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THE EYES AND EARS OF THE SECRETARY

44 Canfield Gardens
London, N.W.6.
England
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Mr. Richard Nolte
Executive Director
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535 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10017
USA

Dear Mr. Nolte:

This newsletter is the third in a series of newsletters in which I examine the operation of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in England and Wales.

In this section of the ongoing essay about the Inspectorate, I analyze the HMI's advisory and informational role in relation to the Secretary of State for Education and Science.

I remind you that the pagination of this newsletter follows the numbering of the continuing essay as a whole.

We can now explore this most important HMI activity.

Sincerely,

Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

IV. THE SECRETARY'S EYES, EARS, AND PROFESSIONAL COUNSEL

When one asks an HMI to describe his various tasks, he invariably claims first that his most important assignment is advising the Secretary on matters of educational policy. Since the HMIs themselves see this as their most important role, we must seriously ask how others see this role and ask to examine the process of delivering advice. This examination must be based more on published documentary evidence and some hearsay than actual first hand observation or enquiry of the Secretary, because it has not been possible to arrange interviews at the highest level of the civil service or political authority; and the liklihood that this interloping American interviewer would get the most candid account and evaluation of the HMI role from the Permanent Secretary or the Secretary of State is not great.

Having qualified what follows, let me say that I have no reason to doubt the veracity of the published materials or of the hearsay passed on to me by HMIs and civil servants. But judgments based on this part of the study must be considered to be somewhat weaker than those about the HMIs in the school.

In evidence to the Parliamentary Select Committee, the Senior Chief Inspector commented on the process of advising decision-makers at Curzon Street: "What we are doing is relating what we see in one place to others and beginning to form some generalized judgments and offering them to the Department as professional advisers[1]." And in response to a question about whether or not advice from HMIs is so identified, the Permanent Under Secretary in the Department of Education and Science said:

> I do not think that normally the Inspectorate's views or advice on a problem would be formally isolated in that sense; I do not think there is any need for it. Normally, in the emergence of a policy or in its formulation, moving down to its detailed publication and trying to get it working on the ground, members of the Inspectorate are concerned in all of these processes or involved in discussions and arguments in the formative process, and then in the translation to action.[2]

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1. SC p34, s119
2. SC p34, s122

The impression which one takes from both the Senior Chief Inspector's testimony and that of the senior civil servant is that there is an organic process by which the judgments based on Inspectorate experience are integrated into the general decision making process. But is this the correct impression?

The suggestion that there may be problems in the delivery of HMI advice to the decision makers in the Department emerges from two sources. First, Lord Boyle, the former Conservative Minister of Education, made some revealing comments in an interview:

> We've said nothing about them (the HMIs) in this discussion up till now and I fear that rather tells its own tale. Looking back over the period we're thinking of, about fifteen years, the Inspectorate has played less of a part in policy making than I for one would have liked to see. I think this was certainly true over the whole question of secondary reorganisation. When I look back to my time at the Ministry, I associate inspectors a lot with the briefing I got from going to particular schools, as local informants about schools. Sometimes they played an active part in Ministerial discussions, for example, Cyril English, the first FE (Further Education), as it were, Senior Chief Inspector. I suspect it's been a bigger role in some local authorities - for example when the London inspectors came before the Education Select Committee, they gave a rather impressive performance, I thought[3].

The picture which one gets from Boyle's remarks is that of a rather ineffective role for the HMI at Curzon Street, perhaps reflecting on personalities, not intrinsic institutional merit. But then in response to a question about the problem of access to the Minister for Senior Chief Inspector, he indicated that the indirect lines of communication at the highest level might diminish HMI influence in decisions:

> I think this may well be so. I don't think there was a sufficiently strong tradition that when you had a major discussion the Senior Chief Inspector should normally be invited in. Equally, I'm afraid I must say in fairness, I think there may have been personal reasons over the years why this tended not to happen. But for whatever reason, he didn't play a big enough part in policy making in the Department, whoever he was. The sad thing was that occasionally one would meet an inspector, say on the train, a senior one, who would talk interestingly and extremely fairly about the position in Curzon Street itself[4].

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3. pp 130-131, THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION, Maurice Kogan, ed,, Penguin, London, 1971.

4. Kogan, p131

The overall impression one has of the reason for the inefficacy of the HMIs in their advisory role is that there may be an institutional impediment but that the primary problem has been weak Senior Chief Inspectors or overly protective senior civil servants.

