

What did you learn in school today?

80 years of educational protest

EDGAR MAURICE

DR EDGAR MAURICE is a former principal of Harold Cressy High School in District Six.

He resigned from the profession when 'Coloured' education was taken over by the Coloured Affairs Department, and has since been secretary of the Cape Town Terminating Building Society.

Dr Maurice was an active member of the Teachers' League of South Africa and the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM).



With acknowledgements to Cape Argus.

FOR some six or more weeks now we have witnessed, and been involved in, a concerted, organised and well-supported protest by pupils and students against a discriminatory and inferior system of education. They are the front-line victims. And their position has evoked a unity of purpose, a sense of discipline, and a show of courage which has gained much admiration along a wide spectrum.

But in point of fact, in this area of so-

called 'Coloured education', only TWO things are really new, and both are merely two sides of the same coin. In the first place, the pupils and students are now themselves involved in the protest and, in the second place, the nature of the protest, in the form of a boycott of classes and other forms of youthful demonstration, is in the nature of things a fresh development. In the belief that their parents are partly, if not wholly, responsible for the

grant of 50% of the total Provincial expenditure, the money to be spent as they pleased. The first formal change came in 1925. And it is a reflection of governmental thinking 55 years ago that it was agreed to pay a subsidy of Fourteen Pounds for each white child and Five Guineas for each 'Coloured' child in school. It was the first national monetary evaluation of the schooling of white and 'Coloured' pupils: *the ratio remains much the same today, and at R180 to R640 has in fact worsened to more than 3 to 1.* — (Editor's italics).

It required no prophetic vision to see that this subsidy arrangement could and would neither give an equal education to all, nor improve the situation in any real way. Ten years later, 32% of the children were still in Sub Std A; only 2,9% (as against the normal 12% for the white pupils) had reached Std VI and, worst of all, some 30 000 to 40 000 children, or one-third of the estimated school-going population, had never seen the inside of a school.

The Teachers' League begged and prayed for an increase in the subsidy. The resolution on the subject at its annual conference became a 'hardy annual,' and always elicited the terse 'Contents noted' reply from the authorities. At the outbreak of the Second World War it was clear that 'the vexed question of the subsidy for Coloured education' was the over-riding question to be answered.

Jan Hofmeyr

Around this time Jan Hofmeyr, Minister of Education and Finance in the Smuts Government, opened one of those interminable annual bazaars at a rather large Mission school. He flattered his audience for a while in his inimitably eloquent way, complimenting them, in words and phrases that touched their hearts, on the wonderful spirit of sacrifice and co-operation they had displayed over the years. He told them he was fully aware of their problems, especially the matter of the subsidy. 'I said to myself last night,' he went on, 'as I was preparing this speech as Minister of Educa-

tion, "I really must, I really must get more money for Coloured Education." And when I awoke this morning and spoke to the Minister of Finance, he said to me, "We can't afford it! We haven't got the money!"'

The New Road

But people were not so easily fobbed off. As part of the rejection in the late thirties of the old leadership and its methods, and signalling the rise of more militant and forceful attitudes, there developed a new movement among the teachers which came to grips with the situation in its own characteristic way. Its philosophy and outlook was based on three formal tenets. Firstly, that they wanted not reformism and petty concessions, but full democratic rights and equality in their country. Secondly, that since education in any country is merely the reflection of the prevailing political and social philosophy, the system of education could and would only be changed by changing the political system. Thirdly, and most importantly, that since, in the peculiar circumstances of the time, the teachers were the natural leaders of the people, they had of necessity themselves to gear the educational struggle to the political struggle, and become involved.

After 1940

And so, after 1940 they waged, in the revitalised Teachers' League and its political affiliates, the most concerted and meaningful struggle against the colour bar in education. They raised the political consciousness of everybody to a new level, organised and conducted campaigns throughout the country, especially against the establishment of the Department of so-called 'Coloured Affairs,' and, above all else, displayed an intransigent and implacable refusal to operate and become part of any of the machinery devised by the Government for the subordination and inferiority of the people they represented. Under a principled and articulate leadership, they moved along 'the new road' in the fight for full democratic rights, which

their unquestioned superiority and supremacy in this land.'

