

OPEN MINDEDNESS AND GOOD FAITH

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'For the philosopher clarity is a matter of good faith.' The Marquis de Vauvenargues, as usual, hit a nail on the head. Yet it was misleading thus to limit his statement to the philosophers. For the point must apply equally to everyone essaying, either to discover and to proclaim the theoretical truth about something, or to devise and to implement a practical truth about something, or to devise and to implement a practical policy for achieving desired ends. Nor is it only clarity which is mandatory here. As I propose to argue now, critical openmindedness, both about whether in fact proposed beliefs are true and about whether proposed policies are or will be effective, also is, and just as much, a matter of good faith.

I

There is one imperative which directs and unifies all the work of Sir Karl Popper; who surely is, at least in the English speaking world, the greatest living philosopher. Whether our concern is with the advancement of learning or with practical policies, we have always to be ready, first to recognise our mistakes, and then to learn from them. So, Popper contends, in the natural and social sciences, we should proceed by the method of conjectures and refutations. Rationality requires there that we be, if not forever actually testing and rechecking, then at least always ready, when occasion arises, to criticise, and to attend to criticism of, our conjectures. When and to the extent that any of these is discovered to have been mistaken then it must, and the sooner the better, be either amended or replaced by another. (Or, if it remains the best available theory, then the objection must be frankly admitted and clearly recorded as a difficulty; and then put on one side, but prominently, until such time as either it can be fully overcome or else the previous best theory is abandoned in favour of a better.)

Again, in the field of public policy, it is mainly because it is so impossible to assess the effects and to correct the mistakes of wholesale, revolutionary, Utopian, social engineering that Popper urges us to reform, but to reform always and only piecemeal and tentatively. In the spirit of Popper, if not following any specific Popperian exhortation, I suggest that the ideal would be to build into every social policy machinery for the independent assessment of all the actual consequences of implementing that policy - actual consequences some of which are bound to have been unforeseen, and hence unintended. Abundant experience of that most powerful of all social forces, inertia, indicates that it would also normally be prudent to provide that - whether by what in the USA are called sunset laws, or otherwise - new programmes should after some years, unless a positive decision is made for their continuation, simply lapse.

In all his emphasis upon the imperative of learning from our mistakes Popper is displaying and exploiting an essential logical connection: between, on the one hand, rationality and, on the other hand, a critical concern to learn. What I propose to do here is to deploy the thesis that there is a similarly essential link between, on the one hand, both these two things together, and on the other, sincerity of theoretical or - as the case may be - practical purpose. Here lies the connection between the two terms of my title: the openmindedness is that of persons both criticising without inhibition their own proposed beliefs, and honestly assessing the actual effects of their own preferred policies; while the good faith is the sincerity of the concern both for truth and for the stated aims of the policy shown by such anxious and conscientious monitoring.

This present dual thesis is important. It is one which Popper himself in his published writings has at most hinted, and certainly never developed; although in private he has indicated that he would be sympathetic to such a development. Take first the theoretical aspect. Here the point is that no one can be said to be sincerely and rationally seeking the truth about anything save in so far as they are willing to criticise their own hypotheses in that area; and, where and when these turn out to have been false, to revise or to replace them. Turn, second, to the practical aspect. Here the point is that no one can be said to be sincerely and rationally pressing a policy, as a policy directed to securing these or those results, save in so far as they are concerned to monitor the actual success or failure of that policy by those stated standards; and, when and where it appears to be failing to deliver the expected goods, either to adapt or to abandon it accordingly.

II

Our present thesis is the completely generalised form of a contention developed some years ago with exclusive reference to the particular case of 'Teaching and Testing'.¹ The point there was that you cannot claim to be sincerely trying to teach - or, for that matter, to learn - unless you are constantly alert to discover how far the material proposed for teaching, or for learning, actually is being mastered. It is, therefore, one thing to reject some particular method of testing and assessment, or some particular practice in the employment of the findings thereof. It is quite another to repudiate all testing and assessment, in general and as such. When, as has in these last years sometimes happened, professing teachers or professing students commit themselves to such wholesale repudiations, then their manifestoes ought to be construed, and forthwith accepted, as acts of resignation from whatever status and emoluments such 'teachers' and 'students' were previously enjoying in the educational world.²

