

Teetering on the brink of a totalitarian society?

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, when I discovered that we were in fact living in a socialised economy in which decisions about the way in which some 75% of GNP will be spent are made by politicians and bureaucrats, I was asked whether I thought we were on the verge of living in a communist, fascist, or totalitarian society. I dismissed the idea. More recently, however, it has become clear that the idea is not so ludicrous as it may seem. In this short paper an attempt will be made to summarise some of the results of my research to date. Those who want to review the evidence in detail should turn to the references which are cited.

The idea that we might be on the verge of living in a totalitarian society is certainly not ludicrous in Ireland. My data shows that most Irish people believe that they can do little about the problems which plague them themselves; The government must tackle them. They think that members of parliament should take steps to assess what they, the citizens, want, but should then go ahead to provide what they themselves judge to be best for the citizenry. Most people do not think that a citizen should go out of his way to make his views known to his member of parliament. Indeed, a sizeable proportion said that a good citizen should *not* do this or take steps to join a political party or a trade union in order to try to influence government policy. The role of the citizen is essentially passive. It involves voting in elections, standing up for the national anthem, and attending funerals. The role of an M.P. is to ensure that the bureaucracy gives one one's clues. If the government misbehaves, one simply votes them out of office at the next election. One does not take any active steps in the interim to ensure that the government considers the right questions or does the right things about them. And a third of the informants in one of our studies did not even think that regular elections were necessary. Although, because people are thought to be basically irresponsible,

*The views expressed in this paper should not be attributed to the Scottish Council for Research in Education.

the government should make firm rules and exercise rigid sanctions to ensure that people comply with them, once people get into positions of authority, whether in the home, the work place, or the wider society, they seem to be expected to be responsible and trustworthy. It is felt to be unnecessary to have a system of public surveillance in order to ensure that these authorities behave in responsible ways. Public surveillance of leaders would be unworkable because public opinion is felt to be so lacking in consensus. For the same reason a leader who paid much attention to the public's wishes would not be expected to make much progress. Democratic processes are, on the whole, not thought to be viable. A strong leader, who finds out what people think and then does what is good and right, is essential. He cannot be responsible to the views of the citizenry because, not only would he be unable to make much progress because of the lack of consensus, there would, if he responded to such 'pressures', be a danger of his being subverted from the right goals. He would end up by responding to the most articulate and influential. Therefore, no-one should seek to influence him.

In short, most people believed in authoritarian leadership, passive citizenship, and centralised as distinct from individual initiative to tackle the problems of society and individuals.

As a foreigner in Ireland, I was prepared to detach myself from this set of expectations, feeling that it was *their* problem and that my own role should be confined to feeding this set of expectations, and their probable social consequences, into public discussion.

Discussions in which I have been involved since I came back to Scotland have convinced me that it is more than likely that a similar set of perceptions and expectations characterises the Scottish populations as well. Furthermore I have collected some data, from admittedly very small samples, and become involved in a number of discussions, which point to the probable existence of another set of perceptions and expectations which I find equally alarming.

In the course of the papers in which I give the facts which led me to the conclusion that we already live in a socialised (but neither a managed, nor a centralised) economy, I repeatedly emphasise that if a socialised economy is to operate in the interests of the population, then it is necessary for the laws enacted by the state, and for the bureaucracy itself, to make provision for a wide variety of alternatives suited to people with different priorities and between which people can be invited to choose. Such variety cannot be

developed, administered, and, in particular, evaluated, through the existing political channels but must come into being by developing open bureaucracies which enable differentiated policies suited to the variety of different needs and priorities which exist within the population to be evolved, administered in different ways, and evaluated against different criteria. A whole new set of understandings and procedures are required to initiate developments and provide for accountability in an internally diversified socialised economy. We require a new *conception* of democracy to cope with them.

Data I have recently collected shows that, at the very least, this viewpoint is not widely shared. Indeed it strongly suggests that most people are at present utterly opposed to any such developments.