Four Bills

These were, of course, not mere words. For during the 1890s much time and energy was spent in the attempt to achieve the basic aim: to provide for all the white pupils a superior system of State schools in which education would be free and compulsory; and to exclude all 'Coloured' pupils from such a system. No fewer than four attempts were made in the Colonial Parliament to translate this aim into legislative enactment. While differing in details, the School Attendance Bill and the School Boards Bill introduced by J W Sauer (father of Paul Sauer, the original architect of apartheid) and by T P Theron (the MP for Richmond) in the session of 1896, and the School Attendance Boards Bill

introduced by W P Schreiner (the Cape into the schools the large number still outside. Indeed, in response to the growing evidence of increasing discrimination against them from all sides, the 'Coloured' people were beginning to organise themselves for the struggle. In 1902, for example, they formed the African Political Organisation, later called the African People's Organisation (APO), which was to play such an important part in their political life for the next thirty odd years. Incorporated into its constitutional aims at its Conference in Somerset East in 1905 was the desire 'to secure better and more advanced education' for their children.

The Circular

The forces were obviously beginning to range themselves for the battle. Indeed, when Sir Lewis Michell, the acting Colon-

***We learnt that West is always best
and white is usually right.***

Liberal) in 1899, all restricted their provisions to white children by formal definition. Only the Bill introduced by Thomas Smartt, the Colonial Secretary, in 1898, while clearly imposing mandatory obligations on the State only in the case of the white children, did allow some permissive concern for the interests and welfare of Coloured pupils.

Objections

Although these were all abortive attempts, the sinister implications for their children certainly did not go unnoticed by the emergent, politically sensitive and enlightened leaders of the 'Coloured' people. Already in 1896 Imam Effendi (later to be an unsuccessful candidate for Parliament) had made it clear to a Select Committee on Education that he welcomed the compulsory education of Malay pupils to bring

ial Secretary in Jameson's Progressive Party government, who had lived in Cape Town for 20 years and had often canvassed Coloured voters for support, issued his notorious Circular No 33 on 12 July 1904, the reaction from the organised groups was immediate and clear. For Michell had asked all School Committees in the Colony (exclusively white) whether they favoured the introduction of compulsory education, free to indigent parents, in a system of schools restricted to pupils 'of European descent'. He made no reference whatsoever to 'Coloured' pupils.

Protests

Soon after the Circular became public news, a deputation from the Coloured People's Vigilance Committee placed their objections against the discrimination before the Government. And other represen-

tatives submitted their objections to three Mps in Cape Town. Further afield, at a protest meeting in Paarl, it was resolved that any law for free, compulsory education should apply to both white and 'Coloured' pupils. But by far the most demonstrative opposition, headlined by the *Cape Times* as 'A Strong Protest', was voiced at a very large public meeting held in Cape Town on 25 August 1904. The speakers made the grounds and the nature of their objection very plain: amongst other things, they were taxpayers; and they wanted the best system of education for their children to remove the stigma from 'Coloured' persons because of their lack of education. In Kimberley, people were equally upset, and sent a telegram of support to the meeting.

Were their protests and pressures successful? Quite definitely not. But they were

white section there was to be a planned and effective system of undenominational schools under the local control of School Boards established throughout the country, in which it would become the duty of the State to provide the schools and to overcome whatever difficulties there were in the way of the education of the children. And compulsory education would become a reality in accordance with a definite legislative and administrative programme in a fixed period of time.

As for the 'Coloured' pupils, their education, he said, was 'a question of great difficulty that had caused a good deal of heart burning and trouble.' In brief, the Mission schools, restricted to Standard 4, were to remain the main agency for their education. But if the 'Coloured' parents wished their children to go beyond Standard 4 they could, subject to certain condi-

***That rich and poor will always be
and that's what makes us free.***

not without some little effect. Michell, for example, publicly admitted that some phrases in his Circular were 'not very well chosen' and, clearly on the defensive, he was forced into equivocation and special pleading, finally conceding that he was not opposed to the inclusion of 'Coloured' pupils in the proposed new system.

