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Author(s): William R. Anson

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PROVISION OF FOOD FOR SCHOOL-CHILDREN IN PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

THE subject of the feeding of children in our public elementary schools has engaged the attention of the House of Commons on several occasions in the last two years, but it cannot be said that the discussions which have taken place throw much light on an undoubtedly difficult problem.

The sentimentalist, the Socialist, the economist—each has his say. Pity for the hungry child, anxiety lest the race should be allowed to deteriorate, fear of diminishing parental responsibility and breaking up home life, desire to make the neglectful parent do his duty—all these admirable but conflicting sentiments obscure in their collision the real issue. I would set aside the extreme view, put forward by some, that the State should, through the ratepayer or the taxpayer, provide free meals as a necessary sequence of free education. One reason against such a course is that meals would soon be found to be only one of several requirements. Anyone who goes into a school in a very poor district in cold or wet weather would say at once that the condition of some of the children's clothes and boots is as great an obstacle to the cheerful pursuit of their studies as a deficiency of meals. A pair of sodden boots on a cold, wet day are as likely to benumb the child's faculties and undermine its health as a temporary lack of food.

Another reason is that the great majority of parents are perfectly able and willing to feed and clothe their children, and that it is hard on the taxpayer, and harder still on the ratepayer, to be required, at his own cost, to give to people that which they

do not ask for, in most cases do not want, and in very many would repudiate with some natural pride and indignation.

And, lastly, the general provision of meals would do harm in so far as it would appreciably diminish the influence of home life. No one can dispute the importance of raising the standard of home life among the poor, and in their life the family meal is a kindly social influence not to be disregarded. But, setting aside the question of a universal State provision of meals in our schools, there remains on the part of those who speak most earnestly and even passionately on one side or other of the subject a provoking disinclination to answer certain plain questions. Are no children to be supplied with meals, under any circumstances, or are all to be supplied, or only some? If some, who is to make the selection? And again, who is to pay? I may add that there is an equally provoking disinclination to inquire into the extent of the evil, and into its causes; or even to consider whether some of the most distressing features visible in our schools in poor districts are really caused by present and immediate hunger. Apart from those who form general conclusions *à priori*, the process by which the advocate for "doing something" arrives at his results is very often of this sort. As a sympathetic visitor he inspects a school in a very poor quarter of London or some other large town: he is struck by the listless and unhealthy appearance of the children; he learns that three or four have come to school without breakfast, and that some others are uncertain as to what, if anything, awaits them by way of dinner. He goes away impressed with a sense of twofold hardship, that the children should have to learn under such conditions, and that the taxpayer should have to pay for teaching which can bear so little fruit.

He might have learnt, perhaps, if he had pressed his inquiries further, that, in the very school which he had visited, breakfasts and midday meals were supplied to a large percentage of the children in attendance; that those who were breakfastless were so because they came late for the school breakfast. If he put himself into communication with the relieving officer he might learn that the cases in which parents were unable or unwilling to provide meals for their children were comparatively few; and if he inquired a little further still into the conditions under which the children live he would realise that their unhealthy appearance is not due to immediate hunger, but to consistently unwholesome feeding from infancy onwards, to late hours, to dirt, and to insanitary and ill-ventilated dwellings.

It is not often that such inquiries as these are made. Not only does the visitor assume that the conditions which he has observed are due to poverty and starvation; he goes on to generalise boldly from one or more such visits, and assumes that these conditions, if not universal, are very widely prevalent. How often has the Johanna Street School, or the Bristol experience of Dr. Macnamara, done duty to give point and pathos to a speech on the forlorn condition of the hungry child?

On the other hand, we are confronted with the severely orthodox economists, whose views, if pushed to their logical conclusion, would perhaps startle themselves. We have, no doubt, in our large towns, sections of the population who, without deliberate unkindness, are thriftless, ignorant, and neglectful of their children. If these children are sent from home without breakfast, or find no dinner ready for them at midday, are they to remain hungry, or to acquire hopelessly perverted appetites, while this part of our population learns by some unexplained process the charm of home life and the nature of parental responsibility? And then again, in the case of parents who do their best for their children, there may come times when employment suddenly ceases and acute distress sets in. Is no provision to be made for such times?

It would be better to admit that the phenomenon of the underfed child is a reality, that the difficulty which it occasions is not universal, nor even widespread, and is often intermittent in the places where it occurs; and that we should do well to put aside generalisations and speculations, and sentiment and political economy, and try to ascertain what, if any, are the conditions under which it is desirable to provide meals for children attending our elementary schools, how such children are to be selected, how the meals are to be provided, and who is to pay for them.