The second source for evidence about problems in the HMI's ministerial advisory role is a former Senior Chief Inspector, Mr. Cyril English. His analysis of the problem focuses on the institutional problem and the inherent constraints of an advice-giving role:

> An inspector is an adviser and must be so, and should be so, in my view. The trouble with advice is that you lose it -- I am being completely frank. You give advice on a topic, it may be with Ministers, it may be Senior Administrators. Nobody throws it out through being bloody-minded, as you put it, it is not this at all. You lose it and people come back with it if they disagree with it or they cannot make it work. You cannot follow it though, you lose sight of it....[5].

This testimony seems to have two threads somewhat confused: First, that advice is only that, not an occasion for action; second, and more important for our purposes, that in major policy matters the Inspectorate is not always clearly involved or that its involvement is such that its advice goes through too many hands after it leaves the Inspectorate.

It is difficult to evaluate the Boyle and English comments without access to still secret papers and the candid comments of politicians and civil servants still serving. However, HMIs -- including some Chief Inspectors -- and civil servants -- up to the rank of Assistant Secretary -- have given me their views on the role of HMI advice in policy making in the Department of Education and Science. So some judgments can be made.

A senior Staff Inspector suggested that one must distinguish between policy issues which are politically sensitive and about which there is party disagreement and those which are not a matter of political dispute. As one would expect, in the former the role of the HMI is marginal, in the latter it is more central.

An example of politically sensitive issue is that of secondary school reorganization, where the Labor Party has strongly supported the move to comprehensive schools and the Conservative Party opposed it. In the seesaw of party power, the Inspectorate has played only a limited role: it has been mainly one of helping local authorities develop plans which are consistent with the position of the political party in power at the time and only to a limited degree has it contributed to the development of actual policy on the issue. The only contribution to policy in this area seems to have been in providing constraints

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5. SC,p46,s175.

through suggestions about official Departmental statements (called circulars) on the issue.

In regard to secondary school reorganization, it seems worthwhile to question Lord Boyle's criticism that the Inspectorate did not play a vigorous role in policy development. This comment seems especially unfair, because it appears that both Labor and Conservative Ministers came to Curzon Street with closed political mandates concerning the issue: HMIs do not change party policies.

A case where the Inspectorate seems to have played an important policy development role, at least in its own eyes and also in the eyes of some authorities inside and outside Curzon Street, was the decision to raise the school leaving age and the development of strategies for doing so. This particular decision was authorized by the Education Act of 1944 and was considered to be a desirable action by both political parties. Whether or not the historical facts will support the view of some Inspectors that their suggestions prompted the decision to actually implement ROSLA, (the raising of the school leaving age) only time will tell. But it is quite clear that the HMIs have been intimately involved throughout the very convoluted decision making process which will finally lead to the actual raising of the school leaving age to 16 in the next school year.

The example of the role which the HMIs played in ROSLA contributes some insight into how they influence policy by acting as "the Secretary eyes and ears." About a year ago the HMIs in the Northwest Division started making enquiries of schools about what substantive curriculum plans had been made in each school in order to prepare for ROSLA. They found that almost no planning had been done in regard to curriculum; only in regard to physical plant. Then the Divisional Inspector in the Northwest wrote a memo about the problem to the Senior Chief Inspector, who asked each division in the country to report on the state of readiness for ROSLA in its areas. After receiving the reports and discussing the findings with senior civil servants and the Secretary, the Inspectorate recommended a major program of national support for implementing curriculum innovation for ROSLA during this academic year. It was acting as the source of information for the Secretary that put the Inspectorate in a position to make an important contribution to future success in a crucial area of educational policy.

A final example of the role of the Inspectorate in policy development and implementation, which falls in the politically sensitive category but is not itself yet an issue of party disagreement, is that of teacher training reform. Since this particular exercise is still in process and is a matter of great current controversy, I can only offer the outline of the Inspectorate's role: the details either I do not know or know in confidence. The value of considering this example is that it lies somewhere between an issue where there is great party disagreement, such as secondary school reorganization, and an issue where there is consensus about correct policy, such as ROSLA.

Recently a Royal Commission chaired by Lord James of Rusholme, Vice Chancellor of York University, published a controversial report on the training of teachers in England. This report recommended a complete re-structuring of teacher training into three cycles, which include liberal arts, professional and inservice, continuing education. Also, it suggested new forms of control over teacher education, which would remove the supervision over colleges of education from universities. These are the outlines of the proposals, not the details, which for present purposes need no further comment. The important point is that there has been violent disagreement with the proposals from various educational lobbies. However, this disagreement has not been translated into a matter of partisan political controversy. This is the context for an analysis of the HMI role.

