

BRING BACK SCHOOL FEES

James Tooley

Recently, UK Members of Parliament received an Oxfam press release entitled *Education Charges: A Tax on Human Development*. Oxfam's latest research in Tanzania, Ghana and Zambia, claimed that education charges amounted to a tax on school attendance, and were therefore denying millions of children the chance to escape from the poverty trap. For Oxfam 'the evidence is indisputable, and success in achieving universal basic education depends on education becoming affordable to the poor, and this requires the abolition of education charges'.

One thoughtful MP immediately forwarded a copy to my office with an attached note suggesting that I might have something to say about this. Indeed I do. In fact it was not that long ago when the abolition of school fees was an issue of topical debate in the UK. In November 1942, R. A. Butler, President of the Board of Education, wrote to Lord Fleming, Chairman of the Committee on Public Education, to request that his Committee submit a report by February 1943 on the question of the abolition of school fees. Unfortunately for Mr Butler, the 17 members of the committee failed to agree, and so both a Majority and a Minority Report were finally published.

The Majority Report, signed by ten members of the committee, concluded that the 'retention of fees would be a serious obstacle to securing education as a right to every child; they should be abolished as a whole and the loss of income made up by liberal grants to ensure that standards are maintained'. While it was recognised that the proposal to replace fees by grants raised the problem of the independence of the schools, the signatories of the Majority Report wished to make it clear that they did not believe that there was any desire to deny to the schools a real variety, as 'this variety is not only a sign of health, it is essential for an effective education system, designed to meet the needs of different children and the views of different parents'. However, the report did admit that 'the administrative control of schools, may, in itself, tend to produce uniformity. If a single committee undertakes the supervision of several schools, there is a danger that they may be treated alike. Often a sense of fairness, a scrupulous feeling that no one school should receive any different treatment will lead to this'.

The Minority Report, on the other hand, signed by the remaining seven, argued against the abolition

of fees. While they agreed with their colleagues in accepting the principle that no child shall be debarred by lack of means from obtaining the kind of education best suited for him or her, they did not think that this would require the complete abolition of all fees in Grant-aided Schools. If fees were abolished 'we fear that in course of time the promised independence would disappear, and that the receipt of a large proportion of their income from public funds would be regarded as sufficient reason for an increased measure of public control'. The Minority Report argued that 'if there was sufficient free places to satisfy the requirements of the local authorities, fees graduated to the financial circumstances of the parent could be charged for the other places'. The effect on parental choice was also a concern as a parent who wishes to send his child to a grammar school 'should not be compelled to send him to a modern school with the sole alternative of an independent school'. Finally the Minority Report highlights one fundamental question which is as relevant today as it was in 1942: 'Should State help be given to parents of children according to their needs, or should free secondary education be given to all children even if their parents can well afford to pay towards it'.

Reflecting on my recent research into the rapid growth of private schools for the poor in developing countries, the abolition of school fees in state primary schools will have a negative impact on current attempts to achieve education for all. The recent experience of Kenya suggests why. Following the introduction of free primary schooling in 2002, many of those attending private schools and paying a modest fee have flooded the free state schools, resulting in overcrowding and a decline in standards in state schools and the closure of many private schools.

I would therefore agree with Lord Fleming, the Chairman of the 1942 Committee on Public Education, who signed the Minority Report which argued against the abolition of school fees in the UK. They should be reinstated in the UK as soon as possible, and any attempt to abolish them in developing countries should be strongly opposed.

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