'The belief that the appearance of the modern popular press stemmed from Forster’s Education Act in 1870 is a myth . . . In the late 1860s most people were literate, most children had some schooling - and most parents were paying for it’.

PROGRESS in education, many people would stress, does not occur of its own volition. It requires heroic political action; action like that undertaken by such pioneers as R.A. Butler in 1944 or that of W.E. Forster in 1870. Forster, we are told, with his famous Act of exactly 100 years ago laid down the very foundations of our present educational system.

Such centenary praise of Forster implies retrospective condemnation of the conditions that he had to reform. The impression that there was no education to speak of before 1870 is indeed quite common, especially among younger people. I find it curious that many have completely lost perspective on this subject. To me the evidence about how much education was growing before 1870 indicates that if there had been no Forster Act at all developments would not have been so devastating as is popularly imagined.

Take first some indirect evidence - the evidence on development of literacy. Consider the early 19th-century incentives to become literate by self-help. Growing incomes were creating a demand for more entertainment. In a pre-radio age the printed page was a more predominant vehicle for this. As a consequence there was, well before 1870, an expanding market in popular literature from the penny magazine and serialized fiction such as Pickwick Papers down to Almanacks, Ballads and last dying speeches. The innovation of steam printing in the 1830s brought revolutionary cost reductions in the production of newspapers. The belief that the appearance of the modern popular press stemmed from Forster’s Education Act in 1870 is a myth. A
popular newspaper readership had much earlier origins and received a particular fillip in the 1850s after the removal of the taxes on paper.

**Working Class Literacy**

Next consider some reports on working class literacy. As early as 1839 a special survey in Hull found that over 92 per cent could read. A similar survey in the mining districts of Northumberland and Durham in 1840 showed that four out of five miners - 80 per cent - could read and that more than half of them had learned to write. One authority on the subject, Mr R. K. Webb, believes that in the late 1830s over two-thirds of the working classes were already literate. The Registrar General’s report for 1870 shows that 80 per cent of the men marrying in that year were able to write. (Since the average age of marriage at this time was about 28 years, these grooms had left school about 17 years before, in 1853. But a more appropriate figure to test the literacy rate of young school leavers in 1870 is the 1891 census report. This showed that 94 per cent of the males could write.) The introduction of the penny post in 1840 had of course been an obvious encouragement to ordinary people to develop the habit of letter writing -especially with their growing mobility in a new railway age.

Consider next the evidence on schooling. According to Government returns the number of pupils in schools in England and Wales rose from about 11 millions in 1833 to 21 millions in 1858. Clearly the habit of schooling had penetrated all social classes by the mid-century. It is wrong to assume that before 1870 the mainspring of this education was private philanthropy inspired mainly by religious zeal. Charity and the Church played a significant part, of course; but individual family effort was the predominating force. Reports on the 1830s and 40s show that the fees paid by working-class families covered most of the school costs.

**Private Schools Mainstay**

Forster’s Act of 1870 was not the first step in Government intervention in 19th-century education. That occurred in 1833 and took the form of a system of
subsidies or direct grants to private schools. Private schools in those days were the mainstay of education for all classes. But although these annual grants of Parliament steadily grew between 1833 and 1870 they never became the predominant source of school income. As early as 1841 parents in Bristol were paying £32,000 annually in school fees, and this sum alone was larger than the Government grant to the country as a whole.

In 1861 the Newcastle Commission published what was probably the most exhaustive 19th-century special investigation into education. It was this body that reported two and a half million scholars in day schools. It concluded that no serious gaps existed in the physical provision of schools. There was continued need for State aid to education, it argued, but this should take the form of a strengthening of the existing system of direct grants to the private schools. The Commission reported that the number of children found to be attending schools when compared with the total population gave a proportion of about one in eight, the same as in Holland and better than France, although not quite so good as that in Prussia. The Newcastle Commission concluded that almost everyone received some amount of school education at some period or other. This was in 1861. I find it curious that when introducing his Education Bill in 1870, W. E. Forster made hardly any reference to the Newcastle Commission's exhaustive enquiry. Instead he relied upon a hurriedly assembled report of conditions in four selected industrial towns in 1869 by officials in his own Education Department. According to one of these reports, Forster told Parliament, a quarter of the children in Liverpool were receiving no education. His estimates, however, were based on the assumption that the children normally left school at the age of 13. The Newcastle Commission had reported that the age of 11 was more typical.