Note well that this argument was not and is not offered in defence of any particular examination system, whether existing or projected; and certainly only a Philistine fool would believe that progress in every area in which we ought to want our school teachers to be teaching can be measured best or at all by three hour written examinations. For instance: declining levels of theft, bullying or vandalism would be one far better index of the success of a moral education programme than even the greatest fluency in the regurgitation of meritorious moral maxims. No, the crux is that no one can be sincerely trying to teach anything, except in so far as there is some way of assessing whether the lessons have been learnt; and except in so far as the teachers themselves are constantly concerned to monitor progress in learning, and to react accordingly. To set out to teach something the mastery of which is so impossible to detect that there are and can be no acceptable tests of your teaching success or teaching failure is about as sensible as *The Hunting of the Snark*; a creature which, it will be recalled, could not be identified.

That was the point as applied to the particular case of teaching and learning. But now we must generalise. Suppose that someone proclaims a Quest for the Holy Grail. And suppose that, almost as soon as the fanfares have died, he settles for the first antique seeming mug offered by the first fluent rogue in the local bazaar. Then we surely have to say that his neglect of any serious and systematic inquiry, his total lack of interest in either the history of the purchase put in the place of honour on his mantelpiece, or the evidence that the real thing does after all survive somewhere,

Scientific Notes No. 3

ISSN 0267-7067 ISBN 0 948317 65 5



An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
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© Antony Flew, *Durham and Newcastle Research Review*, 1988

This essay first appeared in the *Durham and Newcastle
Research Review*, Vol. X, No. 55, Autumn 1985.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or Subscribers.

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conspire together to show that, whatever else he may have been after, he most certainly was not sincerely trying to unearth and acquire the vessel actually used in the original Last Supper. Sincerity absolutely presupposes a strong concern to know whether the purpose entertained has been or is being achieved. Or, again, take a less elevated and more homely example. What should we think of a captain of a team, claiming to want to win a game of cricket, and yet never interested in the score, or even in whether anyone was being so mark-minded as to keep it?

That there is this universal and necessary connection between sincerity of purpose and the monitoring of progress is, once it has been pointed out, too obvious a logical truth to require further illustration or proof. Yet it is one of those obvious logical truths from which it is, as we shall be seeing, easy to derive exciting and contested conclusions.

The link just pointed is logical. It is, in Humean terms, a matter of 'the relations of ideas' rather than 'a matter of fact and real existence'.³ But there is also some reason to believe that at least in some areas continuous as opposed to discontinuous feedback of information on success or failure tends, as a matter of contingent fact, to improve performance. Madsen Pirie, in *Trial and Error and the Idea of Progress*,⁴ cites some experiments in which groups with discontinuous feedback 'improved over a dozen trials from being on target forty per cent of the time to achieving fifty per cent on target performance,' while the groups with continuous feedback 'started with nearly fifty per cent success and improved it, over the same period, to sixty-four per cent success.'

III

Having begun in the previous Section II by taking the two cases of theoretical science and practical policy together, let us now for a moment attend separately to each in turn.

I. I will, in insolent defiance of many contemporary historians and philosophers of science, make so bold as to say that the whole object of the exercise is truth. Given this ingenuous yet enlightened aim, the critical approach must follow. For, like the knight who with pure heart and single mind seeks the Holy Grail, persons who truly want the truth cannot bring themselves to embrace superficially appealing candidates promiscuously and unexamined. Such Knights of Truth have to be ever ready, wherever and whenever any grounds for doubt arise, to test, and test, and test again.

These truisms remain as true as they are important even if we refuse to extend to all empirical beliefs a Popperian contention which was, I hope, intended to apply only to the highest reaches of scientific theory: 'Science is not a system of certain . . . statements; not is it a system which steadily advances towards a state of finality. Our science is not knowledge (*episteme*); it can never claim to have attained truth . . .'⁵ I hope, as I said before, that Popper intended this statement to have only limited application. For, applied universally, it would appear to carry the wildly sceptical and indeed obscurantist implications that not only is there no such thing as scientific knowledge or the growth of scientific knowledge, but there is also no such thing as any known truth anywhere. This, as I have argued more fully elsewhere, is a perverse and misguided doctrine - especially when presented as part of an account of the growth of scientific knowledge.⁶

However, even if we were to concede that it is everywhere impossible to grasp truth and to know that it is her whom we have in our hands, still such a concession should in no way inhibit us: either from striving to approach more closely; or from testing and rejecting false candidates; or from holding always more or less tentatively to those that have survived the most demanding examinations anyone has managed to set. To insist upon this restless and critical approach is a mark - indeed the mark - of the sincerity of our desire for truth herself, and of our refusal to be content with any substitute - however plausible, seductive, comfortable, congenial or otherwise appealing that substitute might be.