Colonial Secretary

And when Colonel Crewe, the Colonial Secretary, on whom devolved Parliamentary responsibility for education, finally formulated the Government's policy and outlined its plans for the infamous School Board Bill, in a speech in Kimberley on 30 November 1904, he revealed that some little thought (albeit an afterthought) had been given to the needs of the 'Coloured' pupils. But he made the dichotomy in policy and provisions very plain. For the

tions, including a petition from 50 parents able and willing to support such schools, have such schools established, provided the School Boards consented. Conditions required for some kind of permissive compulsion in certain areas made the prospect no more than a vain hope and, in the classic (and prophetic) words of Abdurahman, placed compulsory education for 'Coloured' pupils 'as far off as the Greek Kalends.'

Abdurahman

Colonel Crewe's speech, and the publication of the School Board Bill on 13 January 1905, gave Abdurahman the chance to show his mettle. He was then a young man in his early thirties, at the beginning of his political career, uncorrupted by the blandishments of office and not yet grown cynical from the futility of the political game.

The occasion was a packed public meeting at the old Clifton Hill School in District Six on 23 February 1905. According to the *Cape Argus* it was attended by some 500 people, with several hundred unable to gain admission.

In a brilliantly eloquent speech, which more than deserves its place in the annals of public oratory in this country, he lucidly analysed the details of the Bill and pungently exposed the obnoxious principle and policy inherent in the Bill. 'We are excluded,' said Abdurahman, '... not because we are disloyal, not because it has been proved that we are inferiorly endowed and unfit for higher education, but because, although sons of the soil, God's creatures, and British subjects, we are after all Black.' The resolution to oppose the Bill was passed unanimously, and a deputation was appointed to interview the Colonial Secretary.

The Deputation

The deputation was led by Abdurahman. What happened in Crewe's office that day caused quite a public furore and many letters to the Press. For, soon after Abdurahman had introduced the delegation and outlined their case, the Colonial Secretary, no doubt already incensed by the widely publicised reports of the Clifton Hill speech, turned his back on Abdurahman, ignored him completely for the rest of the meeting and gave his explanations and promises to the others. But they got no real redress, except insignificant concessions and assurances on minor details.

The School Board Act

While the Bill was before Parliament, where the debates showed substantial agreement between Government and Opposition (the Second Reading was passed without division) a further deputation of Coloured leaders interviewed the six MPs for Cape Town and repeated their objections. But still to no avail. The Bill passed through the House of Assembly on 10 June

1905, was promulgated on 30 June 1905, and became the legal framework on which was built the educational superiority of the white population in the years thereafter.

The Mission Schools

The years after 1905 were barren years in which, for the so-called Coloured people, the grass was always greener on the other side. They saw the erection all over the country of the many fine, whitewashed buildings of the 'Public' schools for white pupils, each with its distinctive architectural design and green playing-fields, neatly fenced and maintained (many of them still to be seen today).

And they saw themselves inevitably restricted and confined almost completely to the inferior and neglected Mission schools, which owed their origin largely to the wave of evangelical zeal which had swept Europe in the last few years of the eighteenth century, and had brought so many of the churches and missionary societies to South Africa. Dependent entirely for their establishment and maintenance on voluntary efforts, the Mission schools had first received Government recognition in 1841, in the form of meagre grants towards the salaries of teachers. But although these grants were slightly increased more than 50 years later, in 1897, the provision of the school buildings and equipment always remained wholly the responsibility of the churches and their supporters.

It was, on the one side, a sordid story of official neglect and indifference. On the other side, amongst the poorest of the poor, it was a struggle against the most severe odds: they displayed the most admirable sense of devotion and purpose, and the greatest willingness to sacrifice in order to educate their children. Apart from the funds provided by the churches themselves, the parents paid the weekly school fees, proffered the monthly offertory, baked and bought the cakes at the school bazaar, accosted their friends and employers with their school collection lists, bought tickets for the annual school concert and, in a

hundred different ways, raised the money to keep the schools going.

The Crumbs

But they were never really (nor could they be expected to be) equal to the magnitude of the task. Abdurahman, in his famous 1905 speech, denounced the Mission schools as overcrowded, inadequately-staffed, ill-equipped, poorly-housed and scholastically ineffective. But in the years thereafter he could no more than advise his followers 'to pick up such crumbs as might fall from the table,' petition the School Boards and take advantage of the arrangements, however difficult, to secure Board schools (as they came to be called) for their children. Their chances were far from good. By 1911 only 5 of the 119 School Boards had taken any action, however limited, to provide schools for 'Coloured' pupils. And ten years later, when the school statistics for 'Coloured' pupils were first separated from the general 'Non-European' group, only 3 675 of the 48 309 pupils were not in Mission schools. The position never changed in any significant way.