First, we may consider the class of children whose parents are selfishly callous or selfishly neglectful. The children have no breakfast ready for them before they go to school, nor any sure prospect of a dinner in the middle of the day. These are the cases which should be met by the order and circular of the Local Government Board issued in April, 1905, whereby the Guardians were empowered to supply prompt relief and to treat the cost of meals provided as a loan recoverable under sections 56 and 58 of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834.¹ These sections are only applicable to children whose fathers are alive, and the remedy

¹ See *Report on Medical Inspection and Feeding of Children attending Public Elementary Schools*, Vol. i, p. 83, and Appendix iv.

needs extension, but the order has had a salutary effect. Still, there is wanting the machinery for finding the children who are thus neglected and providing the meals as they are required.

In this group of cases the parent can pay, and should be made to pay. There is another class of case in which the parent would make no difficulty about payment. Sometimes both parents are out at work at the hour of the midday meal. Where a widow is left with a young family she is often obliged to be absent from home during the day, earning money for their maintenance. If a small sum is given to the children to buy a meal the chances are that it will be spent on sweetmeats or cigarettes, or, at any rate, not laid out to the best advantage; nor is the parcel of cold food which the child sometimes brings to the school to be commended as very appetising or digestible. There are cases in which the convenience of the parent and the proper nourishment of the child would alike be met by the provision of meals obtainable by purchase and delivery of a ticket.

Lastly, there are the cases of genuine occasional poverty when the breadwinner is thrown out of work and there is not money enough in the house to provide meals for the children. Here, no doubt, difficulties must arise. What are the conditions which justify the gratuitous provision of meals? There must be gradations of poverty both in extent and duration. There must be a point on one side at which the need for assistance diminishes so far as to justify its withdrawal; while, on the other, the distress may assume so permanent and hopeless a character as to make it necessary to invoke the aid of the Poor Law.

From what has been said it will be seen that the class of children for whom it is desirable to provide meals, though variable in number, is limited; and that the class for whom meals might properly be provided gratuitously, though not necessarily the most limited, is certainly the most variable.

But if two out of the three classes who receive meals are able to pay for them, and if payment can be obtained from their parents, the cost of provision ought not to be more than voluntary and charitable agencies can meet.

I have given reasons why local authorities should not be permitted to provide meals for all, or even for some. The wastefulness of providing free meals for those who are quite willing to pay for them is obvious: so is the hardship on the poorer class of rate-payers, if they were called on to pay for feeding the children of persons who were better off than themselves. But if a limited class only are to receive gratuitous meals, the risk of throwing upon

the local authority the duty of provision, or the duty of selection, becomes a very serious one. At every municipal election a question would be raised whether the Council or the Education Committee took a sufficiently liberal view of their duties in the matter. The views of successive Councils would expand under the genial influence of electioneering promises; inquiry would slacken; those who could pay would feel aggrieved when they saw the children of parents, not poorer, but less conscientious, than themselves, in receipt of free breakfasts and dinners; voluntary agencies would no longer be able to stand the strain upon their resources; and the collapse of a system financed by voluntary effort but controlled by local authority would lead to an irresistible demand for power to be given to local authorities generally, not merely to determine the selection but to provide the meals. We should find, too late, that we had blundered into a system of free meals provided out of the rates.

It would seem that voluntary agencies are able to find the necessary funds. Of this the Report of the Committee on the Medical Inspection and Feeding of Children leaves little doubt, and if the gratuitous provision of meals is limited to the case of the children whose parents are in temporary distress, if those parents who could pay and would pay were allowed to pay, and if those who could pay and would not pay were made to pay, there should be no doubt of the capacity of voluntary effort to meet every need. For we should never forget in dealing with this subject that the circumstances which call for gratuitous provision of meals are not universal. Not merely are they not universal: it may almost be true to say that they are limited to large towns and to certain quarters of large towns. But one of the difficulties which presents itself in dealing with these conditions is that they are not merely local, but are often intermittent; that in certain localities poverty is a permanent trouble, while others are subject to periodical or occasional outbreaks of distress.

The weakness of voluntary agencies is their lack of permanence and of organisation. They need a system which would enable them to economise their resources and apply them promptly as occasion demands; and they need the means of inquiry into the urgency of individual cases, and the capacity of the parent to make the necessary provision, at home or elsewhere, for the children's meals. They need coherence and stability, the avoidance of overlapping, and the machinery for selection.

It is impossible to doubt that—given access to the best sources of information—a voluntary society would conduct the necessary

inquiries better than a local authority. The inquiries of a local authority would, at the best, be purely official; they might be evaded, or resented, they might be perfunctory, and in any event their methods or their results might form undesirable topics for discussion at every municipal election. Above all, a local authority would be spending money, whether of the ratepayers, or of subscribers, with the traditional freedom accorded to local authorities. The agents of a voluntary society would be administering the funds of the society to which they belonged, and it may be presumed that they would be more careful in their expenditure than a local authority would be, whether it were dealing with the money of the ratepayers or the contributions of charitable persons.

