

OPENING ADDRESS : THIRTY-NINTH CONFERENCE OF HEADMASTERS AND
HEADMISTRESSES OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS OF SOUTH AFRICA,
HELD AT GRAHAMSTOWN FROM 6 TO 9 AUGUST 1985

Fellow Educators, Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe I may be forgiven a certain sense of awe as I have the temerity to stand before an assemblage of some sixty Headmasters and that endangered species, Headmistresses. I have not yet reached those advanced years when vivid recollections of schooldays have receded from memory. My apprehension is increased when I spy amongst your numbers one whom I had the honour to serve as a fag. A sensible collective noun would help me to place your exalted status into perspective. When my colleagues and I foregather as the Committee of University Principals the problem is simple: we are a Lack of Principals. In your case the best I can manage is to dip into my meagre stock of classical learning and refer to you as a Hydra of Heads.

On a previous occasion when you met in Grahamstown (in 1977 I believe it was), I took as my theme when I addressed you the importance of Religious Instruction. It seemed to me that your charges should be made more theologically literate, since most of you have denominational affiliations. I still believe that to be important, but I intend to refrain on this occasion from offering you any gratuitous advice on that or any other topic. Still less do I propose to criticise you, although that is sometimes fashionable in certain quarters, who would have it that you are elitist, inward-looking, lackeys of your capitalist masters, wanting in political courage, and the like. We South Africans are sometimes too prone to a certain masochism, in that we are overly influenced by all the odium that is so unstintingly poured out upon us. Certainly we are guilty of a

great many sins, but let us, after due self-examination and meditation issue our own mea culpa, and keep in perspective the tua culpa of the outside world. An honest acknowledgement of our own fault will supply us with the self-confidence to begin to amend our ways.

I intend rather this morning to praise you, not as you might legitimately anticipate, for the excellence of your teaching or even for the prowess of your sporting achievements. Further, my praise is not primarily directed to the great many boys and girls who have over the years left your tender, loving care to proceed to Rhodes University. I am indeed grateful for the part they have played in our corporate life, and proud to count myself and my two daughters among such company. As our Vice-Principal, Professor Brommert has already intimated to you, as of March 1985 some 428 of our present students listed one of your members as being their last school attended. If one adds to that a further 317 who attended private secondary schools ostensibly not members of your conference, then 745, or a little under one Rhodes student in four attended a private school. I venture to suggest that this is the highest percentage in South Africa, and possibly one of the highest in the world.

My real purpose in praising you is a far more fundamental one. I praise you for your continued existence. I understand that there is no specific theme to this conference. Being is a universal theme, and so I am on safe ground in praising you for your being. That in spite of all adversity, the ravages of inflation, the decline in standards and the, until recently, universal trend towards greater centralisation and ever more encroaching government pervasiveness, you have continued in existence, is a great tribute to you and the parents who have so faithfully supported you. That trend is now changing, and if you can

but hold out for a few more arduous years, the tide will unquestionably turn in your favour. Indeed, the initial signs are already to be discerned.

Until comparatively recently, certainly as measured in historical terms, the functions of government were, by present day standards, modest in the extreme. Rulers in general felt that they had served their subjects well if they could protect them from the grosser consequences of external aggression and internal crime. The health, education, housing and general social welfare of a population were until the middle of the nineteenth century most definitely not the concern of government. People were expected, aided by a far more extensive network of private charitable support than is generally appreciated, through self-help, individual or mutual, to fend for themselves in these matters. As the celebrated Nobel prize economist, Milton Friedman, points out in his book "Free to Choose", the first compulsory school legislation was that of the State of Massachusetts in 1852. In Britain it was not until 1870 that a system of state schools was established, but only in 1880 was attendance in elementary schools made compulsory, while fees continued to be levied until 1891. These steps did not come about through parental pressure, but rather through the efforts of teachers, administrators and well meaning intellectuals. It is also ironic, says Friedman, that at the time of the enactment of these laws, privately financed education was already reaching virtually the whole of the population.

What I have said about education applies with equal force to medicine, housing, transport and other government operated, and funded social services. At first government endeavours were depicted as helping the underdog, and were comparatively modest in scale. The traumatic

events of the Great Depression and World War II had an enormous effect on the scope of operations. Individual people, demoralised by the cataclysmic scale of these disasters, lost the self-confidence to manage for themselves and were grateful to leave matters in the hands of apparently benevolent governments. What was definitely not foreseen was the expansion of government activity, and the vast army of, by the nature of things, not overly talented functionaries required to run the machinery.

Things have now reached such a pass that in the USA, of every welfare dollar spent, 85 cents are required to fund the apparatchiks, and only 15 cents reaches the intended recipients. Inevitably the standard of service deteriorates, to the extent that many recipients, in spite of the fact that the official service is "free", are willing to turn to other means of obtaining a better quality service. A fascinating book, Megatrends, by John Naisbitt describes some interesting new analytic techniques, employed to establish how people in the USA are reacting to these circumstances. One such technique is content analysis, whereby the column-inch content of local newspapers is scrutinised to ascertain what matters are of primary interest to the readers.

Some of the results are indeed surprising. Naisbitt has identified what he calls ten megatrends. One is that ordinary citizens are becoming increasingly disillusioned with institutional help, and are turning to mutual self-help. In the educational sphere, the plunging standards in the publically financed schools are sending enrollments in private schools soaring. Some more radically minded parents have gone even further and are educating their children at home. One

estimate quoted by Naisbitt puts the number of families educating their children at home at 10 000, with the figures escalating rapidly.