2. Parallel considerations apply to the promotion of social policies. If you want to claim that it is to secure some relief of man's estate that you are pushing this policy, then you must be on guard to

monitor its success or failure by your own stated standard. You would indeed, as I suggested at the beginning, be best advised to build provisions for such monitoring into every programme which you propose.

How, for instance, can anyone in good faith pretend that it is with the aim of raising levels of learning achievement that they are restructuring a public school system when they are at the same time discouraging by every available means the discovery, and still more the publication, of all relevant performance data? Or, again, how can anyone with a clear conscience maintain that it is in order to remedy the curiously elusive yet apparently all-pervasive evil of alienation that a Marxist-Leninist revolution is needed, when they never think to try to construct an alienation index, nor to ask what is found when such an index is applied to various groups within various different social systems; nor yet to reflect on the reasons why the workings of their own most favoured regimes are so largely closed to independent investigation?

Popper's own advocacy of piecemeal and reformist social engineering should itself be recognised as the consequence and expression of his sincere and rational commitment to the welfare of the intended beneficiaries, its subjects. For Popper's crucial objection to revolutionary and Utopian social engineering precisely is that it must make the monitoring of success, and cybernetic correction of failure, impossible. This fundamental Popperian insight is supported by an unflagging awareness of the enormous complexity of social life, as well as by a Hayekian appreciation that the Scottish Founding Fathers were right to see 'the main task of the theoretical social sciences' as being 'to trace the unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions.'⁷

Thus, after contrasting the rival methods of determining what is to be done, Popper describes the implementation of one of the two kinds of policy: 'The reconstruction of society is a big undertaking which must cause considerable inconvenience to many and for a considerable span of time. Accordingly the Utopian engineer will have to be deaf to many complaints; in fact it will be part of his business to suppress unreasonable objections. (He will say, like Lenin, "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.") But with it, he must invariably suppress reasonable criticism also.'⁸

It is furthermore the diametric opposite of the truth to maintain that revealing 'social experiments must be on a "large scale", that they must involve the whole of society if they are to be carried out under realistic conditions.'⁹ On the contrary: instructive social experiments are those made 'on a "small scale", that is to say, without revolutionising the whole of society . . . the kind of experiment from which we can learn most is the alteration of one social institution at a time. For only in this way can we learn how to fit institutions into the framework of other institutions, and how to adjust them so that they work according to our intentions. And only in this way can we make mistakes and learn from our mistakes . . .'¹⁰ A single moment of self-critical thought should have been sufficient to remind our self-styled scientific socialists that your true experimenter is forever labouring to learn by manipulating only one variable at a time. But this, it seems, is one more occasion to quote a characteristically devastating apothegm from A. E. Houseman's Introduction to his edition of *Juvenal*: 'Three minutes thought would suffice to find this out: but thought is irksome, and three minutes is a long time.'

These last remarks will be better appreciated by those who know that while Popper was composing *The Open Society* it was still the fashion to speak with admiration and respect of Bolshevik rule as 'that great social experiment in Russia'. So he notices that 'the Utopian method must lead to a dangerous dogmatic attachment to a blueprint for which countless sacrifices have been made . . . this does not contribute to the rationality, or the scientific value, of the experiment. But the piecemeal method permits repeated experiments and continuous readjustments.'¹¹

That, he continues, is a method which 'might lead to the happy situation where politicians begin to look out for their own mistakes instead of trying . . . to prove that they have always been right. This - and not Utopian planning or historical prophecy - would mean the introduction of scientific method into politics, since the whole secret of scientific method is a readiness to learn from mis-

takes.¹² And, I would myself add, our politicians might be just a little encouraged to behave in this new and almost unprecedented way if more of the rest of us were to become fully seized of the truth urged in the present paper. For the truth is that any refusal openmindedly to monitor the success or failure of policies in achieving the stated objectives of those policies, and then, in so far as those objectives are not in fact being achieved, to amend or to reverse those policies, is a sign which has to be interpreted as indicating indifference towards those stated objectives. Either the true aim now is, and perhaps always was, to secure some quite different ends; or else the preferred policy is, or has for its promoters become, a good in itself.

