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'POLITICAL EDUCATION' IN A DEMOCRACY

A philosophical examination of some
interpretations of 'political education'
in New Zealand.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in Education
at Massey University.

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February 1978

ABSTRACT'Political Education' in a Democracy.A philosophical examination of some interpretations
of 'political education' in New Zealand.

This thesis seeks to examine formal, informal and non-formal aspects of 'political education' in New Zealand. There is not only an attempt to expose political components of what is apparently an apolitical or non-political school system, but also to explore politically-educative characteristics of other agencies. Its aim is to clarify the relationships between politics and education.

The first chapter examines the word 'democracy' and tries to discover the kinds of functions which a democratic society might require of its education system. The idea that political education occupies a key role in the continuance of democracy is advanced, and the adequacy of New Zealand education in relation to meeting the necessary requirements is evaluated.

Further chapters deal with four possible interpretations of 'political education' in a democracy. Chapter two is concerned with the transmission of tradition and conformity. Chapter three deals with the maintenance of the system - how education serves as a recruiting agency. The fourth Chapter looks at 'political' aspects of civics and citizenship education, while Chapter five discusses political skills and knowledge - both their importance to a democratic system and their manifestation in New Zealand society. Running through the examination of these 'possible interpretations' is an evaluation of them in relation to democratic practices and ideals.

In the final chapter, it is suggested that in terms of the requirements of democratic society in a rapidly changing world, New Zealand's 'political education' might be seen as both inadequate and unsatisfactory. It is recommended that greater emphasis be placed on the development of political skills and knowledge in the school system.

PREFACE

People learn about politics in several environments. Home, school and community are among the settings from which they acquire skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that encourage or inhibit political activity.

This thesis is about some of the agencies, practices and processes involved in 'political education' in New Zealand, and in particular, about the ways in which schools and other formal, informal and non-formal educational organisations, deliberately or incidentally influence the political attitudes and activities of citizens in a democracy. Although the emphasis is upon schools, which are in a strong position to exert influence on their students - both specific and overt, as well as general and covert - other agencies are also discussed.

The approach is conceptual - in that I confine myself to ideas and arguments - rather than empirical. This does not constitute an under-playing of the importance of, or need for empirical surveys although Holly's observation (1972) that:

"The mass survey is the very stuff of one dimensional rationality, the pretence that by a streamlined technique you have captured reality....." (1)

highlights the need for thinking and analysis prior to any empirical study of political education. Furthermore, Crick (1970) says:

"Never has there been a time more ripe for constructive social and political thinking."

(2)

That the language of politics tends to be loose and confusing may act as an obstruction to clear thinking. Although there are no attempts at rigorous definition, three of the key words - "politics", "education", and "democracy" are discussed early in the thesis. The first chapter is devoted to an examination of democracy and the kinds of demands a democratic society might make on its education system.

The rest of the thesis deals with four major areas of political education, chosen to represent areas of skills and attitudes which are, to varying degrees, the concern of school and

society, and are open to educational influence. Chapter two on 'tradition and conformity', deals with transmission of culture both in and out of school. The third chapter, on 'recruitment', lays more stress on the preparatory function of schools in terms of both manpower and societal roles - the part schools play in affecting subsequent careers, occupations and social statuses. Chapter four discusses civics and citizenship programmes and their 'political' functions in a democracy, while the fifth chapter deals with the teaching and acquisition of political knowledge and skills.

Throughout, I have attempted to draw together many strands of social and political experience which may constitute 'political education' and have tried to explore some of the inter-relationships between education and politics. For as Holly (1972) states:

"Not only must politics in particular, not be taken out of education - it can't be. Nor can education be taken out of politics: they are mutually inextricable and each is bound up with society."

(3)

Because of the lack of research literature relating to New Zealand political education, sources referred to are taken from related fields. It might be objected that the use of quotations to support arguments constitutes 'arguing from authority'. However, the intention is to report (and examine) some of the published and stated observations of what is considered to be the case in New Zealand schools and society as well as some of the views of political philosophers and educational theorists. While these do not purport to be 'facts', they represent some of the assumptions, beliefs and values being discussed in this thesis.