On the latter assumption the numbers receiving no schooling in Liverpool would have been practically nil; and this was pointed out to him in the Commons by Robert Montagu. Even Forster's own figures conceded that three-quarters of all children were already in school. And Forster himself would have been the first to stress to a
20th century audience that his Act of 1870 was intended primarily not to create education from scratch but simply to augment it. As he told Parliament, the object was to complete the existing voluntary system by filling up the gaps.

Today, a century later, the situation is reversed. State schools provide most of the education whilst private provision fills the gaps. How do we explain the rapidity of the transformation? One answer lies in the type of administrative machinery that Forster set up, a machinery which seems to have gathered its own momentum and to have developed far beyond his original aspirations. Forster intended simply that the Government should make strict enquiries into educational needs in each area and only to set up school boards in those areas where a significant deficiency was proved.

As it happened many officials were often over-ambitious in their reports of these needs. Gladstone himself could not stop them. He protested in 1873 that four-fifths of the children in his own constituency were already provided for and that for the remainder further provision in three additional infant schools was being organized. Why set up a school board, he protested, which in comparison with voluntary arrangements already being made was of necessity cumbrous and costly?

At a time of rising population, the question soon arose on who should provide the schooling for the net increase in children, the new school boards or the voluntary system? Soon after 1870 the Education Department (not Parliament) took upon itself to establish the rule that where school boards existed, however small, they had the first right to supply the new deficiency. Even Forster, the author of the 1870 Act, could not stop this administrative horse from galloping. He protested, at a meeting in 1878, that those who ought to decide on new schools were those who were willing to build them. The Education Department, Forster proclaimed, and here I use his own words: ‘would find that they had engaged in a most obnoxious business which they could only transact with odium if they tried to take upon themselves to decide whether any fresh call was necessary or not’. But now out of office Forster was powerless. New board schools appeared with increasing momentum throughout the country. Where excess board school capacity was created, the boards were able to
reduce their fees and to drive out many private establishments. Many private schools indeed were forced take-overs by the board school system and swelled the number of board schools that the 1870 Act was subsequently claimed to have created.

**Differential Effect**

As previously stated the 1870 Act arrived at a time when a considerable amount of education was already available. In the late 1860s most people were literate, most children had some schooling; and parents were paying fees for it. The progress that was already in train would surely have continued had there been no Forster Act. By how much did the new legislation step up educational progress still further? What was its differential effect? The more the Government money to finance board schools came from the rich the bigger the boost would have been. The biggest part of tax revenue, however, came from the working class, for the bulk of the revenue came from indirect tax payments such as customs and excise.\(^1\) Progressive taxation was not introduced until the 20th century.

All this suggests is that governments after 1870 increasingly did people's educational spending for them. Much Government educational expenditure, in other words, did not make for a net increase in education, only a switching of power between those who controlled it. This sort of observation and evidence certainly challenges the usual interpretation of the 1870 Act. The differential effect of that Act is difficult to estimate precisely; but it was a differential effect only. The socialization of existing schools in 1870 should not allow us to be misled into giving the excessive credit to Forster's Act that is usually accorded.

**Onus on Parents**

\(^1\) Not all indirect taxes are regressive; their final incidence is often difficult to determine precisely. However, by the same token, we certainly cannot assume that most of the public education funds came from the rich.
Although often described as the architect of the present system of education in England, Forster would have opposed it in some very important respects. The first draft of his Education Bill was presented to the Cabinet in October 1869. In it he argued that in pursuing the objective of filling the gaps in education it was necessary that there should be the least possible encouragement to parents to neglect their duties, the least possible expenditure of the public money, and the least possible injury to existing efficient private schools.

Forster considered each of four plans which were at the time being vigorously mooted. The first was that of the Birmingham League and the one that foreshadowed our 20th-century system. The League proposed that local authorities should establish non-fee-paying schools, that such schools should teach no religious dogma, and that they be built and maintained by rates and taxes (the rates paying one-third of the cost and the taxes the remainder). These schools were to be managed by the ratepayers but to be inspected to a standard set by the central government. Mr Forster objected to this plan; in his word, it was ‘too logical a piece of machinery’. Such a system, he argued, would quickly undermine the existing private schools. It would also relieve the parents of all the payment and destroy their necessary involvement in their children’s education.

