



Private versus Public Education: A Classical Economic Dispute

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West summarizes Smith's views on education and explains some of the institutional features of the university in Smith's day. Having read Smith, this is a good test to see if you understood what Smith was saying. It should help you write a better paper.

PRIVATE VERSUS PUBLIC EDUCATION

A CLASSICAL ECONOMIC DISPUTE

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THIS article examines a remarkable division of opinion among the classical economists concerning the applicability of the free-market principle to education. First I offer a brief description of the school and university situation during the time of Adam Smith. Next I shall examine Smith's preference in his own circumstances for the operation of market forces in providing education. I then sketch the development of government policy in education over the subsequent century showing the roles of J. S. Mill, Nassau Senior, and Edwin Chadwick. Finally I contrast the ideas of Robert Lowe, the last true representative of Adam Smith on education, with the dominant ideas of his contemporaries, Mill, Senior, and Chadwick.

In Adam Smith's lifetime it was commonly observed that both in quality and quantity the schools in Scotland were better than those in England, despite the superior material prosperity of the latter. The main explanation of this was to be found in the contrasting legislation in the two countries rather than in any differences in national character. In 1696 an Act of Scotland had ordered schools to be established in every parish and had obliged landlords to build a schoolhouse and a dwelling house for the use of the local master. The salary of this teacher was to come from a small fixed stipend and also from fees payable by pupils or parents. This legislation was so well enforced that by the end of the eighteenth century the majority of children in Scotland were receiving some schooling. Although by that time inflation had substantially reduced the real value of the statutorily fixed part of the masters' salaries, the more efficient

ones were managing to survive with incomes deriving largely from fees. Such dependence on direct payments from their customers meant that the teachers' efforts respected more closely the wishes of the pupils and their parents, since teaching incomes conspicuously fluctuated with the numbers on the school register. In many cases the teachers allowed their fees to be divided according to the number or type of subjects taught. Special fees were often paid, for instance, to meet the demand for new lessons in modern subjects. This sort of discriminatory pricing developed to such a degree that Robert Lowe observed (approvingly) in the following century: "In Scotland they sell education like a grocer sells figs."

Legislation in England had a quite different result from that in Scotland. The Test Act of 1665, by excluding dissenters from the schools and universities, placed a serious brake upon English education that was to last for over a century. While Catholics and Jews were kept out of the universities, grammar-school teachers were restricted by a rigorous system of ecclesiastical licensing. The upshot was that many individuals who were willing to teach were prevented from doing so while those who did were protected against potential competitors. But apart from the legislation, a traditional characteristic of English education was also partly responsible for the reduced competition. This was the typical practice of financing schools and colleges largely from funds bequeathed to them by propertied benefactors, a system which became known as the process of "endowment." The more such institutions were endowed, the more they tended to become divorced from the wishes of the

parents. Furthermore, with the passage of time, the original objectives of the testators became increasingly reinterpreted in the interests of their administrators. Turgot seems to have been one of the first eighteenth-century economists to make this kind of criticism:

Endowments, whatever be their utility, carry in themselves an irremediable vice which they derive from their very nature—the impossibility of maintaining the execution of their purpose. Founders deceive themselves very grossly if they imagine that their zeal will communicate itself from age to age to the person charged with the perpetuation of its effects. . . . There is every ground to presume that an endowment, however useful it may appear, will become one day useless at least, perhaps injurious, and will be so for a long time.¹

It was the endowment system also which Adam Smith singled out for his strong disapproval when writing about education. It is obvious that Smith's views were deeply influenced by direct experience of both the English endowed institutions and the Scottish method of predominantly fee-paid instruction:

The endowments of schools and colleges have necessarily diminished more or less the necessity of application in the teachers. Their subsistence, so far as it arises from their salaries, is evidently derived from a fund altogether independent of their success and reputation in their particular professions.²

Smith argued that private schools were in an unfortunate minority because the salaries of the public (endowed) school teachers

put the private teachers who would pretend to come into competition with them, in the same state with a merchant, who attempts to trade without a bounty in competition with those who trade with a considerable one. . . .³

The endowments of schools and colleges have, in this manner, not only corrupted the

¹ Turgot, article on "Foundations" in the *Encyclopédie*.

² Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (6th ed.; [1950]), p. 250. All subsequent references are from this edition and are indicated as *W.N.*

³ *W.N.*, p. 266.

diligence of public teachers, but have rendered it almost impossible to have any good private ones.⁴

In his proposals for state intervention in education which appeared in Book V of *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith was especially careful to avoid a state system which would reproduce the errors of endowed schools. His scheme was similar to the Scottish parochial system. State financial aid was intended mainly for school buildings, leaving the masters substantially dependent for their incomes on fees payable even by the poorest parents. When he recommended the encouragement of scientific education "among all people of middling or more than middling rank and fortune" Smith carefully added the proviso that the state should not do this by giving "shares" to teachers "in order to make them negligent and idle."⁵

Most of the classical economists shared Smith's reasoning. Thus Malthus argued that if each child had to pay a fixed sum, "the school master would then have a stronger interest to increase the number of his pupils."⁶ Similarly, McCulloch thought that the maintenance of the fee system would

secure the constant attendance of a person who shall be able to instruct the young, and who shall have the strongest interest to perfect himself in his business, and to attract the greatest number of scholars to his school.⁷

Otherwise if the schoolmaster derived much of his income from his fixed salary he would not have the same interest to exert himself,

and like all other functionaries, placed in similar situations, he would learn to neglect his business, and to consider it as a drudgery only to be avoided.⁸

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁶ Malthus, letter to Whitbread, 1807.

⁷ Note XXI in McCulloch edition to *The Wealth of Nations* (1828).

⁸ *Ibid.* James Mill also shared such reasoning (see *Westminster Review* article [1813]).

When discussing his proposals for state intervention in education, Adam Smith deliberately avoided the provision of a specially selected teaching body. He disliked both state training of teachers and a system of pedagogic licensure operated by a self-governing teaching profession. People were to be left free to choose since "they would soon find better teachers for themselves than any whom the state could provide for them."⁹ Smith supported his objection to state-provided teachers with historical evidence (mainly from classical Greece) illustrating their general inferiority compared with free-lance practitioners. His objection to teachers licensed by their own profession is to be inferred from his rejection of the principle of occupational licensure in general, a subject upon which Smith best expressed himself when considering the parallel case of the medical profession. Since this context is of particular relevance to subsequent discussion in this article, Smith's argument will be examined here in detail.

In 1778 Dr. Cullen, a colleague at Glasgow University, wrote to Adam Smith asking for his opinion on the proposition that the medical profession, in order to protect the interests of patients and also those of properly qualified doctors, should be restricted to graduates of recognized universities. Smith's reply is particularly interesting here since it illustrates the full and extended strength of his desire to remove all obstacles to competition in the professions generally. He told Cullen first that his proposal would strengthen still further the existing monopoly power of the (endowed) universities which granted the examination certificates: "Monopolists seldom make good work, and a lecture which a certain number of students must attend, whether they profit by it or no, is certainly not very likely to be a good one."¹⁰

Second, Adam Smith dealt with the ob-

⁹ *W.N.*, p. 281.

¹⁰ Adam Smith's letter to Cullen is to be found in John Thomson, *The Life, Lectures and Writings of William Cullen, M.C.*, Vol. I (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1832).

jection to the market system that J. S. Mill was later to make with reference to education—the objection that in some cases it failed because the consumer was an incompetent judge. Smith maintained that people were not such children in the choice of their doctors, as the less patronized doctors were fond of believing:

That Doctors are sometimes fools as well as other people, is not, in the present times, one of those profound secrets which is known only to the learned. The title is not so very imposing, and it very seldom happens to a man that he trusts his health to another merely because the other is a doctor. The person so trusted has almost always either some knowledge or some craft which would procure him nearly the same trust, though he was not decorated with any such title.¹¹

Thus the people did not require such props to their judgment as university degree qualifications, either in the choice of doctor or, presumably, in the selection of teachers and schools.