We asked people to say, first, how *satisfied* they were with various services—including the housing, health, welfare, education and planning services. We then asked them how *important* they thought it was that there should be a *variety* of provision in each of these areas and between which they could choose. People consistently indicated that they were dissatisfied with current provision. However, as far as *variety* is concerned, the results were striking. They wanted a choice of schools, doctors, and hospitals, but they, most emphatically, did *not* want those responsible for any of these provisions to seek to provide a wide variety of alternatives suited to people with different values and priorities. There were bad schools, bureaucrats, doctors, and social workers, just as there are bad plumbers and electricians. They wanted choice so that they could get rid of them. But, having got rid of the incompetent, a good plumber, social worker, doctor, or teacher, would not, indeed *should* not, seek to cater for his different clients in different ways. Indeed, the whole notion of individualising provision of the goods and services provided by bureaucrats seemed to be inconceivable. It was neither possible nor desirable. It was not possible because there is no known mechanism other than the economic market place for providing and evaluating variety. It was not desirable because it would result in the most articulate getting the *best* provision. Whereas the economic market place was impersonal, the bureaucrat was not, and some people would be able to exert undue influence over him. But, more basically, despite people's experience in the consumer goods market, there was little recognition of the fact that different people defined 'the best' form of provision in different ways. It is possible, too, that the notion of choice frightened many people because they feared that they would not be able to

understand the issues, with the result that others would score over them. As a result they wished that choice to be eliminated for *everyone*.

Asked what they would do about the sorts of problems which were revealed by the large discrepancies between their ratings or importance and satisfaction, most people responded, as did the Irish, by saying that there was little they could do; the 'government' (i.e. the bureaucracy) should do it. Furthermore they themselves were not the sort of person who would do something about such problems, or even draw the government's attention to them. Not only did they lack the knowledge of where to begin, the financial resources, and the contacts, necessary to do anything about them, they were not the sort of opinionated, aggressive, loud, manipulative, troublemakers who, they felt, would in fact be able to do something about such problems. They lacked the knowledge, skills and motivation needed to gain control over their own lives, and their self images and expectations of others were not conducive to trying to take direct action to do something about their problems.

From these data alone it would seem that there is an urgent need to encourage the population to rethink its civic and social attitudes. The long term social consequences of the set of attitudes, perceptions and expectations which have been described cannot be expected to be anything but unpleasant. Equality means the same provision for everyone, not an equal opportunity to choose between one of a variety of different types of provision. Citizens should, as they do, accept what they are given in a spirit of frustrated resignation, rather than take an active role in seeking to improve the situation for the good of all. What's more, it is widely accepted that it is inevitable that there should exist no way whereby we can recruit the energies of others in a team effort designed to do something about the root causes of some of our pressing social problems. Nor are the social sciences thought to have much to offer.

Let me now take an example of socialised provision (education) and argue that, contrary to widely shared assumptions, it is both necessary and desirable to seek ways of individualising provision rather than to adjust all pupils to a common curriculum.

As is well known, the qualities parents want their children to develop vary markedly with socio-economic status.

High socio-economic status parents tend to want their children to be interested in intellectual activities, to be original, independent,

responsible, to ask questions, and to make their own observations. They want them to have internalised, reason-based, controls over their behaviour. They want them to think for themselves and to think of themselves as at least in some ways better than others. They want them to be adventurous and expect them to 'get on' in life.

Low socio-economic status parents tend to be more likely to want their children to be instantly obedient to authority, not to take much interest in books, to be dependent on, rather than independent of, them, to be strong and tough, and able to stick up for themselves. They should be biddable and follow moral codes rigidly. They should not put on airs or think of themselves as in any way better than others. They should not be adventurous or move away from (and possibly neglect) their families and friends.

In point of fact, of course, in absolute numbers as distinct from proportions, more LSES parents believe in the HSES value system, since there are simply more LSES parents in the total population—and we will comment on the significance of this variation within groups in a moment. Here it is more important to draw attention to the fact that children who hold to the LSES values cannot expect to do well in a school system and society geared to HSES values.

One way of handling this problem is, as many Homestart programmes in this country and abroad demonstrate, to try to encourage *all* children to adopt the HSES value system. Then they will all be able, if not to be equal, to have an equal opportunity to compete in the same race.

There are, however, a number of problems with this widely held viewpoint.

Firstly, as Kohn has shown, both sets of attitudes we have described often seem to be entirely appropriate to the jobs, life styles, and environments in which the individuals concerned find themselves. Indeed, Kohn maintains that they are learned *in* those life positions. On many housing estates it would be disastrous for children not to do as they are told without question, for boys not to learn to stick up for themselves, for girls not to watch out for themselves by following moral codes rigidly, and for children not to stand by each other in time of trouble.

