

The Education Crisis

Musamarat al-Jayb, 28 October 1945.

Were it granted to the Minister of Education that the veils might be lifted for him, and the curtains of the unseen drawn back, he would see what he does not see, and hear what he does not hear, and would know that there are many things in the affairs of education in need of his attention, that deserve his effort, and that call for him to spend upon them the kind of sincere, honest labor that would restore many hearts from fear to security, from anxiety to ease, and from despair and hopelessness to hope and expectation. And it is my strong impression that whatever has gone wrong in educational affairs has come from several different sources. The first of these: that the Minister of Education has been excessive in his confidence in himself and in his responsiveness to his compatriots, and this excess drove him to change what by right should have remained unchanged, and to introduce innovations that ought not to have been introduced except after a great deal of patience and deliberation, and a great deal of caution and reflection. For it is not enough that a government should change merely so that the incoming government can tear down what the preceding government built; for the homeland is not the property of one government rather than another — indeed, it is not the property of any government at all, but belongs to the generations of the people, past and present, those who existed in ages gone by, those who exist in the present age, and those who will exist in ages yet to come.

And if it is not permissible for one generation to block the path of generations to come, nor to erase what is sound in the legacy of past generations, out of regard for the rights of the one and the sanctity due the other, then it is all the more fitting that a government — whatever share of insight and intelligence its members may have — should not complete the demolition of what previous governments have built, for no reason but sheer vengeance and retaliation.

The Minister of Education came to his ministry and found a system that no single minister had devised, but that different governments had erected, little by little, each one building part of it, another adding to it still further. The last Wafdist ministry added a great deal to it, broadening it where it had been narrow, easing it where it had been difficult, opening it up where it had been constrained. It tore down

nothing of what the ministry before it had built, but reformed gently, innovated with much caution, overcame many of the war's difficulties, and prepared to overcome what remained of them; it multiplied the number of schools, multiplied the admission of pupils into schools, and prepared the policy of the future, making primary education free, and preparing to make secondary education free as well; it did not burden people with the collection of fees, nor did it make children bear the burden of the hardship their fathers were forced into, or the burden of the procrastination their fathers sometimes resorted to as well, but instead granted them education freely, granted them the examination freely, and opened before them the wide doors of hope. Its view was that something is better than nothing, that imperfect education is better than ignorance, just as a little food is better than hunger, and just as Nile water — turbid as it may be — is better than dying of thirst while waiting for the means that would bring it to people pure and clear.

Nor did the Wafd ministry pursue this policy in an arbitrary or improvised manner, but thought it through, calculated it, and sought Parliament's permission, which Parliament granted. It was therefore the Minister of Education's duty not to act arbitrarily in changing this policy, and not to deviate from it without Parliament's authorization for that deviation; but he was excessive in his confidence in himself, in his reliance on his own strength, and so he rushed ahead without patience, changed things without forethought, and overstepped Parliament's authority after having promised not to overstep it, yielding to this detestable impulse that those entrusted with the people's affairs ought never to yield to — the impulse to monopolize power and the desire to tear down what one's predecessors have built...

Nor was the Minister of Education content with this alone, but added to his own self-confidence his confidence in a group of aides who were no less confident in themselves than he was, so that they rushed ahead as he had rushed ahead, went to excess as he had gone to excess, and ended, as he ended, in producing this very turmoil from which today's education crisis has arisen. And they could have proceeded, as the ministers before them had proceeded, with a measure of deliberation, patience, and sound management.

The Wafd ministry expanded education by a certain measure, and they too could have expanded it by a certain measure; but they expanded in one direction while narrowing in another, so that matters became thoroughly confused.

Compulsory education remains, to this day, far indeed from meeting Egypt's needs and capacity: its schools are fewer than they ought to be, and its curriculum stands in need of much reform, so the proper course would have been for the Minister of Education and his aides to attend to reforming the curriculum on one hand, and to building new schools on the other. But instead they wished to expand primary education, and so abolished some hundred compulsory schools, without yet establishing other schools to take their place, with the result that many of the people's children were turned away from popular education, forced into an idleness heavy upon them and upon their fathers, harmful to both. Nor did any meaningful expansion in primary education result from this; for they admitted pupils into these schools only by a certain, very small measure, and because they abolished the first classes in some of the old primary schools, and because they took special care to multiply kindergartens, in which education is offered for a fee rather than free of charge. The result was that popular, compulsory education was constricted for the people, while primary education was not expanded for them; so the poor complained because they could find no schools in which their children could be educated for free, and the well-off complained because they could find no kindergartens in which their children could be educated for a fee. And from all this arose a situation in which the Ministry of Education toyed with children as a boy toys with the playthings in his hands, shuffling them from school to school, and from district to district, with no regard for their age, nor for their capacity to be moved about, nor for their families' capacity to look after and care for them.

And worse than all this, it set itself up in the place of parents and guardians, consulting them on nothing, and taking no counsel with them in managing these facilities that touch their sons and daughters so closely. And families looked about, only to find their sons and daughters scattered across the districts of the cities without reckoning, without order — as the overseers of educational affairs wished it, not as fathers and mothers wished it, nor as fathers and mothers could bear it. And the means of transportation in Egypt these days are extremely limited, and extremely difficult under present circumstances, so that this slight regard for the children's own interests, this meager attention to their own capacity and that of their families, this scant gentleness toward the people — all of this ought to have inclined the Ministry of Education toward deliberation and reflection before scattering children across the districts of the cities in this manner.

