

The Case for Education

Al-Ahram, 11 July 1949.

1 It is said that he who stays silent about the truth is a mute devil, and there are many devils on this earth — some that speak, and some that stay silent.

2 I take refuge with God from both these and those, and I absolve myself before the Egyptians of both these and those. For this reason I wish to speak a word of truth, because it must be spoken however harsh and unwelcome it may be. I have accustomed my dear fellow citizens to my never flattering them nor dealing gently with them, and to my making them taste the truth however bitter its portion may be. And my dear fellow citizens have accustomed me to always hearing me out — most of them respond to me, and the fewest of them turn away from me, but they lend me their ear in any case. So let them listen now, well guided, thanked, and set aright.

3 If injustice befalls a single man among the people, lifting it is a duty; if injustice befalls a large group of people, lifting it is a still more binding duty, a still more pressing obligation; and if injustice befalls the whole people, lifting it becomes the most binding of all duties, and failing to lift it becomes a grave sin that the people will not forget and that history will not overlook.

4 And the injustice I wish to speak of, and urgently call for the lifting of, has befallen the whole people, with no exception made for the strong or the weak, the rich or the poor. This injustice concerns education and its spread, and doing justice to those who labor to advance it, so that they may be enabled to disseminate it in the best and most complete manner.

5 We were given a very brief span of time in which we understood the people's right to be educated as well as it could possibly be understood — namely, when we drafted the constitution and set down in it the people's right to see their sons receive a measure of education, without which a modern man cannot be a man at all. We imposed this modest measure of education upon the state and the people together: upon the state, to spread and disseminate it; upon the people, to send their sons to receive their share of it. So if the government falls short in spreading it, it is answerable for that before Parliament, and if the sons of the people fall short in receiving it, those who fall short among them are

answerable before the courts.

6 So we resolved when we drafted the constitution, and we believed that spreading compulsory education in this manner was a first step that could not suffice on its own, but ought rather to be followed by further steps toward spreading general education, technical education, and higher education, so that the people might take from all of this whatever they wanted and whatever they could bear.

7 A quarter of a century has passed since the constitution was promulgated, and the people have scarcely advanced in any kind of this education save a slight, meager advance. The responsibility for this does not fall on the people — the people press and press, and raise their voice every year, indeed every day, demanding that education be spread, while the governments sometimes listen and do nothing, or scarcely do anything, and at other times stop their ears for fear of hearing, because they are too occupied with matters more trivial and less weighty than education to attend to it.

8 I do not deny that Egypt has, in this period, established two universities and a number of secondary, primary, technical, and compulsory schools. But the plain fact is that what it has established, of all this, is far less than what it ought to have established. The proof of this is that the two universities are straining to hold their students in a truly alarming, frightening manner, and that the government, wishing to establish a third university, confesses its own inability to do so and grants itself whatever time it needs to prepare and to send out its scholarship missions. The proof of this too is that the government faces, every academic year, a violent and absurd crisis, because the schools established thus far are too cramped to hold the students and pupils applying to them. The proof of this is that the director of Fuad I University announced, in the presence of the Minister of Education two months ago, that the secondary schools will graduate sixteen thousand students this year, and that the two universities will be unable to accept this enormous number.

9 The proof of this is that the technical experts at the Ministry of Education estimate that the primary schools will graduate upward of forty thousand pupils this year, and that the government secondary schools can accept only the fewest of them. The proof of this, after all of this, is that the private schools accept and teach more pupils than the government schools accept and teach. And the final proof of all this is

that four-fifths of the Egyptian people remain ignorant, unable to read or write, and that most of the fifth who are free of illiteracy remain sunk in an ignorance that is perhaps more dangerous still than illiteracy itself, because it spreads among people a certain vanity and corrupts their conception and judgment of things.

10 There is, then, a general injustice befalling the whole people, and the state is responsible for it and falls short in lifting it; but this grave shortfall cannot continue, cannot endure, unless we treat our public life and our future as mockery and play, unless we laugh at ourselves and delude ourselves into imagining that we are advancing, when we are nothing of the sort, in no true sense of advancement. We ought not deceive ourselves, nor lie to ourselves, nor tell ourselves anything but the truth, for we deceive no foreigner about our shortcomings and our failures, since they know our affairs just as we know them, indeed more than we know them, and we ought not be deceived by the sweet words we hear from them here or there, for these are words whose source is mere courtesy, flattery, and the pursuit of their own interests and the satisfaction of their own needs.

11 And the grave excuse by which governments excuse themselves, when questioned about their shortcomings in spreading education, is that the budget is too narrow to accommodate education as it ought to be accommodated, and too weak to bear the burdens of education as they ought to be borne.

