

Lost Advice

Al-Balagh, 7 June 1945.

It was he who urged, in submitting his proposal to the Ministry of Education, that the Ministry should not burden itself, nor burden the people, with excess in deferring to pedagogy, nor with excess in responding to what pedagogy calls for in that fastidiousness which avails nothing, that glitter which profits nothing, and that procrastination which helps nothing. For pedagogy, in the final analysis, is nothing but a nascent art that has not yet attained the status of a science, nor discovered the laws which generations of people, across their differing environments and circumstances, could safely rely upon — however much talk there has been about pedagogy for centuries upon centuries.

I thought of this when I read a statement broadcast by al-Ahram on Tuesday from the Minister of Education, and I had already thought of it weeks ago when I read a statement broadcast by al-Ahram from a responsible official of the Ministry of Education — but I then set that thought aside, because the Ministry of Education had flatly and forcefully denied that statement. I had reckoned that the Ministry would likewise deny this second statement as it had denied the first, but it did not do so, even though the two statements converge in a strange coincidence, scarcely differing except on the question of when and where the teaching of foreign languages should begin.

And it is my strong suspicion that had the responsible official left out any mention of foreign languages, his statement would not have been exposed to denial; for the teaching of foreign languages is a thorny matter the Ministry would do well not to touch except after detailed explanation and a preamble one can safely rely upon. The important thing is that the Minister of Education spoke to al-Ahram about educational matters, and divided these matters into urgent matters best settled decisively and swiftly, and matters that can wait, best considered with deliberation and patience.

And the Minister of Education is utterly indignant at the urgent matters, utterly alarmed at the corruption that has befallen education — because the Ministry of Education, it would seem, had handled educational affairs with haste and improvisation, running things as haste required rather than as the public interest required.

And it is enough to know that some schools, built for five hundred pupils, were crammed with more than a thousand; that classes which ought not to exceed thirty pupils came to hold more than fifty; that school supplies and books were not provided to pupils in time; that teachers were fewer than the number of pupils required; and we may add to this that pupils were not seated on the proper fixed, regulation benches they ought to have had, but were brought chairs from here and there, and that they lacked even the forks and knives that would let them eat as the well-provided ought to eat.

And I think you will agree with me that the responsible official whose statement was forcefully denied, and the Minister whose statement was not denied, and the authors of the bulletins broadcast here and there from time to time, said nothing new; for the complaint of overcrowded schools, packed classrooms, scarcity of teachers, and the state's inability to meet the ever-growing demand for education — all of this is an old matter, far older than the Minister of Education and his aides taking up the affairs of education. You will find it recorded in the report of His Excellency Hafez Afifi Pasha, in "On the Margin of Politics," which he published shortly after that report; and you will find it recorded in hundreds of articles and dozens of reports published ever since Egypt rose to take up the business of education. All this talk is a repeated discourse, like the talk that the villages of the countryside drink no clean water, eat no wholesome food, and wear no clothing that protects them from wear or shields their bodies from the ordinary ravages of heat and cold.

And the source of this repetition and recurrence in these discourses that never seem to end, and that teach people nothing new, is the contradiction between what pedagogy wants and what Egyptian life wants: pedagogy wants the affairs of education to be worked out in minute detail, according to whatever system this or that educator has devised, relying in devising it on his own fertile imagination, or his sound reasoning, or his incomplete experience, or on all of these together — while Egyptian life wants the people to be educated, wants the whole people to be educated, wants them educated in the swiftest possible time, and wants them brought out of ignorance by whatever means can bring them out of it. The difference between us and the Minister of Education and his aides is that we respond to the people, and satisfy their need for education by whatever means we can find, while they respond to pedagogy, and satisfy its need for refinement and fastidiousness by

whatever means they can find.