The Act of Union

The reason was very simple. For in 1910 the Act of Union stripped them completely of any prospect of meaningful political power, and reduced them to the sale of their vote on the election market place in exchange for idle promises and deceptive offers by white politicians. And consequently, while they often proclaimed loud and clear that it was 'the duty of the State' to provide the schools, as for the whites, they had little alternative but, in the main, to make valiant attempts to ameliorate the Mission school system.

The Teachers' League

In this endeavour they were now ably, if perhaps vainly, assisted by the growing body of 'Coloured' teachers who had organised themselves in the Teachers' League of South Africa and held their first conference in 1913. The genesis of the organisation is interesting: while many of them had belonged, along with the white

teachers, to the SATA, they now felt that, with the changed circumstances, the SATA was not helping to solve the problems of the Mission schools in which they were employed.

Resolutions

But the form and effectiveness of the requests and protests of the teachers was limited. They were strictly professional. Annual conferences were held; resolutions were passed and posted to the Education Department; deputations were sent and received; petitions were signed and submitted; they sat on and gave evidence to a never-ending stream of committees and commissions; public meetings were held and speeches were made. One such public meeting was held in the Cape Town City Hall on 17 September 1927, after which a widely representative Provincial Committee was formed whose purpose was to conduct an intensive publicity campaign and to give education 'a big push forward.' The Committee succeeded in securing the support of a large number of organisations, and arranged to hold a further series of meetings in Cape Town and the surrounding districts and, indeed, a mass demonstration on the Grand Parade!

Money

It all changed the situation in no fundamental way. True, it was not without its meliorative effect, mainly in the form of increases in grants-in-aid, including rent grants on buildings, cleaning grants, increasing responsibility for the salaries of teachers and for the provision of books and requisites. But the basic requirement remained: the provision of the capital sums required for the erection of schools. It was a simple question of money, always allocated to meet, first, the full needs of the white pupils and, as an afterthought, to do something for the 'Coloured' pupils.

The Subsidy

The availability of funds to the Provincial Administration was first determined by the Financial Relations Act of 1913, according to which the Central Government gave a

situation because they did nothing about it, the pupils are, of course, quite wrong. Their parents and grandparents might have failed (and, perhaps, in a sense, did fail) but they certainly tried and often tried very hard.

Early years

Indeed the whole history of 'Coloured education' is a story of dissatisfaction, objection and protest. And perhaps it will help everybody's perspectives — more especially those in authority who keep saying they haven't had enough time and always counsel more patience — if we take a look at the record. It goes back more than eighty years, some three generations. For history records that, particularly after 1890, there developed in the old Cape Colony a growing concern, more especially at official and Governmental

nowhere better expressed than in the precisely measured and emphatic prose of Sir Langham Dale in 1890. He occupied the high office of Superintendent-General of Education (the SGE) in the Cape and, moreover, had by then had 31 years of experience in that position. Without doubt, he reflected the contemporary views and assumptions on which educational policy was based, and he obviously spoke with very great authority and much influence.

Dale was explicit and clear. He divided the population into two groups: the persons of European descent on the one side, and those who were 'Coloured' (including African) on the other side. Society, he maintained, had put a marked line of demarcation between them: white and non-white. But let Dale speak for himself: 'No legislation, no opinions about identity of origin, no religious sentiment about the

What did you learn in school today dear little friend of mine?

level, at the large number of white children who were receiving either very little schooling or no schooling at all. There were no accurate figures. But the estimates varied between 20 000 and 400 000.

This anxious solicitude was motivated by three considerations. Firstly, the children were white and by that very token had to be educated. Secondly, increasing numbers of children who were not white, were in fact being educated, albeit in humble and inferior Mission schools. Thirdly, there were large numbers of white and 'Coloured' children being taught together in the same Mission schools.

Sir Langham Dale

But the concern went very much deeper than the mere provision of schools to educate all the white children: they had also to be given a superior education. The feeling on this aspect of the matter is perhaps

effacement of the distinctions of black and white, can delete the line. It is drawn in bold, ineffaceable lines, and the demarcation will last because it is in accord with the natural instincts of the two groups of people.'

