

SCHOOL UNIFORM

—and Other Things

Written for "The Listener" by
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WHEN I lived in Canada I had several arguments on the subject of school uniform. Remembering that in the days of my youth in England certain schools required their pupils to wear a certain type of uniform, I used to take note of the varied clothing worn by the Canadian secondary school girls and boys and wonder if, perhaps, it would be better for all children to conform to a certain style of dress.

During the depression, for instance, there was a marked difference between the clothing of children from families hard hit by short time and unemployment, and those from families unaffected. On the surface it would seem that one standard and type of clothing would have eliminated any taint of class consciousness, would have done away with that sense of inferiority that haunts an adolescent who is less well dressed than the average.

Then one day, while fulfilling part of my obligations as a member of the local Board of Education, I attended a school assembly period and watched the girls and boys file into the assembly hall of a technical school. It was a large school with a roll of approximately 900 pupils, a fair percentage of them from outlying farming communities that had been hard hit by the depression. For many of them there was only one way they could get a secondary education. They came into the city and worked as housemaids and baby minders for their room and board. Somehow or other their parents scraped together the necessary money for their school books, but I am positive that an outlay of from £15 to £20, such as is required for the average New Zealand school uniform, would have been totally beyond them. Since the school leaving age in Canada is sixteen years, had school uniform been compulsory, these country children would have remained in their rural schools working their difficult way through secondary school textbooks as best they could.

I HAVE often wondered how New Zealand parents managed to provide their children with school uniform during the depression. And I hope no-one will tell me, as I have been told on more than one occasion, that there was no depression in New Zealand, because I now live in a district that was hard hit and where many of the young people still bear the mental and physical scars of scarcity.

Apart from the question of cost, however, I used to think how nice it would be if all children attending a school could be dressed in a suitable uniform. So neat, so clean, such a spirit of—well, belonging, as it were. Looking back, however, I don't believe it would have worked. Canadian children, and Canadian parents are too independent to be told what must and what must not be worn. I remember the struggles the

principals and teachers of the secondary schools used to have to stop the girls from using lipstick and rouge. I don't think they ever quite succeeded. And after having lived in New Zealand for some years I think that perhaps the Canadian spirit of independence was a good thing.

I SINCERELY hope no-one will misunderstand me if I say that perhaps there is a little too much repression of



"I wonder if it is good psychology . . ."

the young in New Zealand. I remember being partly amused and partly shocked soon after my arrival here when in a public park I offered to help a prim little miss on to a merry-go-round in the children's corner. "Oh," she said, looking at me with big, round eyes, "but I'm NOT ALLOWED!" I have found out since that there are quite a number of things that New Zealand children are "not allowed" to do, things that would be taken as quite normal procedure in other countries.

Getting back to the question of school uniform, I wonder if it is good psychology to put girls just coming into the bloom of young womanhood into heavy navy blue serge gym tunics and white blouses with stiff, uncomfortable, Peter Pan collars? It seems to me that at the age of say, 14, the average girl has reached the stage where the matter of dress is of prime importance. A young girl from the age of 14 to 18 years is going through her most sensitive period. She feels that she is growing up, and yet the tendency in New Zealand schools is towards the repression of all her instincts of self adornment. She must wear the school uniform. In winter she must wear those horrible long black stockings, and what girl can feel attractive in black cotton stockings?

Generally speaking, our secondary school lessons in deportment, good grooming and good speaking are excellent where they do not become restrictive, but I think that our girls would benefit by being allowed to wear their own or their parents' choice in school clothing, or if we must have a uniform, surely we could devise one that allowed the sun to get at some part of the bare skin other than the face.

(continued on next page)

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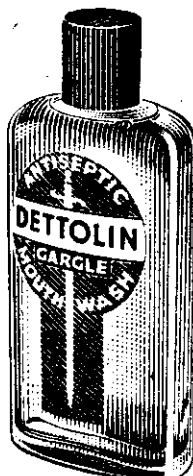
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