Smith then pointed out that the holders of degrees comprised a heterogenous group of practitioners, so that the degree offered no sure guide for choosing among doctors within the group. Some doctors had taken twice as long as others to get their degrees. In other cases, especially at poor universities, the examination was perfunctory and the degree obtained merely by "doing time" and paying fees at the university. Furthermore, by giving a label of credit worthiness to a person of low competence, the degree title might also have extended his practice "and consequently his field for doing mischief; it is not improbable, too, that it may increase his presumption, and consequently his disposition to do mischief."¹²

Finally, Adam Smith argued that the de-

¹¹ It is interesting to observe that J. S. Mill also objected to a teaching profession confined to graduates, but for the "libertarian" reason given by W. von Humbolt, that this practice would be giving too much power to the government. Apart from this he could well have agreed to the proposal on the grounds that the consumers were incompetent to judge and needed such protection.

¹² Thomson, *op. cit.*, letter to Cullen.

gree licensing system would so strengthen a growing monopoly as to lead to still higher prices. Many of the public would then be deprived of medical attention altogether for want of money.

Had the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge been able to maintain themselves in the exclusive privilege of graduating all the doctors who could practise in England, the price of feeling a pulse might by this time have risen from two and three guineas, the price which it has now happily arrived at, to double or triple that sum; and English physicians might, and probably would, have been at the same time the most ignorant and quackish in the world.¹³

Smith chided the doctors for affecting to champion society's interests when all the time their real purpose was to prevent the erosion of their own incomes:

Stage doctors, I must observe, do not much excite the indignation of the faculty; more reputable quacks do. The former are too contemptible to be considered as rivals: they only poison the poor people and the copper pence which are thrown up to them in handkerchiefs could never find their way to the pockets of a regular physician. It is otherwise with the latter: they sometimes intercept a part of what perhaps would have been better bestowed in another place. Do not all the old women in the country practise physic without exciting murmur or complaint? And if here and there a graduated doctor should be as ignorant as an old woman where can be the great harm? The beardless old woman takes no fees; the bearded one does, and it is this circumstance, I strongly suspect, which exasperates his brethren so much against him.¹⁴

In the century that followed the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* the English educational scene rapidly changed. The French Revolution caused such nervous reaction in England that the means of communication of knowledge of all kinds became suspect. Hostile government actions against the press, the paper tax (referred to by J. R. McCulloch and James Mill as a tax on knowledge), together with the dislike of

combinations, corresponding societies, and political pamphlets of the Tom Paine variety, were all symptomatic of the official climate of opinion. The period of 1800–1830, which Dicey described as the time of “Old Toryism” or “Legislative Quiescence,” witnessed the failure both of the movement to repeal the Test Acts and of Samuel Whitbread’s 1807 Bill to establish parochial education in England, a bill which had the particular support of T. R. Malthus.

The Whig victory of 1832 brought a swift reaction in the opposite direction and a period of legislative enthusiasm ensued. J. A. Roebuck, representing the utilitarians, introduced an education bill in 1833 that had the effect of getting Parliament to indorse the first of the annual grants to education, which have existed ever since. Roebuck’s arguments, and also the later utterances of Edwin Chadwick concerning the educational opportunities and responsibilities facing the new Poor Law Commissioners, drew the special praise of J. S. Mill. All the utilitarians were educationists in a very special sense. It was their enthusiastic adherence to the new psychological Principle of Association which led Bentham and James Mill to attach so much importance to the power of environment upon a child’s character. While the vast legislative reform machinery of the Benthamites was openly directed to the cause of individual freedom, they intuitively recognized that education was a political prize of the first order. So confident were they of the superiority of their own special pedagogic ideas that they seized any political chance to impose them in a manner which, however benevolent in intention, was fully authoritarian in reality.

The Benthamites’ main chance offered itself with the operation of the new Poor Law, following the celebrated Poor Law Report of 1834 in which the ideas of Senior and Chadwick had predominated. The last page of this Report alleged that there was a widespread failure of privately organized schooling and emphasized the urgent educational duties of government. The election of Edwin Chadwick to secretaryship of the

¹³ *Ibid.*, Smith’s letter to Cullen.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

You don't have to read past this point. West is finished with Smith and moves on to discuss other classical economist's views on education, but check out the last page of this paper--it is quite thought provoking.