The surrender of so many social services into government hands stems ultimately, to my mind, from a massive failure of the charitable and noble impulses in man. It is not only a question of funding, but also of a sense of commitment and private responsibility. Those of us with a strongly developed sense of history know full well that it was not always so. The phenomenon is only a century, or at most, two centuries old. There was, for example, a famous hospital in Genoa which survived for three centuries or more, right up until about the mid-nineteenth century, by observing quite literally, the famous Biblical maxim, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself". At the end of each day whatever supplies were in surplus were distributed to the poor. The community never failed: every day for 300 years enough was supplied to the hospital to keep it going. Lest that be regarded as an utterly impractical idea, let us remind ourselves that it is exactly on this principle that Buddhist monks operate to this day.

As soon as such services fall into government hands they are performed by people doing a job rather than living out a vocation. Inevitably they are less zealous and frugal. Economies of scale are attempted in order to compensate for the loss of frugality. Larger and larger organisational structures are created, until they acquire a momentum of their own. Local community interest is elbowed aside and people immediately involved feel that they have lost control. Decisions are taken far away from the scene of operations, with great loss of empathy for individual circumstances. The looked-for economies of scale do not materialize. Structures such as individual schools

expand in size far beyond the optimum. Vandalism and lack of discipline become problems. The natural checks and balances of the biological world do not unfortunately serve as a limit. For example, if an elephant were to grow to twice its size it could never raise itself up onto its feet. On the other hand, if a high school doubles in size to 1 200 or even 1 800 pupils it does not cease to function: it merely functions less effectively.

In contrast to this dismal scenario, which we merely have to look about us, not so much in communities like Grahamstown fortunately, but in the massive metropolitan areas to observe daily, the private schools are performing a vital service to the community, merely by continuing to be. You demonstrate in particular that large bureaucratic educational systems are not a sine qua non of a good educational delivery system. Parents, staff and Councils feel that their contributions still matter. What is an example in the educational sphere specifically can also ultimately influence the way we choose to consider medicine, housing transport, recreation, cultural institutions and the like.

It is frequently argued that such a system can only work for the fortunate few, and that the great majority of people are unable to provide the means for their own education. Government intervention, and the consequent massive increases in taxation are unavoidable, it is claimed. There are really two issues involved here: the funding and the management. It may well be necessary for government to provide the funding, but is it necessary for it to provide the operational management as well?

Let me illustrate the dichotomy by pinpointing the essential difference between your institutions and mine. In your case virtually all the income is derived from private sources, mainly fees. The university indeed charges fees as well, but the lion's share of income, of the order of 80%, comes from the public exchequer. In that sense we are definitely not private. As far as the management of the institution is concerned, our Councils are virtually as autonomous as yours, - in hiring personnel, determining curricula and in spending money without reference to higher authorities. The management climate of the two types of institutions has a great deal in common. At the far end of the spectrum the Declared Cultural Institutions (or museums in common parlance) derive effectively all their income from Government sources, and yet their Councils, with some limitations, have essentially the same freedom of action as ours. It is instructive that along a kilometre stretch of Somerset Street one finds examples of all three types of institution.

The point I am emphasising is thus that autonomy of management is not necessarily correlated with source of funding, at least for certain types of institution. When it comes to primary and secondary schools, however, the authorities are practically slavishly insistent on the maxim "He who pays the piper calls the tune". This may well result from a practical reality that public spirited men and women of sufficient generosity and calibre are simply not available to sit on Councils for publically funded schools. I should like to enter a plea, however, that such an organisational arrangement should at least be conceded as a theoretical option. There were definite pointers in this direction in the De Lange Report, but they do not appear to have been given a chance to develop.

Such an option would have great symbolic significance, since it would allow operational autonomy to coexist with a funding mix at any point along the spectrum from zero to 100% public financing. Individual institutions could at least in principle choose their degree of public funding, up to the per capita limit affordable by Government, such as to optimise their own arrangements. Such a blurring of the formal distinction between private and government schools could have many emotional as well as practical advantages, not least for Black education. Provided people of the right calibre and community legitimacy could be found, the ideal combination of central funding and local control would enable a school to accept resources, and yet perhaps escape the accusation of being "part of the system". For private schools too there would be the advantage of not being so isolated, even aloof, from the overall school system, and yet at the same time not having to compromise your essential nature.

Some years ago, in that most human of institutions, the letters-to-the-editor columns of the Times of London, the implications of Bishop Berkeleys "esse est percipi" (to be is to be perceived) philosophy were being vented. One contributor voiced his opinion in poetry:

"There was a young man who said 'God
must consider it terribly odd
That this tree
Continues to be
When there's nobody about in the Quad'"

The following morning this elicited the reply

"On the contrary I do not consider it odd
That this tree should continue to be
When there's nobody about in the Quad
Since observed by
Yours truly,
God"

Long may God continue to observe, and thus keep in being, the private schools of South Africa.

My final task, a most agreeable one, before resuming my seat is to declare this Thirty-Ninth Conference and General Meeting of the Conference of Headmasters and Headmistresses of Private Schools of South Africa truly and officially open.

D S HENDERSON

7 August 1985