

# School and State: A Neat Solution to the Neatby Dispute

by Daniel Hager

**B**efore there was Rudolf Flesch there was Hilda Neatby.

In 1955 Flesch published *Why Johnny Can't Read*, a bestseller that charged the U.S. educational system with malfeasance for not correctly teaching young students how to read.

Two years earlier Hilda Neatby (1904–75), a University of Saskatchewan history professor, rocked the boat north of the border with *So Little for the Mind*. Illiteracy was so rampant in Canadian schools that it was considered normal: “It is simply assumed that many secondary school boys and girls cannot read.”<sup>1</sup> But this deficiency, Neatby argued, was merely a symptom of a deeper ill: a de-emphasis of learning in favor of turning out students who were well “socialized” but whose gross level of ignorance was of little import. High school students could not understand math problems “expressed in perfectly grammatical and unambiguous English,” but so what? “It is never suggested that there should be a *pons asinorum* over which non-readers may not pass.”<sup>2</sup>

Like Flesch's, Neatby's book hit raw nerves. By December 1953, only two months after publication, it had already gone through a second printing and into its second edition. In a preface to that edition she dealt with the furor of protest she had

aroused. She denied having “passed a sweeping condemnation” on the educational establishment and explained her purpose with another subtle jab, citing a French expression without translation: “Je n'oppose pas; je ne propose pas; j'expose.”<sup>3</sup> She also responded to critics who claimed that her alleged “intemperance of language” had provoked “hostility” in “educational breasts”: “I refuse to believe that any of our responsible educational leaders would be deterred by faults in the form of my criticism from remedying the weaknesses which I may have succeeded in exposing.”<sup>4</sup> *Touché encore*.

But both Flesch and Neatby, despite their early triumphs, eventually lost out to the educationists. Flesch published a 1981 sequel, *Why Johnny Still Can't Read*, detailing how the educationists had mollified incensed parents and other critics by talking about reforms but failing to make substantive changes. Today the public schools still turn out a scandalously high proportion of students who are crippled by the printed page. And in Canada the contemporary schools appear to be in disarray, according to the 1993 book *Rituals of Failure* by journalist Sandro Contenta. Inmates are suffused by demoralization, dispiritedness, and a sense of futility. Students' resistance to authority translates into resistance to learning.

The question provoked by Neatby and Flesch and other mid-twentieth-century crit-

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ics of publicly funded schooling is, how can it be improved? The debate rages yet today. But in light of a half century of additional ineffectualness since Neatby and Flesch burst into prominence, it is clear that the question itself needs to be improved.

It should be restated thus: Why should there be any publicly funded schooling at all?

The most powerful argument *against* tax-supported schools was listed by educational historian Ellwood Cubberley among the reasons propounded *for* them in the first half of the nineteenth century: “That the taking over of education by the State is . . . the exercise of the State’s inherent right to self-preservation and improvement”; and “That only a system of state-controlled schools can be free to teach whatever the welfare of the State may demand.”<sup>5</sup>

Such intrinsic power granted to the state should provoke alarm. The state’s interests are allowed to supersede those of parents. The schooling structure becomes a political jousting ground for groups with competing views about what the “welfare of the State may demand.” Since social control is implicit, the system attracts persons with a hunger for domination whether for personal or ideological reasons. The goal of social indoctrination and manipulation may foster not the advancement of enlightenment but the maintenance of ignorance. In the absence of competition, the state enterprise is enabled to function in the historic tradition of socialism: Political and administrative power is retained through the overstating of achievements and the shifting of blame for failures.

## Maintaining Control

The market for literacy is 100 percent of the population. A competitive, totally private learning industry paid directly by customers would seek assiduously to satisfy every last one with maximum value for the prices charged. By contrast, the publicly funded schooling bureaucracy’s overriding concern is not to teach youngsters how to read but rather to keep its control intact, its

revenue flows unstanching, and its critics at bay.

The United States began its journey into state-controlled educational bureaucracy with the “common school” movement that first bore fruit in the 1830s. The so-called “father of the common school” was Horace Mann, who as initial secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education pioneered the path for imposing statewide standards and curricula on all local schools. Joel Spring noted that Mann was a phrenologist and temperance activist who hoped that “the mental faculties could be developed and shaped to create a moral and good individual and, consequently, a moral and just society.”<sup>6</sup> He quotes from Mann’s diary while Mann was contemplating the 1837 offer to lead the Massachusetts Board: “When will a society, like a mother, take care of *all* her children?”<sup>7</sup> On accepting the position, Mann wrote, “Henceforth, so long as I hold this office, I devote myself to the supremest welfare of mankind upon earth.”<sup>8</sup>

Mann’s best-known Canadian counterpart was Egerton Ryerson, who was chief superintendent of schools for Ontario and who centralized provincial authority over local schools under the School Act of 1846. Sandro Contenta cited a scholar’s assertion that “Ryerson set up the first Canadian system of mass social control” and also noted that Ryerson “believed a publicly funded, universal school system would create stability by training the population in their duties towards the political order.”<sup>9</sup>