Poor Law Commissioners was a great tactical triumph for the Utilitarians. Chadwick was the main author of the plan that was embodied in the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. This act appointed three Commissioners with extensive powers vaguely defined and with no representative in Parliament. Its provisions were directed not toward the Malthusian idea of the gradual reduction of poor relief but toward the "better" administration of this relief. The large-scale central administration beloved by Bentham was now established. A spate of reports to the Secretary of State, mostly inspired by Chadwick, flowed from the Poor Law Office between 1834 and 1841. In 1837 the Commissioners were empowered to combine parishes or unions in order to set up enormous Benthamite schools into which could be drawn all the pauper children of the districts, children who had been separated from the "evil adult influences" of the old work-houses.

It was from the experience of the "scientific administration" of such establishments that the zealous and dogmatic Chadwick proceeded to announce to the world the practical success of Benthamite pedagogic principles. Bentham's ideas can be traced to a paper called "Outline of a Work To Be Called Pauper Management Improved," which was published in Arthur Young's *Annals of Agriculture* in 1797. "Industry houses" ruled by a central board were to secure contracts for labor, and paupers were to be paid on an incentive method. The industry houses were to offer scope for submitting poor children to the most effective "plastic power" conceivable. "The influence of the schoolmaster on the conduct of the pupil in ordinary life, is as nothing compared with the influence exercised by the Company over these its wards." Bentham also applied to this problem his architectural principle of universal inspection while the new and controversial monitorial system was accepted with enthusiasm. These were the ideas which his disciple, Edwin Chadwick, was later to help to bring into such confident operation as to claim eventually that the

pauper schools were superior to those of the private sector. During this experimental period Chadwick was in constant communication with Nassau Senior and J. S. Mill, both of whom were duly impressed and gave him much encouragement.

It is quite evident that Edwin Chadwick provided an important source of information from which J. S. Mill derived his stereotypes of working-class life. In chapter vii of his *Principles of Political Economy* entitled "On What Depends the Degree of Productiveness of Productive Agents,"¹⁵ Mill was very severe on the "uneducated" English laboring class and compared them unfavorably with continental workers. His 'evidence' was attributed to the Report of the Poor Law Commissioners in 1840 on the training of pauper children. This report had, in fact, been written entirely by Chadwick and it had given an account of a typically amateur piece of sociological investigation. Leading questions had been put by Chadwick to certain "witnesses," the manner of selection of the latter being unstated. But it was from such dubious evidence that J. S. Mill no doubt formed his general opinion of English popular education:

even in quantity it is (1848) and is likely to remain, altogether insufficient, while in quality, though with some slight tendency to improvement, it is never good except by some rare accident, and generally so bad as to be little more than nominal.¹⁶

Nassau Senior's views showed similar superficiality. As a member of the Royal Commission on Popular Education, 1861, he gave Chadwick the task of supplying him with certain evidence. Senior severely opposed the proposal of a fellow commissioner that education was a matter that should be left in the hands of the parents:

For fifty years they have been managing their own trades unions. There is not one which is not based on folly, tyranny and injustice which would disgrace the rudest savages. They

¹⁵ All references to this work refer to the Ashley edition, 1915.

¹⁶ *Principles of Political Economy*, p. 956.

sacrifice their wives', their children's and their own health and strength to the lowest sensuality. The higher the wages the worse seems, in general, to be the condition of the families.¹⁷

Senior, however, could not refute the statistics of his own commission. It reported that there were 2,535,462 children attending school out of a total of 2,655,767 of school age—a shortfall of only about 4.5 per cent.¹⁸ These figures showed that the growth of voluntary schooling (i.e., schools run by the churches and also private adventure schools) over the previous thirty years had been most remarkable. Furthermore, the figures easily matched those of European countries where, unlike England and Wales, compulsory state education prevailed. Senior's main criticism, therefore, was directed against the quality rather than the quantity of education. To understand the full nature of his criticism it will be necessary to sketch the developing policy problem in education.