IV

I hope that the various examples offered in the process of illustrating and enforcing the thesis just reiterated have also been by themselves sufficient to demonstrate its importance. Nevertheless I propose now, as a kind of appendix, to give more. This will consist in a glance, in the present perspective, at the reception given to certain recent research reports having, or appearing to have, some bearing upon the question whether 'Britain's experiment in comprehensive education' or, simply and neutrally, comprehensivisation, has been, from a purely educational point of view, a success. Is it, that is to say, resulting in more of our children reaching higher levels of educational achievement than, under the previous arrangements, they would have done?

It has, perhaps, always been clear that for some of those most prominent in promoting universal comprehensivisation the enforcement of this policy has been, not a mere means to other perceived goods, but a good in itself. Thus John White has declared that 'Comprehensive schooling is an integral part of the socialist vision.'¹³ And this same commitment must surely have been the reason why, when, in response to Prime Minister Callaghan's Ruskin Speech (18/5/76), Mrs. Shirley Williams, the then Minister, set up the so-called Great Debate she was so careful to insist that this most precious policy must be irreversible. If, but only if, this is granted, then it becomes entirely reasonable for her not to have invited any *Black Paper* contributors or other dissident radicals to contribute to any of the public performances.

But of course, in so far as the policy of wholesale and universal comprehensivisation was sold to a wider public, it was and had to be sold rather as a means by which to promote manifest educational goods. Thus, in a letter to *The Times*, a cabal of socialist academics wrote: 'Comprehensive reorganisation is the crucial step needed to open up educational opportunities, particularly to working class children of ability; as experience has already shown.'¹⁴ The promise was that many late developers and others who would, under the old grammar school/secondary modern system, have failed the 11 plus selection tests will, under the new comprehensive system, be enabled to take and to pass A levels before proceeding to tertiary education.

This is not the place to challenge the claim that experience had already shown what these writers to *The Times* asserted that it had shown; nor yet to deploy the case for urging that, on the contrary, the grammar schools must have been in large part responsible for the fact that, when the comprehensive revolution was launched, Britain had a higher proportion of working class students in its universities than any other country in Western Europe.¹⁵ For we are not here and now concerned to discover the actual results of any particular educational policy. The aim is, rather, simply to bring out: not only that and why so many people influential in Edbiz seem not to want to know; but also that and why some appear to be even more keen than other people, and in particular members of the lay public, should not.

The reason why such persons do not themselves want to know must be, surely, that their commitment to the comprehensive system is not a commitment to a policy pursued as a supposed means to some further ends? The reason why they do not want outsiders to know is that they recognise that their own peculiar values are by no means universally shared; and that most of us prefer to judge this or any other system by its actual educational results. That there is not, in fact, much critical openmindedness in this

area, and even a certain lack of frankness about the aims actually being pursued, can be brought out by considering the reception given to two recent research reports, reports apparently pointing in opposite directions.

(1) In the first case what was actually received, and accepted uncritically at its own estimation of itself, was an article announcing the publication of a book by Jane Steedman (and others), *Progress in Secondary Schools* (London: National Children's Bureau, 1982). The comparatively short article summarising that massive, notably expensive report appeared in the NCB's quarterly *Concern* in the July 1982 issue. Long before anyone had much chance to examine the primary document, it was being widely hailed in the press as having completely vindicated the whole comprehensive reorganisation: 'Report explodes comprehensive myth,' *The Guardian* shouted; 'Clever children do as well in comprehensive as in grammar schools - study shows,' said *The Times*; and so on. Nor is there evidence that any of the Education Correspondents who joined in this explosion of applause ever got around to studying the data actually presented. Only in the *Financial Times* were there signs of such study, and this resulted in a carefully damning editorial.

