

Since the 1830s



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Since the 1830s, the highly controversial issue of national education had been heatedly debated in the British parliament: In 1833 the first government grant of £20, 000 was introduced for the building of schoolhouses in England and Wales; under the Whig administration of Lord Melbourne, the Committee of the Privy Council - the Education Department - was established in 1839 to superintend the use of public funds for the promotion of public education and, at the same time, the first education Inspectors were appointed; and, in 1846, Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth established a pupil-teacher scheme to replace the 'monitorial' system of Bell and Lancaster that dated back to the 1780s, and to improve the quality of school teaching. Later, in 1862, the Revised Code was created in response to the findings of the Newcastle Commission Report (1858-61) on elementary education. Consequentially, the size of the grant - now directly paid to the school managers - was to be determined by satisfactory performance in the 'three R's.' Two-thirds of this grant was calculated upon the basis of performance in tests carried out by the Inspectors; the remaining third decided by attendance figures. Such measures effectively meant that the state had now accepted responsibility for the control of the basic syllabus in those schools predominantly dependent upon State grants. The Education Act of 1870 did not merely provide for the inspection of schools, as this had already been accomplished under the Factory Act of 1833. The Act was an optimistic piece of legislation - despite its critics' claims to the contrary - and it endeavoured to secure school accommodation for all children whose parents did not pay a school fee exceeding ninepence a week. It may be claimed that the Act placed the state in a new relationship with the rest of society and, indeed, many historians argue that the increase of state

intervention into national education marks the origins of the modern Welfare State. Nonetheless, despite the fact that the Act was the foundation from which the system of state-regulated education has sprung, many who voted for its passage through parliament in 1870 disapproved of the organisation and administration of state education, and instead maintained their faith in the ability of the voluntary schools. It was hoped that such schools would prove their educational value and only a minimum of state schools would therefore be established. The system that had been allowed to develop after 1833 under the sponsorship of the state seemed to be the first step on the road to establishing a national system of education, and the £20,000 grant was initially equally distributed between the British and Foreign School Societies. However, by 1834 the latter had exhausted its local funds and was thus unable to make a proportionate advance. By 1839 the National Society was taking three-quarters of the grant. Additionally, the system made no provisions for the poorer localities where the grant was clearly most needed. In his introduction of the Education bill in 1870, W. E. Forster, Vice-President of the Education Department, stated: '... the result of the state leaving the initiative to volunteers, is, that where state help has been most wanted, state help has been least given, and that where it was desirable that state power should be most felt it was not felt at all.'