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TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF HIS POWERS: C.E. BEEBY'S LIFE IN EDUCATION

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Editors' comment: *We invited Noeline Alcorn to choose some of the significant aspects of C.E. Beeby's contribution to education, and chosen from her biography of Beeby which is reviewed in this issue. The result is an insightful look into Beeby's role in education; but a mere introduction to the book itself: To The Fullest Extent of His Powers. (Victoria University Press, 1999).*

When I first began work on the project from which the book developed, I believed I was embarking on a study of Beeby's contribution to New Zealand education. It soon became obvious that this would be inadequate. Beeby's life in education was often enacted on a world stage: his New Zealand experience both informed and was informed by his wider roles. In addition his sustained period of scholarly reflection and consultancy following his "retirement" as Director of Education helped illumine his earlier experience. Increasingly he tried to integrate it into the formulation of theory which could underpin policy. This brief article tries to encapsulate some of the key elements of the eventful life described in the book, to comment on Beeby's achievements, and to give a taste of the range of his thinking by quoting directly from some of his own writing.

During his 20 year term as Director of Education in New Zealand C.E. Beeby (Beeb) was a controversial figure. Appointed to the post in 1940 at the early age of 37, his job was to implement major curriculum change in primary and secondary schools necessitated by the Labour Government's abolition of the Proficiency Examination and its commitment to secondary education for all students. His high profile meant that supporters as well as opponents of the new policies attributed the changes to him. "Beebyism" was used as a term of both opprobrium and approbation. However Beeb had history on his side. The changes with which he was associated in New Zealand occurred in one form or other in most Western countries as universal access to secondary schooling became the norm. What seemed radical in the 1940s later seemed commonsense. He was building on trends which had their origins in educational theory and practice current internationally as well as in New Zealand, though his ability to seize and build on opportunities gave his reforms a local flavour. They were not seriously challenged until the 1980s.

Developing and Articulating Ideas

Writing of his own primary schooling Beeby claimed he learned two major lessons: how to compete and do better than his rivals and the importance of being "good". Secondary school reinforced his sense of competition in academic matters but also taught him to appreciate literature, to analyse and create order. His teacher education and university studies brought him new friendships and a wider range of outside activities and encouraged him to question received wisdom.

A significant figure in this process was James Shelley, a man of many talents who was appointed Professor of Education at Canterbury University College in 1920. A fellow student of Beeb's wrote later: "He told us that nearly all our beliefs and ideas were inherited from our homes, schools and churches, and from the society in which we happened to live. Our job, as students, was to question them all."¹ Shelley's students were not only encouraged to think, they were introduced to art, poetry and drama, they were taught that working with one's hands was a creative learning activity. When Beeby joined the university staff he and Shelley set up a psychological laboratory to carry out experiments, and provide advice to business and community members - work Beeby classified later as applied common sense. His doctoral study in England introduced him to the formidable intellect of Charles Spearman who convinced him of the scientific rigour of psychology and in particular the measurement of intelligence.

In 1934 Beeby took up the challenge of appointment as the first director of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, an independent body set up through the generosity of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. His plan of operation included a bold assertion of belief:

Nothing else matters if the Council can serve as a rallying point for the curiosity in his craft which alone can keep the teacher alive, and which tends to fade so rapidly in the trying atmosphere of the classroom. That curiosity can die, or it can grow, but it cannot stand still; it is not the business of the Council to satisfy it but to feed it. If the Council did nothing but ask intelligent questions it would have done a job worth doing. A few may even be answered. But intelligent questions, like most living things, breed; and there should be more unanswered questions in five years' time than there are now.²

In a series of articles written at NZCER Beeby questioned issues of curriculum, the relation between standards and examinations and the concept of education as a means of "getting on":

New Zealand's special dilemma arises not because her children are more acquisitive than the average, but because she has gone further than most countries in the direction of genuine democracy. Very gallantly she has, in her free post-primary schools, provided the children of the poor with a useable social and economic ladder: she

was, perhaps, not quite prepared for the whole-hearted way in which they have used it almost solely as a ladder. The idea of education for its own sake has generally been a bye-product of wealth and leisure. Only those can afford to despise 'getting on' who are born 'on'.³

It is a little disturbing to realise how much the traditional concept of liberal education depend upon exclusiveness, upon the needs of a group selected for special treatment because of outstanding qualities of intellect or income. To define a liberal education for such a group is relatively easy. To define it for the whole population is at present scarcely possible; we can only grope towards it in theory as in practice. One thing is certain - the definition will be found in terms not of the 'subjects' that a 'gentleman' should have 'done' but of the experiences that fit each citizen, whatever his status or his powers, for life in a complex and rapidly changing democratic community.⁴

His article on examinations poked fun at the printed examination cards used by nineteenth century inspectors which "helped them keep their standard accurate to a peninsula". But he went on to outline the impossibility of maintaining such standards.