Secondly, although it is widely believed that this variation in parental attitudes is responsible for the differential school and life success of their children, the evidence for this view is scanty, and there is some pretty convincing counter evidence. To begin with, there

is a great deal of social mobility in our society—and most of it is *not* attributable to variance in parental attitudes. Jencks' striking finding that the status variability between brothers in the United States amounts to 82% of status variability in general makes the point forcibly. Next, it is possible to calculate from data presented by Maxwell for Scotland, that the variation in IQ between children coming from the same families amounts to 65% of the total variability in IQ in our society. Thus, it is not true that parental attitudes are responsible for the lion's share in the variance in IQ.

Thirdly, the Newsons', and I myself, have produced some evidence that this variance in attitudes is not only a product of home background but seems to be part of some fundamental, if poorly understood, process of differential mobility. We studied the sources of variation in these attitudes among children. What we found was that variance in these attitudes among children was at least as strongly associated with where the children were going to as where they came from. Thus, downwardly mobile children who had previously been exposed to parents who stressed independence, responsibility, and initiative were more likely than others from their backgrounds to stress the importance of instant obedience, not questioning authority, and having strict rules to guide their lives. This is intriguing—particularly as Kinsey and the Newsons have shown that the constellation of attitudes and behaviours we are dealing with includes sexual attitudes and behaviours and that children's sexual attitudes and behaviour are not only typical of the social status groups the children will enter—and not their background (and long before they get there)—but also that these attitudes and behaviours *cannot* have been learned by observation of, or even discussion with, those already occupying such status positions. Thus Kohn is right to point to the ecological appropriateness of such attitudes, but he is wrong to infer that they have been learned as a result of experience in the occupational roles associated with such positions.

Several things would seem to follow from this discussion. Firstly, variance in parental attitudes and expectations may not have such important consequences for their children as has often been thought. Secondly, something pretty fundamental seems to be going on here. As a society we may need this variance in perceptions and expectations and it might be dysfunctional for us to seek to get everyone to think in the *same* way rather than respect the variance in children's priorities. And, thirdly, the widely articulated fear that, by respecting

variance in children's values, we might be in danger of creating a caste society might well be unjustified.

In the context of this evidence it would seem that it would not necessarily be undesirable to strive to cater for different children in different ways. Indeed, it would seem to be both essential and desirable to do so. If we don't, the values-clash which results is likely to disrupt the learning and growth of *everyone* involved in schools, (and not just the development of the low socio-economic status children), and we may fail to develop the range of people with *different* concerns and priorities which our society so badly needs.

It would be nice to believe that all would be well if only one had enlightened teachers who would run competence-focused, project-based, educational programmes in which different children could pursue different goals within the same classroom. And no doubt the answer to the problem does lie somewhere in that direction. Unfortunately the worries about creating a caste society, and our belief that a willingness to pander to low socio-economic status attitudes would have serious consequences for the future of our society, are not the only reasons why we, as a society, have resisted making provision for a wide variety of different types of education geared to the differing values and priorities of individual pupils. There are some other major problems to be contended with.

In the first place, many of the goals espoused by different parents seem to be incompatible. One cannot easily teach some children in a school class to respect, and be obedient to, authority and others to question that authority. One cannot teach some children to stick up for themselves in an alien environment and others to be sensitive to, and mull over, the fleeting feelings and ideas which form the springs of literary, scientific and social creativity. One cannot at the same time—as one third of my Irish adults wished, and one third of Scottish schoolboys experience—beat the badness out of some children and reason quietly with others. Pursuit of one set of goals with one set of children interferes with the pursuit of other goals with other children. Not, mind you, that the choice will be left to teachers—for, as the available evidence again indicates, pupils' and parents' expectations will markedly restrict teachers' freedom of movement.

But, the biggest problem to be contended with is not that of finding educational processes which will *permit* such flexibility, it is establishing the very notion that such flexibility might, could, and

should be provided *at all*. When I have suggested to groups of parents, teachers and headmasters that it might be provided, I have been greeted with incredulity. It would be neither possible nor desirable to do so. The 'middle class' would get the 'best' deal (note the absence of any recognition that there are many different types of 'good' education) and pupils from 'deprived' backgrounds would get a raw deal. (As a matter of fact, of course, Jencks' data, taken together with my own, shows that those bound for 'deprived' positions in society come from all sorts of backgrounds and that those who are really educationally deprived are those, from whatever backgrounds, who are bound for low status positions in society).