**Aided Schools**

Another of the four plans which Forster dismissed stood at the opposite pole. The National Educational Union wanted voluntary schools to be aided by increased Government subsidies. This, Forster asserted, would be insufficient to meet the problems of the impoverished areas. Forster finally accepted the plan proposed by Sir Robert Lowe. Its ruling idea was compulsory school provision if and where necessary but not otherwise. The country was to be divided into districts and officials in each district were to determine whether board schools were necessary. This, then, was the national system that Forster had finally in mind. This was certainly not our modern national system of State schools. Forster’s was only a ‘system’ in the sense of a very efficiently and systematically organized patching-up job.
Forster’s speeches make clear that his overriding objective was simply to secure for all children in the country access to good schools. His final plan was not designed to please any one class or party and it certainly did not aim to superimpose a homogeneous standard throughout the land. In pursuing these aims Forster incurred the hostility of the doctrinaire radicals of the Birmingham League on the one hand and Non-conformists on the other. The talents of the politician who seeks a shrewd workable compromise solution were all their certainly. But his speeches and actions were clearly those of the sincerely dedicated social reformer who champions the needs not only of children but also of vigorous and healthy family life.

Forster would be extremely uncomfortable with the crown which is put upon his head by some 20th-century educationists. While he wanted to cover the country with good schools most of them were still to be based on the voluntary principle and to continue enjoying direct grants from the central government. It is ironic that exactly 100 years later in 1970, the Schools Commission recommended the scrapping of the English direct grant system altogether.

The Universalists

Two principles feature in the debate on social welfare provision in the 20th century, the principle of universality and the principle of selectivity. Most educationalists today are, like Horrace Mann, universalists - that is, wanting government provision for rich and poor alike. The principle which guided Forster was that of selectivity. In his own words, the object ‘is to complete the present voluntary system, to fill up gaps, sparing the public money where it can be done without, procuring as much as we can the assistance of the parents’. His new board schools, which were to fill the gaps, were themselves a classic exercise in selectivity, that is an exercise in discriminating Government provision. While the direct grant system was doing a useful job in 1870, and was to he continued, it would not adequately cover the deprived areas of education. In Forster’s words to Parliament: ‘Where State help had been most wanted, State help has been least given, and where it was desirable that State power should be most felt it was not felt at all’.
Another important difference between the modern educationist and Forster is that he did not want free schooling. Even in his new board schools fees would be charged. If the schooling was provided free, he argued, other sections of the education system would begin to clamour also for enough State aid to make their education free. To relieve the average parent from payments for the education of his child would be mischievous and unwise. Generally speaking, the enormous majority of the parents were able, and would continue to be able, to pay the fees. In the case of the very poorest sections the school board was allowed to give what were called 'free tickets' to cover the fees. 'We do not give up school fees', Forster told Parliament, 'and indeed we keep to the present proportions, namely, of about one third raised from the parents, one-third out of public taxes and one-third out of local funds.'

Parental Choice

Perhaps the biggest difference between Forster and most modern educationists lies in his vigorous defence of the principle of parental choice. His tenacity in defending this principle was demonstrated in the few months after the Act had been passed. His opponents in the Birmingham League had turned upon section 25 of his Act which made the provision for supplying poor parents with free tickets.

This provision brought out 'the religious difficulty' in all its starkness. The practice of using local rates to provide parents with money to pay fees at denominational schools was savagely questioned. But the real issue, as Forster now saw it, was whether a poor parent who was unable to pay his child's school fees, was to be at liberty to choose between a denominational and secular school or was to be compelled to send the child to a school of the latter description - that is, to have 'Hobson's Choice' only. He came down firmly on the right of the poor parent to choose between available schools. This indeed was the reply that he made in response to Mr Dixon's Parliamentary attack in 1872.

Forster's Vision
Forster’s championship of parental choice of school fees and of the direct grant system clearly separate him then from most educationists a century later. Such differences are a matter of individual philosophy or taste. The task here has been to get the historical record straight. The claims of our modern system to a common ancestry with W. E. Forster must be severely qualified in the ways shown. Compulsory, Universal, Free and Comprehensive; of these four modern features of our present system Forster would have given his support to the first two only. He did not want a system that was what he called ‘too logical’. Voluntary provision complemented by really efficient, but marginal, government aid and inspection - that was his vision. Education had not become, and Forster did not want it to become, the exclusive property of politics.