The more care is taken to fix the standard of an examination the greater is the public confidence in it. The greater the public confidence, the stronger the pressure brought to bear on children by employers, parents and teachers to make them pass. But the greater the pressure the more children pass and the lower falls the standard of the examination.⁵

As a result, he suggested, its purchasing power falls. Yet at the same time it is imbued in the minds of many with an intrinsic value which bears little relation to its intended purpose. He boldly suggested that if examinations had little real value as a selection device an administrator of courage might well abandon this function and treat examinations as a kind of aptitude test. "It remains to be seen", he wrote, "how far examinations, chastened and humble, can take up their now function as agents of educational guidance, and how far a generation of teachers and pupils, brought up to regard them as natural enemies, can accept them as allies".⁶ Beeby guarded fiercely the Council's apolitical stance and independent nature but he could not help being influenced by the ideas of the Labour Government elected in 1935.

Labour's policy reached back to fabian socialism. Labour politicians had consistently opposed social distinctions in education. They supported broadening the curriculum at secondary level. Their Education Policy in 1935 declared that "every child should receive a full, generous education together with the opportunity to develop his or her talents to the utmost". Writing in *National Education* in 1938 Fraser asserted that "every child, whatever his social and economic position and whatever his level of academic ability has a right as a citizen to a free education of the kind and length to which his powers best (fit) him".⁷

One of the first acts of the Minister of Education, Peter Fraser, was to abolish the Proficiency Examination which had acted as a barrier to secondary schooling. Beeby maintained his faith in intelligence testing in spite of Fraser's belief that it disadvantaged rural and working class children. But he was impressed with Fraser's support for the New Education Fellowship Conference in 1937. When he was appointed Assistant Director of Education in 1938 his respect increased through working closely with the Minister. In 1939 Fraser returned the draft of the Annual Report to the Department of Education with the comment that it said nothing. The Director, Neville Lambourne, who respected his Assistant Director's skill with words, asked Beeby to rewrite the key portion.

Beeby analysed the situation. What were the key principles, the guiding philosophy of the new education that Fraser was committed to implementing? He was more than familiar with them. The statement he wrote, which Fraser accepted in its entirety, has become much quoted. Its key sentence is a succinct summary of Fraser's belief in and commitment to liberal education for all citizens, broad enough to ensure widespread acceptance and specific enough to provide a goal and focus for education for the next 30 years.

The Government's objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers. So far is this from being a mere pious platitude that the full acceptance of the principle will involve the reorientation of the education system.⁸

It was a sweeping vision, exemplifying one of Beeby's most valuable gifts: the ability to express key ideas succinctly, with clarity and elegance. He went on to spell out the consequences.

The structure of the New Zealand school system as originally laid down (and indeed, of practically all the school systems of the world) was based on the principle of selection. An elementary education in the 3 R's was given to all the population, but, beyond that, schooling had to be either bought by the well-to-do, or won, through scholarships, by the specially brilliant. Under such a system post-primary education was a thing apart from primary education and tended to be verbal and academic in nature. A definite penalty was placed on the children of the poor, especially those who lived outside the main centres of population. The present Government was the first to recognise explicitly that continued education is no longer a special privilege for the well-to-do or the academically able, but a right to be claimed by all who want it to the fullest extent that the State can provide. Important consequences follow from the acceptance of this principle. It is not enough to provide more places in schools of the older academic type that were devised originally for the education of the gifted few. Schools that are to cater for the whole

population must offer courses that are as rich and varied as are the needs and abilities of the children who enter them and that means generous equipment, more and better trained teachers, and some system of guidance to help pupils select the schools and courses that will best cater for their abilities. It means also if there is to be true equality of opportunity, that by one method or another, the country child must be given access to the facilities from which he has always tended to be barred by the mere accident of location. Most important of all, perhaps, it means that the system of administrative control must be such that the whole school system is a unit within which there is free movement. It is only against this historical background that the Government's policy in education can be fully understood. It was necessary to convert a school system, constructed originally on the basis of selection and privilege, to a truly democratic form where it can cater for the needs of the whole population over as long a period of their lives as is found possible and desirable.⁹

The redrafting exercise did more than help him to clarify the task ahead in his own mind. It gave him a personal guiding statement for his work. He knew that to achieve curriculum reform he would need the support of the profession. He was under no illusions about the strength of conservatism in community, schools and universities. New Zealanders saw education as an instrument for getting on. Beeby's industrial psychology background had convinced him of the need to carry with him those who would have to implement changes.