And I do not know what the hungry among Egyptians would say if the state issued them an order not to eat until suitable food were provided to them, nor what the thirsty among Egyptians would say if the state issued them an order not to drink until clean water were provided to them! Would they submit to such an order, or would they find it an outrage, an absurdity, idle talk? Indeed, I know the state would never put any such thing to the hungry and the thirsty, for the state is too sensible to tell them to go and die — but the devotees of pedagogy would have the Minister of Education imagine that the state can tell the people not to educate their children until schools, classrooms, benches, forks, and knives have all been prepared for them exactly as pedagogy wishes all these things to be.

And the reason for this is simple: the hungry and the thirsty are exposed to death if their hunger and thirst are prolonged, and so no one can order the hungry and the thirsty to wait; whereas the ignorant are not exposed to death if their ignorance is prolonged, and so they can be ordered to wait for an education suited to pedagogy's own refinement and fastidiousness — and in this waiting there is an advantage not to be dismissed, for it postpones the spread of education, and the spread of education is dangerous, as you know, because it protects the people from exploitation and degradation. And if the hungry endure their hunger, and the thirsty endure their thirst, they die a moral death that pedagogy neither sees nor denies — because pedagogy concerns itself with a human being only once he goes to school, and so long as that human being remains far from school, pedagogy rests easy and untroubled, toying with fancy, building castles in Spain, and drawing up curricula, programs, and plans for an education that need not be put into effect now, but might be put into effect some day.

And the strangest thing about all this is that those who devote themselves to this pedagogy, and who would force the people into ignorance and neglect until pedagogy is satisfied, forget that very many generations of people were never educated according to the principles of this pedagogy — because these principles change and are renewed with every generation, and had people waited for this conceited pedagogy to furnish them with a proper education, the waiting would have gone on forever, and ignorance and stupidity would have come to rule over minds; but people did not wait, and will not wait — rather, they went and got themselves educated, and left pedagogy to say whatever it pleased,

listening to it sometimes, and turning away from it most of the time.

Let the Minister of Education do as the people have done: let him listen to pedagogy a little, and turn away from it a great deal, for not everything it says is beneficial or useful. The Minister of Education has promised us that he has made every preparation for education, and that he is confident educational affairs will proceed, as of next year, in the manner pedagogy favors most. And the Minister of Education is very optimistic, and so long as this optimism pleases him, we shall not stand in its way. But the certain thing is that next year will be like this past year and like the years before it: pupils will crowd into the schools until they overflow, into the classrooms until they are packed, upon the teachers until they are exhausted. We see no harm in this; rather, we regard it as we regard the hungry crowding upon food that does not suffice, and the thirsty crowding upon water that is not clean — and we see no solution to all these problems except that the state should take the matter firmly in hand, and impose the taxes that would make possible an effective war against ignorance, poverty, and disease.

And the most amusing thing in the Minister of Education's statement is his views on the educational matters that can wait, that can be considered with deliberation and patience; for the Minister of Education is very optimistic indeed, and wishes to draw up for education a policy that Egypt will follow for a quarter of a century — and why not half a century, and why not a century or two? Anything is possible, and it is equally possible to draw up for education a policy Egypt will not follow for even a single day; for the Minister of Education seems to have forgotten that a minister before him drew up an educational policy with no fixed term, long or short, and presented this policy to Parliament, which debated it and approved it, and it was expected that Egypt would try it out, since it had emerged from an agreement between the government and Parliament — but the current Minister of Education was not satisfied with that policy, and paid no heed to its approval by the government and Parliament, and abandoned it without ever trying it, and set about drawing up his own new policy, which Egypt is to follow for a quarter of a century. So can the Minister of Education be certain that his new policy's fate will not be the fate of the policy Parliament approved — that some government, after a time short or long, will come and abandon this policy he is drawing up, just as he himself abandoned the policy someone else drew up? And since Parliament's decisions do not bind governments, governments remain free to do as they please. And the

thing I would affirm to the Minister of Education is that in drawing up his policy he is only writing upon the wind and engraving upon water, and that the next government will change everything he has done, unless he can secure a pledge from the days themselves that he will remain in office for a quarter of a century.