The state's contribution to education had been swiftly growing since 1833, but private expenditure had been growing rapidly, too. The annual grant in 1833 was £20,000. By 1858 it had reached £663,435. The 1833 allocation of this grant was supervised by the Committee of Council for Education which was specially established in 1839. The first secretary of this committee was Dr. Kay (1804–77), who later became Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth. It was Kay who had drawn public attention to squalid social conditions in early nineteenth-century Manchester, and it was his strongest conviction that education was the key to reform. Kay was connected with Senior and the Mills, and it was on Senior's recommendation that he had been appointed an assistant Poor Law Commissioner.¹⁹ Kay and Chadwick thought alike on most matters and Kay willingly accepted the delegated task of reorganizing the pauper schools on Benthamite lines.²⁰ Kay's subsequent experience

led him to emphasize the importance of a specially trained teaching body. When he was appointed first secretary of the Committee of Council on Education, the post which eventually was to become that of Minister of Education, he therefore brought to this office the tradition of an authoritarian and utilitarian educational administrator. The parliamentary annual grant to education was made available to any school in the private sector whether it was run by a church or a private body, so long as certain conditions were observed. One of these was that the school receiving the grant should be agreeable to inspection—another Benthamite principle. It is quite obvious that Kay was in a strategic position not only to appoint the "right" kind of inspectors but also to dictate the criteria of their inspection, criteria which naturally reflected the image of the large and "scientifically" administered pauper schools.

The basis of Nassau Senior's criticism of free parental choice of education is therefore quite clear. In his view, too many people were choosing non-inspected schools, the standards of which, according to his closest official advisors, were very inferior. In pauper schools the administrators had been unhampered by the irritation of parental free choice. In the private sector where this irritation could not be removed the problem was that the parents could not be trusted to select the best kind of school, that is, the larger monitorial school of the Benthamite variety. Even though the fees were subsidized by the state, too many parents, according to Senior, thought that these schools were vulgar "or their boy had been punished there, or he is required to be clean, or to be regular, or the private school is half a street nearer, or is kept by a friend, or by some one who will submit his teaching to their dictation."²¹ Furthermore, in view

¹⁷ N. Senior, *Suggestions on Popular Education* (1861), p. 258

¹⁸ *1861 Schools Inquiry Commission*, I, 79.

¹⁹ S. E. Finer, *The Life and Times of Edwin Chadwick* (1952), p. 151.

²⁰ See *The Report to the Secretary of State from the Poor Law Commissioners* (1841), esp. p. 19 (hereinafter cited as *Commissioners Report*). The first chapter of this Report was written by Chadwick; most of the rest was the work of Kay.

²¹ N. Senior, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

of Kay-Shuttleworth's ardent struggle to establish special colleges for the training of teachers in every type of school, it was embarrassing to discover how many untrained people were taking advantage of the complete freedom of entry into teaching. The Report of Senior's 1861 Commission contained many protests from government inspectors about the freedom of entry into teaching. According to them, a "mushroom growth" of private schools had occurred since the 1851 census of population. Dr. Hodgson complained, "when other occupations fail, even for a time, a private school can be opened, with no capital beyond the cost of a ticket in the window."²² Another protested that the private teachers had picked up their knowledge "promiscuously" and that several combined the trade of school-keeping with another.²³ It was thought that "none are too old, too poor, too ignorant, too feeble, too sickly, too unqualified in any or every way to regard themselves and to be regarded by others as unfit for school-keeping."²⁴

The above outline of the development of the policy problem in education in the century following Adam Smith, will, I think, help to place Nassau Senior's and J. S. Mill's special treatment of education in perspective.

In his celebrated chapter, "On the Grounds and Limits of the Laissez-Faire or Non Interference Principle," John Stuart Mill wrote, "Is the buyer always qualified to judge of the commodity? If not, the presumption in favour of the competition of the market does not apply to this case."²⁵

According to Mill, medicine was an ob-

²² *Commissioners Report* (1861), p. 94.