Caroline Cox and John Marks, however, devoted the best part of their subsequent Long Vacations to *Progress in Secondary Schools*. The result was *Real Concern* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1982). This critique contends that the much trumpeted conclusions of Steedman and her colleagues are not sustained even by their own doctoral data. It is, in the circumstances, not unfair to speak of 'doctored data'. For, as Cox and Marks protest, 'No raw data are given; all the results are adjusted by unknown amounts and then scaled so that the reader has no idea what the original figures were' (p. 8); while '... the report is so biased in its interpretations that it is hard to avoid the suspicion that those concerned, including the Advisory Group on which the DES were represented, were culpable of gross partiality and/or influenced by vested interests.' (p. 21)

Real Concern got little attention in either the general or the specialist press. Most commentators, especially in the latter, continued to speak of this NCB work as 'authoritative', while dismissing any dissent as 'politically motivated'. Having made this charge such commentators should, surely, have revealed the individual political and interest group allegiances of *all* concerned, on *both* sides: the memberships, that is, not only of the Conservative party but also, on the other side, of the Radical Statistics Group. Then, once these opposite allegiances had been allowed to cancel out, the commentators should have gone on to examine, always openmindedly and in good faith, what, with whatever mixture of interests and motives, everyone was actually saying.

To everyone except a *Times Educational Supplement* staffer the internal evidence alone is more than sufficient to reveal Steedman's own political commitment, and its disturbing effect. Consider, for instance, her desperate comment on the fact that, on the NCB researchers' own showing, comprehensive parents are far more inclined to express dissatisfaction over the schooling of their children than the parents of children at either grammar or secondary modern schools: 'Of course it may be that indications of dissatisfaction reflect a certain criticality or involvement in decisions about schooling among parents, which some schools would hope to foster.' (p. 201) One has for her sake to hope that Ms. Steedman never needs to apply for a job with the Consumers' Association. What would such authentically curious and impartial people make of a candidate proposing to rate whatever product caused most dissatisfaction to its users as the Best Buy; and to commend its manufacturers for thereby encouraging 'criticality or involvement' among consumers?

(2) The second of our pair of recent reports is *Standards in English Schools*.¹⁶ Both this and its authors have been subjected to an all-out campaign of vilification. At the stage when they felt moved to complain to the Press Council the *Times Educational Supplement* had already printed 120 column inches of attack to a mere 20 of either straight description or defence; the former including one quite extraordinarily scurrilous feature by a Professor of Education. Much was made - especially by spokespersons for

the TUC Education Committee, for the Labour Party, and for the NUT - of a private document in which DES statisticians were said to have 'rubbished' this 'seriously flawed' and 'grossly incompetent' work.

Although the harried and hounded authors of *Standards in English Schools* were not to be permitted to see what was to them a professionally damaging, supposedly confidential, Departmental document, that document was nevertheless, in whole or part, leaked to every Education Correspondent believed to be a trusty fighter for all out - or should it be all in? - comprehensivisation. Fortunately one of these, jibbing at these dirty tricks of some DES mole, showed that critique to the authors criticised. They have since been able to show that what was asserted to be their fundamental fault was in fact a rather crude misunderstanding on the part of their DES critics.

These critics have since apologised, generously and publicly. They have withdrawn their original reservations, without withdrawing their several commendations of a path-breaking and exhaustive enterprise. These commendations had, of course, never been quoted by any of those making so much of the leaked critique. The DES statisticians have also agreed to release more information about the social class composition of school intakes, information which will make possible a more adequate allowance for differences in this respect. Despite all this, most if not all the various journals, spokespersons, and correspondents who seized so eagerly on a 'rubbishing' now fully admitted to have been itself 'seriously flawed', have been content to leave undone all the damage done by their onslaught on *Standards in English Schools*. They even continue to repeat the same discredited charges.

V

We must not conclude without emphasising yet again that the references in this paper to pieces of policy research, and to the very different receptions accorded to them, are not made either as or as part of an attempt to establish any substantive policy conclusions. Instead the sole object of the entire exercise is to demonstrate that all this work would have been treated in ways very different from those in which it has in fact been treated had the various journalists, union spokespersons, politicians and others most prominently concerned been sincerely, rationally, and unreservedly devoted to the pursuit only of those manifest educational goods of which they would most often, for most of the time, like the rest of us to believe that they are pursuing with a total and undeviating commitment.

