educationalist can readily get in touch with, and put his students readily in touch with, social workers, councillors and those attached to voluntary bodies. True, Liverpool University and the Workers Educational Association already do some work in this sphere but such activities are minimal. More needs to be done. What Liverpool and the W.E.A. people aim at is getting men and women to be more articulate—to say what they mean and to say it in a manner which readily conveys their ideas to others and having done so to get them into touch with those who can help.

The Co-operative Role

What in all this is, or could be, and indeed should be, the role of the British Co-operative Movement? There is, said Professor Alexander, a tendency for the Labour Movement to miss the short term, to miss the here and now and instead to spend an inordinate amount of time looking to the horizons, not just to the long-term but to the long long term, doing so on philosophical rather than realistic aspirations. It is possible, he conceded, that this charge is less true of the Co-ops than it is of say the Labour Party.

Trade Unions should be empirical and pragmatic but on balance they are far from always being just that! The Co-operatives traditionally subscribe to the “production is for consumption” approach and the effect of this is to colour, to influence their attitude towards growth, towards control, towards workers participation, but it gives rise too to dangers of syndicalism. What the Co-ops seem to be saying is that they are not averse to Industrial Democracy but it must not swamp far less destroy their basic concept of “Production for Consumption” for in democratic terms the community is made up of consumers. We are not all workers: we are all consumers.

Then again the World of Co-operative Education does tend to have contact points not only albeit obviously with students but with the community.

There is on the other hand a great danger in consumer affairs and consumer interest. It is that we concentrate much too much on what passes over the counters of the nation. There is then a great need to pay attention to what the Professor called ‘social consumption’. Accordingly he hoped that the outcome of any Co-operative involvement in Local Radio would be to stimulate community interest programming and to ensure that the advertising and programmes are not detrimental to the consumer.

And so to the last and perhaps the greatest question. How in this area of Adult Education do we reconcile the factors which are so difficult to reconcile—how do we reconcile Efficiency and Democracy? This problem lies at the heart of a great many of what appear to be other problems in contemporary Britain? Co-operative Boards have had to grapple with that problem more than most other people and certainly much more than others in the Labour Movement. The sad point is, concluded the speaker, that the incumbents of Co-op Board rooms have not always answered it as well as we and they would have wished.