²³ Mr. Cumins reported from Plymouth: "Of the private schoolmasters in Devonport, one had been a blacksmith and afterwards an exciseman, another was a journeyman tanner, a third a clerk in a solicitor's office, a fourth (who was very successful in preparing lads for the competitive examination in the dockyards) keeps an evening school and works as a dockyard labourer, a fifth was a seaman, and others had been engaged in other callings" (*ibid.*, p. 93).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 953.

vious example of this sort of market failure. Even if the patient could be relied upon to purchase some minimum amount at his own expense and from his own free will, this would not necessarily imply "that the patient will select the *right* medicine without assistance." (*Italics supplied.*) Similarly with education: "The uncultivated cannot be competent judges of cultivation."²⁶ Long experience was necessary to appreciate education, and therefore the market could not adequately provide for it. Pecuniary speculation could not wait: "It must succeed rapidly or not at all."²⁷ Like Senior, Mill did not trust the average good sense of the parents, and obviously for similar reasons. Mill's opinion is thus shown to have been in striking contrast to Adam Smith's preference for private enterprise in the provision both of education and of medicine. Whereas J. S. Mill thought that the competitive market principle broke down in education because the customer was not a competent judge of his interests, Adam Smith had argued that the competitive market principle had not been allowed to operate properly in the first place due to the hindrance of endowment.

J. S. Mill acknowledged that endowments had hindered the development of education but thought that their effects could be improved by wise central administration. Certainly the endowment principle could not be abolished because it was one of the attributes of property:

the ownership of a thing cannot be looked upon as complete without the power of bestowing it, at death or during life, at the owner's pleasure; and all the reasons, which recommend that private property should exist, recommend *pro tanto* this extension of it.²⁸

Nevertheless, property in Mill's view was a means to an end and not itself the end. The use of it may conflict with the permanent

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 953.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 954. Pushed to its extreme, this argument would preclude the possibility of *any* entirely new product gaining a threshold.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

interests in society so there must be room for some judicious adjustment. Mill thought that a typical abuse of the power of bequest occurred

when a person who does the meritorious act of leaving property for public uses, attempts to prescribe the details of its application in perpetuity; when founding a place of education (for instance) he dictates, for ever, what doctrines shall be taught. It being impossible that any one should know what doctrines will be fit to be taught after he has been dead for centuries, the law ought not to give effect to such dispositions of property, unless subject to the perpetual revision (after a certain interval has elapsed) of a fitting authority.²⁹

It will be observed that Mill's complaint about endowments was not quite the same as Smith's. Smith had placed the main emphasis upon their alleged effect in blunting of competition. Mill's primary anxiety, on the other hand, was that the doctrines taught would become out of date. Smith considered this to be only a subordinate defect since if competition were restored it could be relied upon to see that among other things the "right" doctrines *were* taught.³⁰ Although Mill did not stipulate at this point the principle upon which the "right" doctrines should be selected, there can be no doubt that at the time of writing (1833) it was linked with the idea of some sort of middle class cultural paternalism.

Did the new kind of educational paternalism of Senior, Mill, and Chadwick reflect a natural adjustment of the principles of political economy to suit the changed environment and circumstances of the nineteenth century, or did it derive from the historical chance of personality and the accidents of political opportunity? Such a question in the last resort is unanswerable. Nevertheless, I wish to emphasize that there were several political economists who did persist in reaffirming Adam Smith's views even if it caused them much political unpopularity at the time. The most noticeable example

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See Lowe's answer to question 6607 in the *Report of the Schools Inquiry Commission* (1868).

was Robert Lowe, and I propose to conclude this article with a brief outline of the views of this nineteenth-century Gladstonian financier and economist which, so far, do not seem to have had the attention they deserve.³¹

It was to be expected that when such an avowed admirer of Adam Smith as Sir Robert Lowe became, in 1862, the vice president of the Committee of Council on Education (the office which James Kay had originally held) much friction and controversy was to follow. Lowe's opinions, for instance, followed Smith with especial devotion on the matter of endowed schools. Lowe felt that Smith's presumption that competition was necessary to overcome the natural desire of every man to live as much at his ease as he could, was sincerely intended as a *universal* principle. For Smith's principle was

true without any limitation of time or place, and can never by any change of circumstances become obsolete or inapplicable. . . . Those therefore who seek to work out education on the basis of endowments, deliberately reject a superior machine in order to avail themselves of an inferior one. There is no occupation more likely to degenerate into lifeless routine and meaningless repetition.³²

One obvious question arose, however. If endowed institutions became inefficient, could not ordinary commercial establishments compete them out of existence? Lowe, following Adam Smith's reasoning about the advantages of a merchant who trades with a bounty, contended that all sects, communities, and districts desired endowments

³¹ Dicey described Lowe as the last of the genuine Benthamites but this seems not to be the case where education is concerned. Chadwick could best be described as the last Benthamite representative on education while Lowe was the last true disciple of Adam Smith, at least on this subject. Another contemporary supporter of Adam Smith's type of reasoning was Herbert Spencer. Gladstone was impressed with the evidence of average parental behavior, and he approved only of marginal intervention by the state.