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NOTES

1. See Flew (1976), Chapter 6.
 2. A confrontation reported in the London press is not, I fear, without parallels elsewhere: 'Mr. Carlisle, Education Secretary, is facing total opposition from all major teaching unions to his plans to force schools to publicise their examination results.' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 12/10/80) Since we have none of us ever met or even heard of any Head who, having creditable examination results, did not want to tell the world, we have to infer that the leaders of these public sector teachers' unions believe they have something to hide. The most formidable of all England's political thinkers had a cooling card for 'total opposition' of this sort. It is, Hobbes said, easy to see 'the benefit of such darkness, and to whom it accrueh.' (*Leviathan*, Chapter XLVII)
 3. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, IV(i).
 4. Pirie (1978), pp. 78-79 and 83.
 5. Popper (1959), p. 278.
 6. See Flew (1982).
 7. Popper (1963), p. 342: italics removed. Compare Hayek (1967), Chapter VI; also Hayek (1967), Chapter I.
 8. Popper (1966), Vol. 1, p. 160.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 163. We have here an occasion to remark the need to employ a later rather than - as until gently corrected by Popper I had always done myself - the first edition of *The Open Society*. For Chapter VII has now been rewritten to include a section (pp. 124-125) in which, in effect, Popper urges us to adopt as our criterion of democratic legitimacy the possibility of, in due season, 'voting the scoundrels out'. Democracy so conceived both avoids the paradoxes of sovereignty and constitutes institutional provision for the correction of political mistakes.
 13. See 'Tyndale and the Left', *Forum*, 19, p. 60. I owe this reference to Shaw (1983).
 14. I am assured that one of the signatories of this letter was later by colleagues at the London School of Economics confronted with evidence strongly suggesting that, on the contrary, this policy was tending to close down rather than open up opportunities. Smilingly he waved that evidence away, saying: 'But we never truly believed that it would.'
 15. These figures were originally produced by the DES for Mrs. Williams towards the end of the 1964-70 Labour administration. They can be found in Szamuely (1970).
In 1982 Dr. Rhodes Boyson got his officials in the DES to update the statistics. Some of these he then gave in a talk to the National Council for Educational Standards in that year. But I quote from the rather fuller personal letter he sent to me later: 'Figures for entry of children of working class to university as percentage of overall entry: 1920s - 26 per cent; 1955 - 26 per cent; 1968 - 31 per cent; 1974 - 23 per cent; 1979 - 22 per cent; 1981 - 19.4 per cent (may be a base change here).'
- The final figure is provisional, and some correction needs to be made for changes in the social class composition of the whole population. Nevertheless the contrast between 31 per cent in 1968, when almost everyone must have been a product of the old system, and 22 per cent in 1979, with a similarly overwhelming majority for the new, should surely worry anyone who supported wholesale comprehensivisation in hopes that it would increase working class participation in higher education.
- Since these figures were not reported either in the specialist education press or by the Education Correspondents of the major general journals, they have never been properly examined and discussed. It is, therefore, not possible to say with any confidence that they really do have the significance which they appear to have. But it is hard not to draw rather firm conclusions about those who judged that this evidence was best suppressed. When eventually I did myself succeed in getting it into print, apparently for the first time, this was neither in the *TES* nor in the *THES* but in *New Society* (17/11/83).
16. Marks, Cox and Pomian-Srzednicki (1983). It should be noted by all, and shamefacedly by some, that this wide ranging study of examination results, launched in the first year after these became available - thanks to the most bitterly contested clause of the 1980 Education Act - broken down school by school, was the work of three people none of whom has ever been employed in a Department of Education.
- Two of the authors had already earlier offended the comprehensive lobby. Marks and Cox (1980) was an analysis of the examination results in 90 of the 185 schools in the inner London all-comprehensive system. (It was 90 and only 90, because 90 were all the results that the authority failed to keep hidden.) In these 90 schools, 'nearly half the classes for A level subjects had no more than two pupils.' And again, 'out of these 90 schools, there were 36 schools with no A level French or geography, 28 without any physics, 25 without chemistry, 22 without maths, and 20 without biology.' True to form these figures were not reported either in the *TES* or by the main Education Correspondents. So we can only suspect and not be sure that they mean what they seem to mean: that many of London's too few competent A level teachers are being largely wasted on penny number classes; while lots of bright boys and girls must be trapped in neighbourhood schools unable to help them pass mainstream A levels - human sacrifices on the altar of the 'socialist vision'.