Administrative Style and Achievement

David McKenzie titled an article on Beeby's career "Ideas are necessary but not sufficient". Beeby's genius was as an administrator. He was not an original theorist, nor did he develop the progressive or egalitarian theories he tried to implement in the school system. An articulate spokesman, he remained intent on working out the why and how of educational change. His intelligence was analytic, his creativity directed to implementation and action. In addition, for Beeby, that modern man trained in the science of psychology, conviction without logic was suspect. He wrote to maverick Labour politician, John A. Lee:

The ultimate aims in education are not given by reason but by a feeling in the pit of one's stomach. Sooner or later in life, one must say, for no very obvious reason, "I believe in X," and never challenge it again. But when it comes to deciding on the means toward X, give me reason.¹⁰

Effective administrators, Beeby was fond of saying, have an overdeveloped sense of the possible. He might also have added that they need patience and luck. Beeby's initial reforms depended both on Fraser's support and continuing wartime prosperity. Changes to the grading system for primary

teachers took nearly 15 years to implement. Administrative leaders cannot work by fiat. Their success depends on working with and through other people, achieving their trust and support: staff, political masters, colleagues, those with opposing viewpoints. He could be inspiration, mentor, scourge, advocate, conciliator. Some groups, such as many university staff, he never convinced.

Two of his most pressing tasks were to convince teachers that the Department was on their side and to ensure that government policies were understood. Beeby took as many opportunities as possible to meet with and talk to a variety of educational groups. So successful was his networking that on his retirement in 1960 a newspaper editorial critical of his appointment to a diplomatic post, claimed he had kneaded teachers and Ministers like putty. This is an unfair slur on his genuine desire to consult and communicate. Nevertheless, Beeby's gift for reading the mood of a gathering, disarming criticism by admitting shortcomings in his Department's practices and empathising with concerns and frustrations, while it came naturally, was also carefully cultivated. He could also refuse without giving offence. After touring with him in the North Island the President of NZEI admired "the varieties of methods the Director has of avoiding saying 'yes' to the never-ending stream of requests he gets everywhere he goes, for everything from wallpaper and wringers to schools and residences." He refused to sweep issues under the carpet or ignore what needed to be addressed openly, nor did he ever fail to give generous credit. He might criticise them in private to their faces but in public he was always scrupulously careful to be supportive of the work of teachers and lay administrators.

Beeby's leadership of the Department was premised on the development of a professional teaching force. His later theory of the development of stages in a primary education system gave highest value to teaching for meaning. To enable this to happen he developed patterns of consultation with teachers and their organisations, and developed support systems for the provision of resources. In so doing he ensured that generations of teachers became accustomed to look to the Department for professional leadership; he also helped to ensure that issues such as curriculum specification and development were perceived as professional concerns. In general he regarded parents, employers and lay groups as conservative rather than progressive forces.

In 1947 Beeby began to make his mark internationally. His participation in UNESCO conferences in Paris and Mexico City led to a request to the Government to release him for a period to act as Assistant Director General of the new international body. It is significant that it was his performance as a chairperson in complex conference situations that brought this about. He sometimes claimed that chairing meetings was the skill of which he was most proud, enabling a diverse group to work together to define a common statement of purpose, or course of action, working for compromise that would allow all parties to emerge with dignity, determining the exact moment to put a motion, insisting on rules and protocol but using humour to deflect anger or dissent. Steering a gathering in this way was a metaphor perhaps for his administrative style; progress could only be made by defining the rules of procedure, establishing the parameters of the matter at issue, obtaining

information, consulting those present, and determining a course of action. Beeby also understood only too well the need for attention to detail as well as grand plans.

The 18 months he spent in Paris considerably enlarged his horizons, giving him a truly international and comparative perspective. He had already experienced a sharp cultural shock when Fraser sent him on a tour of the Pacific in 1945. Now he became aware of world wide educational and literacy issues. He mingled with some of the world's most distinguished scholars and politicians. In setting up a new international education secretariat virtually from scratch, he honed his already considerable administrative skills and confirmed his view that rhetoric had little use if it could not be translated into action. He continued to see the role of administration as facilitating rather than directing, change and cooperation. He strengthened his beliefs that reform cannot be imposed nor can it move faster than the experience and capabilities of those involved will allow, his sense that diversity was crucial and his faith in education as a liberating force.