A century later the primary problem with the training, according to Hilda Neatby, was that it had been commandeered by the disciples of the American educational theorist John Dewey. She wrote, “Dewey, more than any other single person, must be held responsible for the intellectual, cultural and moral poverty of much modern teaching.”<sup>10</sup>

Neatby had come to national prominence as a member of the so-called Massey Commission, which from 1949 to 1951 investigated Canadian cultural life and the threat of cultural domination by the national neighbor to the south. The aridity of the provincial schooling systems became clear

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Hilda Neatby

during the commission's public hearings, and afterwards its head, Vincent Massey, who became Canadian governor general from 1952 to 1957, "pushed [Neatby] to write a book on the state of primary and secondary education in Canada" and secretly provided financial backing for the project.<sup>11</sup>

Neatby delineated "the intellectual barbarism and moral anarchy which are threatening Canadian schools."<sup>12</sup> She found a "mania for equality and for the 'socialized' existence" and "a scorn of the intellect" that were rooted in Dewey's slogan, "Not knowledge or information, but self-realization, is the goal."<sup>13</sup> But Deweyite efforts to prepare children for socialized participation in democracy would be ultimately contradictory: "Experts talk constantly of training for leadership, but their whole system is one of conditioning for servitude. This is disastrous to the well-being of democracy which depends for safety on the free development of the highest qualities of gifted individuals."<sup>14</sup> Neatby perceived incipient tyranny: "For all his talk of democracy, the educator is generally authoritarian and dogmatic. Teacher-training institutions in general exist to indoctrinate; their task is not to discover truth, but to convey 'the truth.'"<sup>15</sup>

## Not Alone

Neatby and Flesch were not the only North Americans during the mid-century to write about educational malfeasance.

Bernard Iddings Bell in 1949 stated the widespread belief that "the millions of dollars which we devote every year to high-school education are, for the most part, money spent for the retarding of intelligence, the discouragement of efficiency, the stunting of character."<sup>16</sup> Mortimer Smith wrote the same year, "What borders on the criminal is the poor teaching and neglect of those subjects that deal with the history of ideas and ideals, a knowledge of which is essential to all youth who would assume their place in society as thinking, feeling human beings."<sup>17</sup>

The underlying message of Bell's and Smith's criticisms is that the political institution of public schooling needed to be captured from the opposition and controlled by those in agreement with them. But the framers of the federal Constitution understood the necessity of fragmenting political institutions so as to keep them too weak to foster tyranny. Bell approvingly acknowledged that "the sole purpose of the State, as the founders of America saw things, the only justification for government, is to keep people from interfering with one another. A nation exists for the sake of its free citizens and not an enslaved citizenry for the sake of the nation."<sup>18</sup>

But then he took a leap in an unexpected direction. His first recommendation for reform, emphatic enough that he wrote it in italics, was that "*the teaching profession must be organized more widely and definitely than it now is, to see to it that the public is aroused, first of all, to insist on adequate financial support of education and, secondly, to resist all political control, all attempts to transform the schools, colleges, and universities into agencies for the spreading of government-devised propaganda.*"<sup>19</sup>

The irony is that a half century later the teachers *are* organized but have become entrenched political instruments for the spreading of statist propaganda.

The logical means for keeping public schooling from malfeasance is to shut it down entirely. It becomes suitably weak when it does not exist.

"There are few agreements in education," Contenta wrote. "Everyone and their rela-

tives seem to have a different idea of what schools should be doing.”<sup>20</sup> That comment sounds like an argument for total privatization of the learning industry, the abolition of tax-supported schooling. Consumers have different ideas about which products and services best suit them. They naturally seek value in the marketplace. A completely privatized learning market would be no different. Competitive providers would seek to maximize their own gain by offering a variety of learning services tailored to reach different market segments with the greatest possible efficiency at the lowest possible cost.

The ritual herding of the young into state-prescribed confinement persists mainly because it is just that, a ritual of such hoariness as to be largely unquestioned. Fifty years after Hilda Neatby offended her nation’s government educational establishment, the way to the superior system she advocated is becoming clearer—get govern-

ment out of it and let the nonpoliticized free market take over. □

1. Hilda Neatby, *So Little for the Mind* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1953), p. 157.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. vi.
4. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
5. Ellwood P. Cubberley, *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), p. 121.
6. Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642–1985* (New York: Longman, Inc., 1986), p. 83.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
9. Sandro Contenta, *Rituals of Failure* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1993), p. 14.
10. Neatby, p. 24.
11. Michael Hayden, *So Much To Do, So Little Time—The Writings of Hilda Neatby* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983), p. 32.
12. Neatby, p. 238.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 236, 321, 251.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 116–17.
16. Bernard Iddings Bell, *Crisis in Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949), pp. 54–55.
17. Mortimer Smith, *And Madly Teach* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1949), p. 11.
18. Bell, pp. 181–82.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
20. Contenta, p. 11.



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