But not only that. This was not merely a difference *per se*. It had an important social significance, because it was to be reflected in a particular political ideology and geared to a corresponding educational system. Dale made it all very clear. 'The first duty of the Government,' he submitted, 'has been assumed to be to recognise the position of the European colonists as holding the paramount influence, social and political; and to see that the sons and daughters of the colonists, and those who come hither to throw in their lot with them, should have at least such an education as their peers in Europe enjoy, with such local modifications as will fit them to maintain



With acknowledgements to Cape Argus.

alone would bring equality of education.

As their movement gained momentum, the new Financial Relations Act of 1945 abolished the twenty-year-old differential subsidy and reverted to the 50% spent on all Provincial expenditure. In the event, the Provincial Council bound itself by Ordinance to spend a total of a million pounds on Board schools for 'Coloured' pupils, in equal instalments over a period of ten years.

Coloured Education Commission

But it was all not to be. Early in the 1950s the view was increasingly being advanced that 'Coloured education' was 'a financial burden' on the resources of the Province and, for several other reasons, required official scrutiny. In 1953, in the well-worn tradition, the Provincial Council appointed its Commission to consider the financial implications and, *inter alia*, whether 'the system with its emphasis on the academic side does not lead to a feel-

ing of frustration,' and to report on 'the Coloured teacher and his training, his professional conduct and the uses he makes of facilities provided by the State.' Its Chairman (later appointed Ambassador to Italy) was de Vos Malan, SGE for many years, who had a few years earlier told white parents at Robertson that their children had to have a superior education to prepare them for baasskap.

The views of the Commission on the teachers engaged in the struggle are pertinent: there was a 'lack of professional attitude in certain groups of 'Coloured' teachers whose public appearances and utterances are such as do not conform with those commonly associated with educated and cultured people . . . they are certainly not fitted to be educators of the youth . . . the whole tone of the schools is poisoned by an attitude of bitterness and enmity towards the Provincial authorities in particular and the Europeans in general . . .' The Commission felt strongly 'that

it would be in the interests of education if such destructive elements were excluded from the profession.'

Transfer of the Schools

The Nationalist Party came to power in the Cape Provincial Council in August 1954, and thereafter provincial and governmental policy were completely aligned. The fight against the transfer of the schools to the central government was bitter and hard. But the attack on the teachers and their related organisations came from both sides. Victimisation and intimidation, dismissals, bannings and banishments followed in the wake of the report. And in the end, education was ignominiously transferred, by the Coloured Persons Education Act on 1 January 1964, to the Coloured Affairs Department, against whose very existence the teachers had fought so valiantly for 20 years since the days when Harry Lawrence called them 'a noisy coterie.' The Department was now to control and regiment every facet of the lives of the people classified as 'Coloured.'

Conclusion

Sixteen years have elapsed since that auspicious event. One thing is very clear. It was during this period, more than any other, that the concept of 'Coloured Edu-

cation,' first revealing itself clearly at the turn of the century, was given its final shape and form: of schools restricted to 'Coloured' pupils taught by 'Coloured' teachers, financed in a special way, following curricula and syllabuses specially devised and adapted to meet their 'special needs,' and administered by a separate Department of State. Its political purpose was very clear: ideologically and administratively so to control their education that they would fit without difficulty into the social and political pattern devised by their masters.

The boycott of the schools effectively illustrates how it has all boomeranged; and presents the surest signal of the abject failure of 'Coloured education' to achieve its objective. It is all very sensitively epitomised in the plaintive little refrain sung by the pupils in their heroic demonstrations on the school grounds:

*What did you learn in school today
dear little friend of mine?
We learnt that West is always best
and white is usually right,
That rich and poor will always be
and that's what makes us free.*

With acknowledgement to the CAPE ARGUS which published a shortened version on 5 June 1980.

Obituary

Kathleen Bobbias

IT was a great shock to me to hear, on my return after being away for four months, that Kathleen Bobbias had died on September 4 1980.

Kathleen became Treasurer of Somerset West Branch in 1959, Treasurer and Secretary in 1964, and she carried on with both offices until two years ago.

Even then she carried on being Treasurer.

It was said of Kathleen in the weeks of March 1969 that without her the Branch would cease to exist. This has continued to be the case ever since. The Branch has been, and will be, very lost without her.

MARY SCHURR