And stranger still, the Ministry of Education introduced secondary classes into some primary schools, adding at the far end of the school while subtracting from its beginning... giving it two heads, but cutting off its legs! Nor was it content with this alone, but defied the logic of plain facts in an astonishing way. For the nature of things required that those who graduated from a given primary school should be enrolled in the secondary classes established within that very school, so that matters would proceed smoothly and easily, without hardship or difficulty; but the Ministry entirely disregarded this logic, toying with pupils as people toy with chess pieces, scattering them across districts and neighborhoods just as it had scattered the younger children, according to a plan drawn up — as people used to say — in wartime communiqués, rather than according to their own interests and their capacity to come and go. And if you consider that those the Ministry toyed with in this manner are children and young pupils, ranging in age from four to twelve, that none of them can possibly be entrusted to manage for themselves, and that the Ministry possesses none of the means of transport that would enable it alone to look after these children, you will know that the Ministry has imposed real hardship upon parents, and has burdened them severely, through this reckless experimentation driven by nothing but the mere desire for novelty.

I had thought that the age had passed in which people retreated into themselves to draw up plans on paper, then believed they had thereby drawn them up for actual reality. But what the Ministry of Education has done this year has proven that this age has not yet passed, and that Egypt still has people who dream and imagine they are acting, who wish and imagine they are fulfilling their wishes! And nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the fact that the Ministry of Education was so confident, and filled people's hearts with such confidence, that educational affairs would proceed this new year in the best possible condition — indeed, in the best condition Egypt has known in her modern history. Then the academic year resumed, only for educational affairs to witness a confusion and turmoil the likes of which had never been witnessed before.

Children wandering off to no school at all, others scattered among schools with no order to it; schools abolished with no other schools established to replace them; schools that exist only in the Ministry's imagination, while actual reality still waits for them to come into being; teachers transferred twice in a single day, sometimes several times in a

single day; schools burdened beyond what they can bear, classrooms packed with pupils just as they used to be packed in the past; equipment that was supposed to arrive at the schools ahead of the pupils, only for the pupils to find themselves waiting for it, and it appears their wait will be a long one; curricula changed suddenly, with no preparation given to teachers for this change. And all of this happened only because the Minister of Education was excessive in his confidence in himself and in his aides, rushed to demolish before he was ready to build, and made promises before he was able to keep them; whereas had he practiced patience and deliberation, followed the prescribed path, preserved the sanctity due to the laws and the right due to Parliament, and prepared whatever he regarded as reform before rushing headlong into it, he would have spared himself, and spared the Ministry, the schools, the pupils, and the parents all these adventures whose beginning one can see, but whose end one cannot foresee, and whose immediate harm we see now, without yet discerning the grave consequences that will reveal themselves by the end of the year.

And if there is one evil above all that must be guarded against, it is haste in educational affairs, and rushing to change and alter them without reckoning, without reflecting on the consequences or weighing the results.

The Wafd ministry had decided on free primary education, reckoning that this freeness would attract people and draw them toward it irresistibly, and so, alongside these schools, established schools no less useful — perhaps even more beneficial — namely, the rural schools. It established dozens upon dozens of these schools in less than two years, and was preparing to establish the connecting path between these schools and the schools of general education, so that the brightest of their pupils might pass through into this general education, and then on to higher education. The present ministry would have done well to complete what the Wafd ministry, in its haste, had not finished, multiplying these schools further and realizing the connection between them and general education. But instead the ministry retraced its steps, and turned away from everything the Wafd had established, so that it might be said it had innovated, and so that it might also be said it had torn down what the Wafd had built — so that the ministry gained nothing, and the Wafd lost nothing, but the people alone bore the consequences of this turmoil.

The Wafd ministry had drawn up the policy for the new educational system, and had begun implementing this policy once Parliament approved it; it did not rush to lay down new laws until it had prepared for the new system whatever schools, laboratories, and equipment it needed, and laid out the plan for all of this in its five-year project. But the present ministry deviated from this policy for no reason but to be able to claim it had innovated, promising not to change the educational system without Parliament's approval, and then actually changing it without Parliament's approval... thoroughly confusing the stages of education, narrowing the curriculum in some of its aspects, broadening it in others, without Parliament knowing anything of this, and without Parliament authorizing any of it. And the result of all this was that matters fell into the utmost confusion, and discontent spread to the utmost degree.

The ministry's official spokesmen may say whatever they please, but this will not change the actual facts in the least. And the actual fact is that the officials in the ministry's own offices are discontented, because they have been driven to work they do not believe in; that teachers are discontented, because they have been burdened with systems they place no trust in; that pupils and students are discontented, because they have become like chess pieces, played with by players who give no thought to consequences, no regard for their welfare, and no care for the health of their minds and bodies. And parents and guardians are discontented, because people do not wish to see their children driven toward ignorance, nor to see them made the object of reckless experimentation. There is no doubt that all of this is in need of reform; but the path to this reform is not readily available to the Ministry of Education as it stands now. For it is not reasonable to tell those who caused this confusion: "Repair with your own hands what your own hands have corrupted" — rather, the reasonable thing is to tell these people: "Leave the affairs of education to others who understand them well, who look after them well, and who, in managing educational affairs, answer to reason and the public good, rather than to imperfect knowledge or unchecked whims."

And it is quite clear that if these words are not said today, they will be said tomorrow; but it is equally clear that the people alone are the ones paying the price for the broken crockery.