Let me not be misunderstood about this. As I have already indicated, there *is* a widespread public demand for choice of school. But this is because parents know that neighbouring schools are as different as chalk and cheese and don't see why their children should have to go to a bad one. The variance *shows* that some schools *must* be better than others. What they want is a mechanism which will ensure that the schools their children attend will be good schools, not, so far as I can tell, a mechanism which will provide a choice between different *types* of good school.

Let me now recount an anecdote to illustrate how some of the beliefs and expectations which have been described work out in practice. At a meeting between parents and teachers in a certain school, the question of sex education came up for discussion. It rapidly became clear that the parents present at the meeting, and the wider population of parents from which the pupils at the school were drawn, had widely different views on the desirability of sex education and the specific topics which should be covered in such classes. There was general agreement that it would be both unthinkable and impossible to provide a variety of options and allow the pupils to choose between them. Now, given that sexual attitudes and behaviour are strongly polarised by socio-economic status, and given that this was the area in which anticipatory socialisation effects were first established, this agreement that it would be neither possible nor desirable to respect the children's values is distressing. But still more distressing was the solution which was accepted by parents and teachers alike. The headmaster announced that it was impossible to take account of the parents' wishes. If one started discussing with them what should happen, one immediately exposed oneself to a clamour of views within which it was impossible to determine any

consensus. *He* would have to take the decision to provide sex education, decide which should be covered, then set aside the next three days to 'listen to the parents' complaints'. Notice that there was no indication that any action would be taken on the basis of those complaints. Notice too, that, within the constraints of what was possible without a public outcry, it was, as usual, the middle classes decision as to what was appropriate which was going to be imposed at all.

Note that our anecdote illustrates the effect of many of the attitudes discussed earlier. On matters of basic social importance it is impossible to achieve a consensus. Pragmatically, what has to be done is to appoint a strong leader who will take a decision and tell people what's good for them. Then one gives the public an opportunity to cool off.

Notice the implications for open government. Any bureaucrat who opens his door even a chink to hear the public's response to his proposals will be confronted by such a clamour of diversity that he will (a) be able to go his own way because there will be insufficient consensus to stop him and, (b) slam the door shut again in order to prevent repeated exposure to this threatened experience. No wonder so few schools have followed the Plowden and Scottish Education Department recommendations to open their doors to parents. No wonder there is no Access to Information bill.

The attitudes and values discussed above would seem, in themselves, to be sufficient to spell the death knell for any hopes of progress toward open bureaucracies catering for, and capitalising upon, the diversity of the population's values and wishes and thus progress toward a society which would offer its members a more satisfying way of life.

But the further development of a socialised economy is blocked in other ways. Interviews carried out with a small number of civil servants, at all levels, in Ireland revealed a series of attitudes and expectations which, if widespread, seem to be inimical to the further development of our civilization. Although there were outstanding exceptions, many of those we interviewed believed that any suggestions they made for improvements would be treated by both superiors and colleagues as personal criticisms directed toward exposing their incompetence, and making further work for them, rather than as suggestions for ways in which the quality of the service provided to clients might be improved. Staff seemed to be so burdened down with routine duties that there were few options to think about the systems

implications of their work, let alone to translate any ideas they might have into action. Many complained that time horizons were often very short, and that the less said about the long term consequences of particular decisions the better. Senior civil servants, they said, had to make their mark in a short period, and wouldn't be around when the consequences came home to roost. What was important was that they be seen to have had an impact. The human resources (e.g. initiative, ability to become familiar with an overall programme and contribute one's ideas, and leadership) of whole sections were sometimes vandalised for the sake of the personal aggrandisement of a particular individual. In summary, there were many good reasons why a bureaucratically managed economy would be unlikely to very innovative, effective, or even to do what is in the long term interests of society—let alone to cater for, and capitalise upon, diversity.

There was also widespread opposition to the real reasons for particular decision being made public. These reasons would often serve to discredit the whole enterprise, not only because personal considerations were involved, but also because the decisions involved compromises between the pressures exerted by different groups within the total population. And compromising with such pressures is, as we have seen, one of the things which the public in general thinks that bureaucrats in particular should most specifically *not* do.