³² R. Lowe, *Middle Class Education: Endowment or Free Trade?* (1868), pp. 7-8.

because they were glad that the money of the founder would be employed

to discharge for them those obligations to their children which they would otherwise have to discharge themselves. . . . Their competition with private schools is not which shall provide the best instruction, but which shall give it at the cheapest rate, a contest in which the unendowed schools must always be defeated.³³

Lowe argued that an endowment, like a patent, appeared to be useful enough at the start. But in fact its monopoly power extended insidiously into the future, so undermining all the apparent good:

It can always undersell its competitor; and what is still worse, it can by the prospect of a disastrous and unfair competition prevent the existence of any competition at all. . . . What they actually do, we see, and for that they get full credit. What they prevent others from doing we do not see, and consequently do not reflect upon; but the agency of endowment is just as real in preventing better teaching than is teaching badly itself.³⁴

But it was on the question whether ordinary people were competent to choose education that Lowe, again following Smith, placed himself in the most politically unpopular position at a time when nineteenth-century education was becoming a possession shared between the government departments and the increasingly organized teaching profession. Lowe seems to have been the only witness in the Schools Inquiry Commission of 1868 to have put Smith's argument:

Chairman: "Should you have any apprehension that the parents, if left the sole or principal judges of the course of study to be pursued, might, from inadequate knowledge on those subjects, make a mistake; that they would prefer superficial accomplishments to a solid and well-grounded course of education?"

Lowe: "I think so; they are very liable to make mistakes, and they do constantly now; but I know of nothing else. I know no alternative between that and some minister of education or some educational board which should regulate it, which I think is abhorrent to the feelings and principles of this country. I myself see nothing for it but to make the parents of

the children the ministers of education, and to do everything you can to give them the best information as to what is good education, and where their children can be well taught, and to leave it to work itself out.

It was nevertheless John Stuart Mill's argument that triumphed in the Royal Commission's final report, which in its wording showed distinct signs of the direct influence of Mill's reigning treatise, the *Principles of Political Economy*.³⁵ The report recognized that the principle of supply and demand governed completely those private schools (i.e., uninspected and unsubsidized) which were also secular and unendowed. But it claimed that the principle failed in two respects:

it fails when the purchasers demand the wrong thing and it fails also when they are incompetent judges of the right thing. The utmost, that it could do in the matter of education, would be to supply, not what is best, but what the parents believe to be best.³⁶

The report found the parents wanting in both respects. First, they demanded what was "showy and transitory" rather than what was "solid and permanent." There was nothing to raise the child above "the traditions of his own home." "An uneducated father generally has a low conception of education."³⁷ His child would be taken away from school too early and would therefore not rise above his father's tastes. Second, the parents were not competent judges:

Now it is quite certain that it cannot be said that the majority of parents are really good judges of education. They are good judges of certain things and they press these particular things, until the whole teaching is dislocated; but of the best means of training the mind, and of strengthening the faculties, they are no judges at all.³⁸

³⁵ This report dealt with the education of the "middle class." The Newcastle Report of 1861, upon which Senior sat, was concerned with popular education. The later Clarendon Report dealt with the "public" schools: Eton, Winchester, etc.

³⁶ *Report of the Schools Inquiry Commission* (1868), pp. 306-7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Furthermore, the report complained that the parents pressed unduly those subjects which, for instance, were of practical use in business life such as commercial arithmetic.