12 And here comes a second word of truth that must be spoken: that our governments have never once understood the word "budget" in its true sense. For the budget, to Egyptian governments, means simply the balancing of income and expenditure, nothing more — and this is the precise meaning of the word to men of finance. But the budget may carry another meaning to those who understand the politics of peoples in its true sense, namely the balance between what the state spends of its money and what the people need of public services; for it means nothing to the hungry, the naked, the ignorant, and the sick that the Ministry of Finance should be pleased with itself for having balanced income against expenditure, and that the government and Parliament should be pleased with it for having achieved this balance. What matters to the hungry, the naked, the ignorant, and the sick is rather that the government should find money enough to establish the services that ward off from them hunger, nakedness, ignorance, and sickness, and that it should spend this money, in its proper channels, with a precision as just as justice itself,

without crookedness or deviation.

13 The budget, then, is a policy for the people, a stewardship of their rights, and a care for their services — not merely an accounting in which income balances expenditure, nothing more. And this brings us to the grave problem in which we have entangled ourselves, or in which our entanglement has only deepened during this year; for urgent external necessities have made us feel our need to strengthen the defense of the homeland and to establish an army capable of guaranteeing this defense.

14 Had we understood the budget as a policy, not an accounting, we would have recognized defense's due upon us long ago, and would not have been taken by surprise this year by this budget, which spends millions upon dreary millions — if the expression may be allowed — on the army's needs, while wronging another grave class of the people's services, among them education.

15 I do not go so far as His Excellency Sidqi Pasha in holding that economy must be exercised in matters of defense and reliance placed on foreign alliances; for a people that cannot defend itself by itself is lawful prey for hungry nations, and how many hungry nations there are in these days! And a people that cannot defend itself by itself will never find an ally who respects its right and its independence, but will find instead one who covets it and humbles it, lying in wait for it, to inflict injustice upon it and press it into whatever service he pleases.

16 I do not deny, then, our need for a strong army, and this army's due upon us however heavy and burdensome it may be — though I do hope that the Ministry of Defense has among it competent experts entrusted with spending these many millions as they ought to be spent. But that is another story; what concerns me is only that defense should not overwhelm the other services of the people, for Egypt's need to repel the invading enemy among men is no less than her need to repel the resident enemy of poverty, ignorance, and sickness. And a poor, ignorant, sick people cannot raise up a strong, noble army that values the homeland at its true worth and defends it as defense ought to be. Our government has become entangled this year in bearing down upon the domestic public services in order to give the army its due, and this is the error we ought never to have entangled ourselves in. I do not know what harm has befallen the other public services from this encroachment, but I do know that education has suffered from it much harm — a harm that provokes grief and laughter together, and the worst calamities, as the

saying goes, are those that make one laugh.

17 The Ministry of Education wishes to improve the condition of teachers, and this improvement requires, according to Al-Ahram, half a million pounds — but this modest sum is not within the Ministry's means. It must therefore be divided over five years, which means that teachers will bear this hardship upon themselves, their families, and their children, and will pass this hardship on to their pupils, because the budget cannot find half a million pounds with which to lift this distress from them, their families, and their pupils.

18 And the Ministry of Education acknowledges that its schools are unable to absorb the pupils applying to them, and advises families to direct their sons to the private schools, knowing full well that the private schools teach far more pupils than the government schools teach; and it wishes to equalize the pupils of private and government schools, and the teachers of these schools and those, because this equality is the right of all Egyptians, and because it serves, beyond doubt, the interest of the people — and the way to this equalization is to attach the private schools to the Ministry, and to nationalize education. But this requires a sum of money no greater than half a million pounds, and the Ministry of Education cannot find this sum, because the need for defense stands between it and obtaining it.

19 A single million pounds would improve the condition of teachers, nationalize education, achieve equality among the sons of the people, secure the cultural interest of the Egyptian nation, and open before it doors of bright hope — yet the Ministry of Education cannot find this one million. Is this earnest, or is it jest?! What danger could this million pose to our enormous budget, set beside these tens of millions we suddenly found for defense?! We must speak the truth, bitter though it be: that those who oversee our affairs need to believe in education as it ought to be believed in, and to tend to the due of education's men as they ought to be tended to.

20 Let the Prime Minister believe me, and let the Minister of Education and the Minister of Finance believe me: a brief meeting held by the three of them together is enough to discover this million in some corner of the treasury, or some fold of the reserve, or in a tax imposed to meet education's due, which is no less grave than defense's due. Let these three ministers put their trust in God, and search the treasury, even by lamplight; perhaps they will find this million that will lift the

hardship from countless thousands of teachers and the taught alike.