I wish to thank my supervisor, David Stenhouse, for his valuable guidance, suggestions and criticisms.

References

- (1) Holly, Douglas "Schools Society and Humanity" (1972) p.99.
- (2) Crick, Bernard "Protest and Discontent" (1970) p.xvii.
- (3) Holly, Douglas op.cit. (1972) p.10.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ABSTRACT	ii
PREFACE	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
Some Linguistic Considerations	5
Politics	6
Education	6
References to Introduction	7
CHAPTER 1 DEMOCRACY	8
1.1 "Democracy" - the word	8
1.2 What is democracy?	10
1.3 'New Zealand Democracy'	10
1.4 Democracy and Education	11
1.5 Democracy in Schools	12
1.6 Education for Democracy	14
Conclusion	
Interplay of aspects of political education in New Zealand	15
References for Chapter 1	15
CHAPTER 2 TRADITION AND CONFORMITY	17
2.1 Tradition	17
2.2 The Hidden Curriculum	19
2.2.1 School Uniforms	21
2.2.2 Corporal Punishment	22
2.2.3 School Tradition	23
2.2.4 Religious Instruction in Schools	24
2.3 Conformity	25
2.4 Egalitarianism	27
2.4.1 Equality of Opportunity	27
2.5 Patriotism	29
2.5.1 Acquiring the 'state ideology'	29
2.5.2 Pride in Country	30
2.5.3 The Use of Schools to Instil Patriotism	30
2.5.4 The Encouragement of Esteem	31
2.5.5 'Patriotic' Education by 'Comparison' (with other systems)	31
2.5.6 'Exoneration' by comparison	32
2.6 Power	34
2.6.1 Apathy	34
2.6.2 'Depoliticisation'	35
2.6.3 Identification With a Charismatic Leader	36

CHAPTER 2 (Contd.)	<u>Page</u>
2.7 'Tradition' and the 'Political Education' of Females	36
2.7.1 Background - Women and Politics in New Zealand	37
2.7.2 Schools and 'Sexism'	38
2.8 Indoctrination and Propaganda	40
2.8.1 Propaganda	42
References for Chapter 2	43
CHAPTER 3 RECRUITMENT TO, AND MAINTENANCE OF THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM	45
3.1 Preparation of the Workforce	45
3.1.1 Manpower Requirements	45
3.1.2 'Screening' and 'Stratifying'	46
3.2 The Recruitment of Political Leaders	48
3.2.1 Elitism	49
3.2.2 Developing a "Political Class"	49
3.3 Maintaining the Democratic System - Rights and Duties	50
3.3.1 Voting	51
3.3.2 Participation	52
References for Chapter 3	56
CHAPTER 4 CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC EDUCATION	58
4.1 Education for Solving 'Civic' Problems	58
4.1.1 Internationalism	60
4.2 The Use of Education to 'Produce' Good Citizens	62
4.3 Teaching the 'Christian Heritage'	62
4.4 Education to Produce 'Desirable Qualities'	63
4.5 Education for 'Compliance'	64
4.6 A 'Mechanical' View of Citizenship	65
4.7 Education for Membership of a Community	65
4.8 'Public Education' Campaigns as 'Citizenship Education'	66
4.9 'Citizenship' as a School Subject	67
References for Chapter 4	68
CHAPTER 5 POLITICAL ATTITUDES, KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS	70
5.1 Agencies and mediators of 'political' attitudes, knowledge and skills	70
5.1.1 The news media	71
5.1.2 Mass opinion	73
5.2 Affective and attitudinal bases of political 'learning'	75
5.3 Political 'facts', political 'information' and political 'knowledge'	77
5.3.1 Groups dealing in political facts or political knowledge	77
5.3.2 The 'flow' of Political Information	79
5.3.3 Some 'complicating' factors	81
5.3.4 Schools and 'compensatory' political education	82

	<u>Page</u>
CHAPTER 5 (Contd.)	
5.4 Political 'skills'	85
5.4.1 Education for 'rationality'	85
5.4.2 Education for being critical	86
References for Chapter 5	89
CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION	92
References for Chapter 6	96
APPENDIX I	97
BIBLIOGRAPHY	98