However, the Schools Inquiry Report did admit that the public (i.e., subsidized and inspected) schools were less dynamic and inventive. Lowe was quick to remind them of this:

It is, in the opinion of the Commissioners, in private schools rather than in public that we are to look for improvements and the discovery of new methods. That is in private schools there is progress, there is power of adaptation to new circumstances.³⁹

For the report agreed that unendowed private schools offered a field for enthusiasts who could not work in "the trammels of the recognised system of the day." They were the men who most often made improvements and discovered new methods which the state schools could hardly do. Such men were often dogmatic but their enthusiasm made up for this:

One man holds that natural science ought to be the one subject of instruction; another will teach nothing but algebra and the Bible. Such theories in ordinary hands are grievous blunders. But the enthusiastic believer often succeeds in spite of his theories, and turns out pupils if not already knowing all that is necessary yet capable of rapidly acquiring it, and possessed meanwhile of a passion for learning which is almost worth all knowledge that could have been learnt.⁴⁰

The commission also praised the private schools on another account. Although it thought that the desire of the parents to have each child educated according to his own peculiar needs was "unreasonably exaggerated," yet it felt that there were undoubtedly some boys who could only be catered for by the "individual" teaching which the unendowed private system could give.

Robert Lowe also agreed with Adam

³⁹ R. Lowe, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ *Report of the Schools Inquiry Commission*, p. 304.

Smith that the supply of teachers could best be left to the free market. The School Inquiry Commission of 1868, which called in Lowe as a witness, informed him that several other witnesses "of extensive knowledge of the feeling of schoolmasters throughout the country" were suggesting a register of bona fide schoolmasters. This itself indicated that the opinion of the "orthodox" teachers had already become fully articulate. Their "evidence" could be much more organized and readily consulted by official Commissions than the scattered opinion of parents. Lowe, again obviously aware that the political tide was against him, relentlessly persisted with his own reasoning. The schoolmaster organizations wanted to have a register of their own members compiled as a first step in the direction of being placed in the same position as surgeons and apothecaries. Accordingly, they advocated also that all recruits to the "profession" should pass an examination that would license them to teach. The penalty for teaching without a license was to be similar to that in the case of unqualified surgeons: that they should have no legal mode for recovering payment for their services. Asked his opinion on this, Lowe replied flatly that he was entirely against the suggestion.

Chairman: "I suppose you would not consider that the educational profession should be put on the same grounds as the medical profession?"

Lowe: "I myself doubt exceedingly the policy of the Medical Act. There are plenty of quacks inside."⁴¹

This reaction was, of course, exactly in accordance with the views of Adam Smith, who, as we have seen, had declared himself in even stronger terms on this same matter of occupational licensure and had used precisely the same example of the medical profession. On this issue, at least, Lowe was supported by another witness to the 1868 Schools Commission, a Mr. Frearson. Frearson questioned the ability of an inbred academic teaching profession to make suitable

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Q. 6617.

innovations from its protected position within education:

It is the nature of teachers to recommend that which they know best themselves. To recommend anything else is to impose on themselves the trouble of going to school again. . . . Besides there is nothing in the occupation of a teacher which tends to give that large acquaintance with men and things which enables a man to discover what are the wants of society in respect of instruction, and how those wants may be supplied. Nor has the State any peculiar means of forming a right conclusion on this subject.

The issues which divided the political economists on the subject of education and which have been examined in this article are among the most difficult that any free society has to decide. But they are issues which are only too easily swamped by dogma and political expediency. The duty of a government to protect children from ignorance is a proposition with which most people would agree. But it is easily forgotten that, insofar as such a proposition points towards policy at all, the suggested improvements must be envisaged in the realm of the politically possible. The state is not a dis-

embodied abstraction and its officials are presumably just as fallible as other human beings. The choice of educational supervisors for children must therefore always be regarded as a choice between imperfect mortals. For this reason we conclude this article by giving the last word to Robert Lowe. However much one may disagree with the final value judgment contained in this last pronouncement, the framework of alternatives in which Lowe expresses it can hardly be rejected:

Parents have one great superiority over the Government or the administrators of endowments. Their faults are mainly the corrigible faults of ignorance, not of apathy and prejudice. They have and feel the greatest interest in doing that which is for the real benefit of their children. They are the representatives of the present, the living and acting energy of a nation, which has ever owed its sure and onward progress rather to individual efforts than to public control and direction. They have the wish to arrive at a true conclusion, the data are before them, they must be the judges in the last resort; why should we shrink from making them judges at once?⁴²

⁴² R. Lowe, *op. cit.*, p. 12.