

The Government's educational policy can be understood only if one grasps the full significance of this table. At the beginning of this century (for which period, unfortunately, comparable figures are not available) the picture was a fairly simple one. The primary schools, by and large, aimed at giving to the great bulk of the population a training in the three Rs, the "fundamentals." Most of them could not expect to have any formal schooling beyond this bare minimum. A relatively small number, rigidly selected by scholarship, could win for themselves a secondary education. (Parents who could afford it, of course, could buy a secondary education for their children.) Since the secondary pupils were, except for those who paid fees, specially selected for their academic ability, it was quite natural that the curriculum of the secondary schools should be highly academic and their main purpose be the preparation of students for entrance to the University. Even by 1917 only about one-third of the primary-school leavers were going to post-primary school, and there was no great pressure to reform the secondary curriculum.

The situation is now totally altered. Eighty-five per cent. of the primary-school population are going on to post-primary school. The present Government would not claim full credit for this increase. As the above table shows, it has been a constant tendency under a series of Governments throughout the century, although the process has been speeded up over the past ten years. In his report as Minister of Education in 1939, the Prime Minister wrote: "The Government's objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers. So far is this from being a mere pious platitude that the full acceptance of the principle will involve the reorientation of the education system."

It was obvious to the Prime Minister then, and it has become increasingly obvious since, that you cannot give to 85 per cent. of the population the same kind of post-primary education that was originally devised for the specially selected and gifted few. The increased number of technical high schools met part of the need for a post-primary education of a less academic type. But that was not enough. A large number of children in secondary schools and district high schools were still being compelled to take a traditional academic course for which their abilities did not fit them. The work of the schools was still largely dominated by the demands of the University Entrance Examination, although only a relatively small proportion of the pupils had any intention of entering the University.

So began the series of changes in the post-primary schools that have now become fairly well known, though they are as yet by no means commonly understood. The introduction of accrediting, the substitution of the School Certificate Examination for the University Entrance Examination as the ordinary measure of a satisfactory secondary education, the evolving of the new curriculum with its "common core" for all pupils and its wide range of optional subjects, the giving of secondary-school bursaries, the provision of increased facilities for æsthetic and practical activities in secondary schools, the establishment of a vocational guidance service—all were a part of the attempt to provide for 85 per cent. of the population a kind of post-primary schooling fitted to their widely varying abilities and needs.

The important thing to realize is that these changes were introduced not for any doctrinaire reasons or as the result of new theories in education, but as a matter of necessity to meet a new practical situation created by the new post-primary-school population. Like all new developments, these changes in the post-primary curriculum have brought their own special difficulties, but they are as nothing to the problems that would have resulted from making no changes, from encouraging large numbers of children to go on to a secondary education that was designed not for them but for the selected, academic few.