But a voluntary society which formed itself into relief committees or guilds of help, covering the ground of all necessitous areas, and conducting the necessary inquiries for ascertaining the proper recipients of meals, might effect useful results which would extend far beyond the mere process of inquiry. The knowledge which might thus be acquired by kindly, helpful people of the conditions under which the poor live would create a continuous interest in the welfare of individual families; friendly relations would spring up which would justify counsel and advice in matters of domestic economy. Thus, insensibly, the standard of home life might be raised, and the ill-fed, ill-nurtured child would become a less common feature in our poorer schools. Timely help, direct or indirect, might be given in starting boys and girls in life, and we might get some approach to the Elberfeld system which prevails in some of the great towns of Germany. We may not find it possible to establish here, in completeness, a system which seems to profit alike those who give and those who receive the help which it involves, but we might get some of its results reproduced in the poor quarters of our great cities, and to such agencies, rather than to legislation, or even to the administrative work of local authorities, stimulated by the Board of Education, must we look for the regeneration of the home life of the very poor.

It remains then to consider whether we could establish such relations between voluntary agencies and local authorities as would ensure the permanence of these agencies, would make them available for all cases of need, and would give them access to such means of information as would enable them to choose the right cases for assistance, whether or no the parent was ultimately compelled to pay.

In France the *Caisse des Ecoles* furnishes an instance of a voluntary society attached to municipal institutions, with a constitution in each case approved by the municipality, rendering accounts and receiving for the provision of meals in the *Cantines Scolaires* a subvention larger than would be desirable in this country, where voluntary assistance is more readily forthcoming.

The Committee on Physical Deterioration, following the lines of the Royal Commission on Physical Training (Scotland), recommended that under certain circumstances local authorities might be empowered to provide kitchens, rooms, and appliances for the provision of meals, relying upon voluntary agencies to find the material; and proposed, "by enabling the school authority to supply and organise the machinery, while the benevolent furnished the material," to create "a working adjustment between the privileges of charity and the obligations of the community."

These proposals suggest the means of bringing the two agencies into connection. Sometimes it may be convenient and not undesirable that meals should be prepared and supplied on the school premises, which even in the case of voluntary schools are, during school hours, at the disposal of the local authority; sometimes it might be necessary to hire premises for kitchens, or for dining-rooms, or for both purposes, and to fit them up with suitable appliances; on very rare occasions it might be necessary to build.

A local authority might be empowered to give their assistance to a voluntary society if the latter furnished satisfactory evidence of solvency and permanency, if its constitution and general regulations were such as might receive the formal approval of the authority, and especially if its executive committee were necessarily representative, not merely of the subscribers, but of the local authority, of school managers, and of the guardians. Working through a committee thus constituted, a society might act upon information derived from the best sources, the teachers, the school attendance officers, and the relieving officer.¹ We should no longer see voluntary agencies acting sometimes in ignorance of one another's exertions, and so wasting their energies, acting on insufficient information, and so misapplying their resources, or bringing their efforts to an end when the need of provision is still existing.

Meals should be provided on the presentation of a ticket, and tickets might be purchased by parents who were away from home

¹ Systematic medical inspection of our public elementary schools would be of immense value for this purpose, and indeed for many other purposes. But, as yet, this urgent need remains unsatisfied.

during the times for meals, or by guardians who were called on to give prompt assistance to cases of distress arising from parental neglect. They might also be supplied by the society to those children who were ascertained to be proper cases for gratuitous help, and thus no invidious distinction would be made between those whose parents did and those whose parents did not pay for the meals supplied. It may be said that the connection with municipal organisation would kill private charity, and the proportion which private subscription bears to municipal subvention in the Parliamentary return, which gives an account of the *Cantines Scolaires*, is quoted in support of this view. I have reason to doubt the accuracy of these figures, and I cannot believe that if our great towns took up the question in the way that I have suggested local patriotism would fail to secure continuity in the work.

These are but suggestions for the treatment of a question which needs to be regarded on its practical side, and with the facts kept in full view. We do not want to put upon local authorities the invidious and dangerous duty of selecting the children who are to be fed; nor do we want to incur the needless and wasteful expense of enabling them to feed all. We cannot trust altogether, in a matter which needs constant care, to the unstable and sometimes ill-informed action of voluntary societies. But we need the help of both, and above all of the latter. Is it too much to hope that we may devise some method for the joint action of the two?

WILLIAM R. ANSON