In the light of these results I wonder if one of the reasons for the zoning regulations which are currently being introduced into our educational and mental health services is that the professionals concerned do not want the variation in professional viewpoints to be made public, and, in particular, do not want the public to insist on accountability exercises being mounted to discover what the relative merits of these alternative positions really are.

As if the pressures which have just been described were not sufficient to justify fears for the future economic and social development of our society, much of our discussion of social policy has become pervaded by double-think.

The word 'Community', which conjures up an image of a place where people know and support each other, has come to be used to describe places where no-one knows anyone; places in which the day-to-day lives of the people who live there are controlled in detail by professionals (doctors, teachers, social workers and planners) who do not live there and who, at best, come into the community only on a

daily basis. It has come to be used to refer to places where no-one has any control over the matters which most basically affect the quality of their lives and in which they have no choice of, or influence over, their neighbours.

'Education' is often assumed to be concerned with helping an individual to grow and develop and make the most of his talents. Yet our secondary schools are, for the pupils, the worst working environments in our society, with the proportion finding satisfaction in, and with, their work and their opportunity to develop and utilise their talents being far below that found in the next worst working environments—large factories and offices (which, incidentally, employ a very small proportion of the total population). Most teachers and pupils feel that pupils derive few benefits from their studies once the value of the examination certificate as a passport to a job is discounted. And their teachers are harsh, punitive and unapproachable, rather than warm, facilitative of personal development, and consultative.

The term 'Rational Planning' has come to be used for a process which cannot take into account some of the issues which people feel most strongly about—either because they cannot put their feelings into words, because they cannot be 'quantified' and weighted against other considerations, or because these considerations are not regarded as legitimate. 'Rational Planning' has come to signify a decision-taking process which is, in many ways, *less* complete and less responsive to public opinion than the (rightly) discredited market place.

Summary and conclusions

I have been arguing that we now live in a largely socialised economy in which the decisions most fundamentally affecting our lives are taken by bureaucrats and not through the impersonal procedures of the economic market place. However, it is widely believed that, in such a society, it is neither possible nor desirable to cater for people with different priorities in different ways or to go out of one's way to capitalise upon people with different talents. If one attempted to do this it is widely believed that the most articulate and the most powerful would get the best deal, and that one would run the risk of creating a caste society. Thus, equality has come to mean equal treatment, not equal access to one of a wide variety of different types of treatment. Nevertheless, there is, in fact, a great deal of variety in

people's priorities and the serious implications of that variety are recognised in a round-about sort of way: because the public voice is so discordant that no consensus can be achieved it is widely believed that it is necessary to have a strong leader whose decisions cannot be questioned.

Not only do public attitudes seem to be inimical to the effective and satisfying operation of a socialised economy, it seems that the public, rather than take direct action, has come to rely on the bureaucracy to take action on their behalf. Unfortunately it seems, from the scant evidence available, that our bureaucrats themselves are not in a position to act in an innovative way, and with the long term good of society in mind, in order to tackle these problems. Furthermore it seems that they have good reasons for resisting the implementation of social accountability exercises to replace the market mechanism as an overall means of evaluating the quality of provision and as a means of assessing the need for diversity in that provision and evaluating the quality of that diversified provision. Such procedures would expose them to criticism which, given widespread perceptions and expectations, it would be extremely difficult for them to handle.

Finally, there seems to be a considerable amount of double-think around. The word community has come to mean anomie and compulsion. The verb 'to educate' has come to mean 'to stunt'. The phrase 'rational decision taking' has come to refer to decision taking procedures which ignore variables which cannot be verbalised.

In a word, 1984 is upon us. This despite the fact that very few of us actually want to live in a totalitarian society or actually *like* the pedestrian, grey, uniformity, the cult of tatty-ness, and the inability to develop and utilise our talents that that sort of society thrusts upon us. It seems that it is time to take careful stock of our social and civic attitudes, our administrative structures and assumptions, and to consider their probable long term social consequences. If we are to do this it is necessary to greatly increase our investment in social research and development and initiate appropriate types of adult education programme. We *can* develop more appropriate ways of formulating, administering and evaluating policy in our socialised economy, and we *can* develop more appropriate expectations of our MP's and Civil Servants—but only if we first change some of our basic assumptions, beliefs and expectations. The types of social research, development, and educational activity which are needed are discussed more fully in some of the articles listed below.

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