And moreover, the policy he is drawing up, which he laid out in full to al-Ahram, ought not to last a quarter of a century, nor five years, nor even a single year — nor, indeed, ought it to be begun at all; for the reform of compulsory education is something all people have already agreed upon, and is thus no part of any new policy — but the Minister of Education wants to turn this compulsory education into primary education, and to make it a single, popular education for all people alike. And since the Wafd Ministry had already decreed that primary education be free of charge, there is no meaning in that except that primary education has thereby become a popular education.

And those who advised the Minister of Education toward all of this have led him astray from his purpose, and turned him away from the straight path. I do not know whether they meant to advise him well in this or not; for when the Wafd Ministry decreed that primary education be free, it intended, before anything else, to move toward decreeing secondary education free as well, and then higher education, because it wanted all education, in all its branches and stages, to be popular, and wanted people's access to the branches and stages of education to be entirely free, bound by nothing but their capacity, and limited by nothing but their aptitude.

And those who put these notions into the Minister of Education's head intended, in fact, to abolish the free provision that the Wafd Ministry had decreed; for they claim they will convert compulsory education into primary education, and since compulsory education is free by constitutional decree, whatever the Wafd Ministry did becomes unnecessary.

But this primary education will not, in actual fact, be abolished; in its place will arise an intermediate education, and this education will be fee-paying. And so we shall come back to having an education that is neither compulsory nor secondary, but something in between. And this is not the important point — the important point is that it will be fee-paying, and that this step the Wafd Ministry took will be erased.

And more amusing still is that those who advised the Minister of Education had long held the view that the teaching of foreign languages in primary schools should be abolished, for reasons pedagogy requires — and it seems they set about doing just that, but ran into certain obstacles, and so they found the solution, and what is easier to find than solutions? Compulsory education will be renamed primary education; there is no foreign language in compulsory education; therefore there is no foreign language in the new primary education either. And thus pedagogy content itself with words, when it cannot lay hold of the facts — and intermediate education will arise to stand in the place of primary education, and foreign languages will be taught in it just as they are now taught in primary education, and the partisans of these languages will be content with the actual facts, and will not care that names and words have been changed.

Let the Minister of Education believe me when I say that the affairs of education in Egypt are far simpler than the convoluted pedagogy would have him imagine! A people that complains of ignorance and wishes to be rid of it under the shade of true democracy needs, first, a sound and varied compulsory education, such as Naguib el-Hilali Pasha had designed, and this education is free by constitutional decree; it needs, second, a sound general education that must be made accessible to all, and from which none should be turned away on grounds connected to wealth or class — let it, then, be free, as the Wafd wished it to be, and as the people wish it to be. And it needs a higher education that will furnish it with the elite who manage its affairs and advance its interests — let it have this education too, and let it likewise be free, for this is the democratic direction toward which the whole world is now moving.

And it needs, too, a varied technical education such as Naguib el-Hilali Pasha had designed; let this education be established, and let it be free, as it is in every country on earth. And if the Ministry of Education must exert itself over something, let it exert itself in drawing up the curricula and programs suited to the new life, and let it take up matters from where Naguib el-Hilali Pasha left them; for in doing so it will, first, respect Parliament's decision; second, guarantee that educational policy rises above partisanship; third, guarantee it continuity; and it will spare Egypt a waste of time and effort — for Egypt's affairs always come back, in the end, to the people, and the people's word is, in the final analysis, the highest word of all.

The best course is that we face these matters with candor, rectitude, and sincerity; for there is no escaping what cannot be escaped, and the thing that cannot be escaped, whether we wish it or not, is that the people want to be educated, want to be educated in the swiftest time possible, and want to find no hardships and no obstacles in the way of this education — and if they do find them, they will force their way through, and will prevail over them in the end, just as a flood, in the end, prevails over the rocks that stand in its path.