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Education and Reconstruction (1)

A PROBLEM—AND A WARNING

This is the first of a series of three talks given recently from Station 3AR by J. D. G. MEDLEY, M.A., Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University. Although he was addressing himself to Australian listeners, what Mr. Medley has to say applies also to this country, where there are substantially the same problems. We shall publish the other two talks in the series later

IF it is true that we are in for some kind of a new world after the war, whether we like it or not—and only the willfully blind can doubt it—it seems reasonably certain that we ought to be in for some kind of new education as well. Education has always lagged behind real life, and in periods of slowly changing conditions that hasn't mattered so very much: the gap was never dangerously wide. But our lot has been cast at a time when conditions are changing, and are going on changing with quite unprecedented rapidity, and there is a very definite limit to the width of the gap that can safely exist between education and the contemporary scene. The public is gradually, but only gradually, awakening to the fact that our education is, in the literal sense of the phrase, behind the times, and that we cannot any longer afford to run the grave risks that this state of thing entails. The object of these talks is to arouse your active interest in a problem that concerns us in the acutest possible manner.

Don't Expect Miracles

One word of preliminary warning. Education has a great—probably the greatest—contribution to make to any plan of long-term reconstruction. The better future to which we are all turning hopeful, if apprehensive, eyes cannot be brought about solely by the formulae of economists, as some people (not, to do them justice, economists), are apt to think. There has got to be reconstruction of persons as well as of social machinery. On the other hand, it is no good expecting miracles from education. In a world that knew exactly what it wanted or that lay at the feet of a dictator, whether benevolent or otherwise, a very few years of intensive education for all, in accordance with their capacities, could bring about a transformation in any desired direction, as Hitler's Germany bears witness. But in the immediate future, it will be the fate of the educator to continue to struggle against short-sighted views and interests, and there is no probability whatsoever that he will be given a blank cheque to remould the scene to his heart's desire. And in many ways this is probably just as well. Much as I would like to feel able to do so, I cannot confidently predict either that reconstruction will be in the main the work of educators or assert that it would be likely to be very satisfactory if it was. We may hope gradually to acquire a somewhat more authoritative voice in affairs than we have been able to muster in the past, but we will continue to toil panting after the status quo, though the interval between pursuer and pursued will, I believe, grow less as time goes on. The attitude of the public towards education is lukewarm, to put it mildly. There are only the rudiments of a common front among educators themselves. In England there has just

been produced the detail of a long-term plan covering the whole of the educational facilities of the country, and designed to provide for everybody the necessary equipment to enable them to function as citizens in the post-war world. In Australia we are not yet ready to lift the making of such a plan above the tumult and shouting of short-term political discussion, which means in effect that no such plan is possible. Until it becomes possible, we shall go on educating from hand to mouth, and continue to lose our way between them in a welter of largely unprofitable discussion.

Contempt for Learning

Archibald MacLeish, the well-known writer and librarian of Congress, recently delivered an address in Milwaukee from which I quote the following passage:—

There was never a time, I think, in the history of this country when learning was held cheaper than it is to-day—or when the men of learning and of letters had less honour. A hundred and fifty years ago in America, or 100 years ago, or 50, a man of learning was honoured for his learning. To-day, to be an intellectual is to be an object of suspicion in the public mind. To be a professor is to invite attack in a public service, any public undertaking. To be an artist is to live beyond the reach of serious consideration.

That is a strong statement, but its strength is deliberate, and designed to throw into strong relief the main thesis of the speech, which is that our enemies may well lose the war on the battlefield and yet win it eventually in the domain of the human spirit against which they have waged and are waging a campaign just as ferocious and even more insidious than that which they are carrying on against the armies of the United Nations. On May 10, 1932, there was staged in all the great cities of Germany the celebrated holocaust of books banned by the Nazi regime, when tens of thousands of volumes containing the accumulated wisdom of the finest spirits of mankind were burnt by shouting crowds, and proscribed for all Germans as containing matter dangerous to the development of the new German outlook on the future. It was on that day that their intellectual war against mankind was first openly declared, and ever since that day they have waged it by every conceivable means. That it had some success nobody can deny—indeed the passage that I have just read to you proves that very clearly: that it may have more success in the difficult times that must come upon us unless we are prepared to meet the danger boldly cannot be doubted except by those who refuse to face realities. Let us consider for a moment how we in Australia stand in this regard.

Could It Happen Here?

We tend to complacency about ourselves, and there are many among us who would dismiss with contempt all possibility of any extinction of the lights of our democracy. They would be unwise to do so. Compare our position

(continued on next page)

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