The relationship between the HMIs and the Teacher Training Branch of the Department of Education and Science is somewhat closer than in other areas: the Chief Inspector and his Staff Inspectors in the Teacher Training Section of the Inspectorate share offices with the civil service head of the Teacher Training Branch. The senior civil servant in the Teacher Training Branch, Mr. Harding, sees the involvement of the HMIs in decisions in his Branch as almost complete. To illustrate the integration of HMIs into the decision making progress, he read to me some pages of his appointments diary, which indicated that most of the meetings he attended would involve the Inspectorate. It is in this institutional context that one must look at the current interest in teacher training and the Inspectorate's role in this matter.

In the late'60s there was much pressure for a thorough enquiry into teacher training. For assorted reasons, some administrative, some political, the Labor Secretary did not want to mount a full-scale enquiry, so he asked the civil servants and the Inspectorate to suggest an alternative procedure for dealing with the problems in teacher training. The alternative which they suggested was for the regional agencies responsible for teacher training, the Area Training Organizations based at universities, to undertake regional enquiries of their own, which would be coordinated by the Department. This alternative was viewed as a way to induce change in teacher education through self-evaluation. The Chief Inspector played a central role in developing this policy alternative and organizing its implementation.

But by the summer of 1970 there was a general election; and one of the planks of the Conservative platform was that the party would undertake a full scale and independent enquiry into teacher training. However, it should be understood that there was no party disagreement over the need for changes in teacher education: the only disagreement then was the relatively minor one over the mode of exploring possible changes.

After the Conservatives won, the Secretary, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, appointed a small commission to work full time and to report on teacher training within one calendar year. The Inspectorate and civil service played a role in drafting the terms of reference for the commission and incanvassing names for membership. Usually in the organization of such a commission the Department would appoint both a civil servant and an Inspector as assessors for the commission. However, because it was intended to keep this commission small, only one assessor was appointed: the Chief Inspector for Teacher Training, Mr. A. Luffman. So throughout the deliberations of the James Commission, the Inspectorate was represented. And the HMI was the man who organized all of the Department's representations to the Commission; of course in consultation with the senior civil servants.

Since the report has been published, there has been a massive public outcry from various educational lobbies. And the Chief Inspector and the senior civil servants in the Teacher Training Branch have been made responsible for coordinating the consultation process, which will precede any decision by the Minister about the recommendations of the James Commission.

The first advice to the Secretary was that she should move slowly in dealing with the recommendations in order to allow some sort of consensus to develop.

The process of consultation involves the HMIs first as "eyes and ears." HMIs throughout the country have been invited to comment on the report and to forward to the Department all memos on the report prepared by various groups and individuals in their areas. And before any final decision is made by the Secretary, there will undoubtedly be a formal memorandum prepared by the Inspectorate advising her about the HMI's views on the substance of the report.

One must conclude that the HMIs have been intimately involved in the whole policy making process concerning teacher training in Britain. At this point in time it is impossible for an outsider to assess the relative weight placed on the Inspectorate's advice, for it has been completely integrated into the policy development process in this case, which is itself fair testimony to the importance of the Inspectorate as adviser to the Secretary.

After considering all of these cases, one can better understand the comments of Lord Boyle and former Senior Chief Inspector English. It is probably quite true that in the most fundamental areas of educational policy the role of the Inspectorate is limited, for these areas, because they are so fundamental, are also the areas where there is likely to be political disagreement. Fundamental educational issues raise problems concerning values: and it is disagreement over values which is the essence of political dispute. When there is party disagreement, a civil servant -- even an expert such as an HMI

-- is least likely to be in a position to affect policy outcomes. We find this to be true in the case of secondary reorganization.

Where there is some degree of party consensus-- such as in the case of raising the school leaving age -- then the Inspectorate plays a very important role in policy development. And even where there is a great deal of controversy and even potential party disagreement -- such as teacher training -- as long as there is some agreement between the major political parties, the Inspectorate can still have an important role in policy making.

In this analysis of the HMI as adviser to the Secretary, we have looked at the actual role played by the Inspectorate, not at the substance of the positions taken by the Inspectorate. Such an evaluation of substantive positions is not appropriate here. It is important to note that a judgment about the efficacy of HMI advice entails absolutely nothing about the quality of it.

Now that we have looked at the organisation and operation of the HMI, it will be helpful to look at other inspectorates for comparison.

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