

Two Quarrels

Kawkab al-Sharq, 15 March 1933

Two fierce quarrels broke out in the Chamber of Deputies this week. One of them came to nothing, as though it had never been; the other very nearly broke the coalition between the two government parties, had not the one who holds the knot of this coalition yet been willing to pronounce the divorce between the two fraternal parties, as some newspapers call them.

The fierce quarrel that came to nothing, as though it had never been, was the one stirred up around education policy. Deputies delivered speeches, and other deputies replied to them, and the Minister of Education spoke; and those who read all these speeches and replies were under the impression that a change of enormous consequence was about to overtake education policy in all its fundamentals and particulars. Then the storm subsided, the skies cleared, the heavens smiled, and education policy proceeded on its way just as the Ministry of Education wished it to proceed — if the Ministry of Education knew any direction in which to take education policy.

The fact is that the Ministry of Education, in this blessed era, has been torn between two policies: the first, the policy of the former minister, which relied on renewal and progress, and which also relied on identifying the ailments from which education in Egypt was suffering. For this reason the former minister formed a committee on education policy, and this committee formed sub-committees; memoranda were written, the committees worked, there were discussions, and people at that time were under the impression that education affairs were about to be turned upside down, and that Egypt would at last find for itself a rational education policy suited to its needs and aspirations.

But the former Minister of Education went to Brussels, and the present minister succeeded him — and the first education policy went to Brussels too. Tradition took the place of renewal; institutes were closed, activities were cancelled, the original committee went to sleep, the sub-committees dispersed, and the individual took the place of the collective. The Minister of Education dispensed with the services of this

committee — which, had it been given time, would have turned Egypt's education policy upside down — and made do with himself and his under-secretary.

The most elegant and amusing aspect of this affair — amusing to the point of laughter — is that a group of deputies, during this debate on education policy, were demanding the formation of a committee to determine an education policy, as though this committee had never been formed before, had never begun its work, and as though the deputies had never heard of it. The minister neither mentioned this committee nor alluded to it; instead he answered that the ministry could proceed with the original education policy and the restriction of secondary and higher education. The deputies accepted this, and the quarrel ended in peace, as dreams end.

The second quarrel, however, was embarrassing and excruciating, and it was dangerous: it turned heads, dumbfounded minds, disturbed sleep, and wasted an entire day for a great many deputies and party men. There is no doubt that its subject was of far greater consequence, far deeper in impact, and far more immediately relevant to the life of the people now and tomorrow than education policy — namely the subsidy to the Royal Opera: should the government or should it not grant a subsidy to actors and actresses, singers, and dancers?

The delightful and curious thing is that the defence of granting this subsidy to those foreigners who descend upon us every day to entertain other foreigners was mounted by the Minister of Traditions — the same minister who had closed the Theatre Institute, abolished dance, and combated the mixing of the sexes in schools. The Minister of Traditions rose and defended art and beauty with the valour of heroes, charging and circling, then falling silent and speaking, then raising his hand in the air and bringing it down on the table, while the deputies looked on, listened, and marvelled — some of them opposing and resisting, others supporting and going to excess in their support. And the minister held firm in his position, resolved that the foreigners in Egypt should witness every year — at the state's expense — the performances of actors and actresses, the dancing of dancers, and the singing of singers.

Even though the quarrel reached its peak, and the People's Party was the enemy of acting, dancing, and singing, while the Union Party was the friend of these fine arts, the affair ended with the victory of the Minister of Traditions and the triumph of the Union Party. The Egyptians will pay these thousands, willingly or not, to entertain the foreigners, support a group of European artists in their livelihoods, and enable them to travel and enjoy what Egypt offers of clear winter skies, temperate weather, and the beauty of the Nile.

I would not have thought that education policy would stir up a storm that quickly subsides, while the Opera House stirs up a storm that goes beyond the Chamber of Deputies to the party clubs and to the residences of serving and resigned ministers alike, and even troubles the Prime Minister — who is in the direst need of rest and peace of mind. But God wills that things should always be inverted in Egypt: all of education is demeaned while the Opera is honoured, and the Minister of Traditions finds himself enduring, in defence of renewal — and what a renewal — all that can be endured and more of the hostility of the People's Party men.

The affair in the Chamber of Deputies ended as the minister wished, and it ended outside the Chamber in serenity and peace after estrangement and quarrelling. But who knows? Perhaps another issue more dangerous than education policy will pass tomorrow or the day after like a breeze; and perhaps another issue of less importance than the Opera question will shatter the two coalitions that exist among us, carrying the People's Party men to the right — where the preservation of inherited customs, traditions, and conventions holds sway — and the Union Party men to the north, and to the furthest north, where excess in renewal and complete absorption in keeping pace with the age in which we live prevail.

And for as long as night passes and day turns, nothing will hold firm for this Unionist-People's coalition — not even the Minister of Traditions' defence of traditions and customs.

Let us wait, then. We have seen wonders until now, and I see nothing but that from now on we shall witness things more worthy of wonder and more extreme in their strangeness. But believe me: you are entirely

mistaken if you look at our public life with a serious eye.