His second decade as Director brought different challenges. A change of government in 1949 meant a new Minister, Ronald Algie; he was initially suspicious that standards of education and morality were dropping. That he and Beeby learned to work effectively together is a tribute to their good sense and professionalism. The focus of change became the interface between schools and further education while the focus of administration was to provide for the educational needs of a rapidly growing school population by providing new teachers and new buildings. Beeby and his team were forced to grapple with issues of vocational education and its relations to the needs of industry and society. Again he faced massive practical problems, exacerbated by the shortage of resources. Both employer and union groups were conservative and ambivalent about change. The past could offer few lessons relevant to the needs of technology. The university sector was also growing rapidly. Beeby was anxious that the concerns of university staff to maintain what they felt to be appropriate standards did not prejudice the secondary school curriculum or stifle the growth of post-school technical education.

In 1960 Beeby retired from the Department of Education and was appointed New Zealand ambassador in Paris, where his major interest was the UNESCO Executive Board. This was followed by a period as a scholar and consultant based at Harvard which enabled him to develop his theories on educational planning, published as *The Quality of Education in Developing Countries*, in 1966. His primary concern was that while it was comparatively easy too to extend the scope of education, improving the quality of what happened in classrooms was problematic and difficult. He was determined to ensure that the voice of the educationalist as well as the economist was heard in policy formulation and strategic planning. For a further 10 years he worked as a consultant to governments, foundations, and educational institutions in Africa, the Pacific, India and South East Asia. The most extended work, carried out in Indonesia under the auspices of the Ford Foundation, resulted in another book, *Assessment of Indonesian Education: A Basis for Planning*, a distillation of ideas he had reflected on for half a century. The lasting importance of the book is its analysis of the tensions between the aims of

planners and the political, economic and social realities in which they have to work.

Beeby's 90th birthday in 1992 was the occasion for widespread recognition of his long and distinguished contribution to education and public life. He had already received honorary degrees, medals and fellowships and in 1987 had been made an inaugural member of New Zealand's highest award, the Order of New Zealand. His birthday was also the occasion for the launching of his final book: *The Biography of an Idea: Beeby on Education*, his personal account of his youth and public life.

Towards an Assessment

Beeby dominated the New Zealand educational scene between 1940 and 1960. His prominence was such that it has not been easy to assess the nature of his contribution. Because of the small size of the country he was able to be personally involved in a wide range of issues across all sectors. In his own words he was a big frog in a little pond. His industry, energy and determination to succeed were factors in this dominance. So was his driving conviction and sense of purpose. On one occasion when a later director, Bill Renwick, had weighed up with him the pros and cons of a particular issue Beeby told him the difference between them was that "You never know whether you are right. I always know that I am."

Much of Beeby's experience was pioneering: he was one of the first New Zealanders to embrace the new discipline of psychology; he set up a research unit to study the largely uncharted field of New Zealand education; he established an international education secretariat to promote international cooperation and exchange. He relished the challenge of these opportunities for innovation. His writing remains fresh and lively - a resource which policymakers as well as historians would do well to mine. Its clarity and style reflect a sharp intellect. Increasingly he strove to develop theory from this reflection. This theory was applied; its value has been greatest for those who, like himself, faced practical problems.

Beeby was gregarious and sociable but his upbringing and temperament, as well as his sense of professional propriety led him to respect and protect privacy. He valued courtesy as means of maintaining appropriate spaces between himself and others and the discretion needed for success in public service also characterised his interaction with others in private. His critics were always loudest among those who had not met him personally. His capacity to win over an audience (whether it was one person or a large auditorium) is well attested. For 20 years of his working life Beeby was an authority figure for most of those with whom he came in contact. Many of them held him in awe. Others, like the university men, resented his power. His sharpness and anger were almost always directed against pretension or poorly supported argument. Generous in his acknowledgment of the work of others, kind and supportive to those in need of help, he never suffered fools gladly. He might express a genuine diffidence about his forays into academic writing, but he scorned the claims of planners whose models were not based on real experience. Sometimes accused of arrogance when young, he later mellowed and

cultivated a disarming modesty, though he could still be angered by treatment which failed to acknowledge his importance.

As befits an educator, Beeb remained a lifelong learner who continually asked questions and encouraged others to question. While his intellectual passion was to create order and meaning, to analyse and systematise, he was not interested in stasis or certainty. He wanted to fashion agreement on direction and goals. He also knew that actions taken to move towards these goals involved risk and possibly failure. He defended the right to be honestly wrong and admit it. A leader who avoided any wrong moves, he claimed, was probably too timid to make the right ones. There was little evidence of such timidity in his own practice.

Beeby often described his life as a fortunate one. Born too late to fight in the First World War, he found at Canterbury University College both a mentor who enlarged his horizons and a new field of study. The generosity of the Carnegie Corporation made possible the establishment of NZCER at a time when he was qualified to lead it. Peter Fraser's determination to change New Zealand education gave him a mandate few public servants have enjoyed. He achieved his top positions without fighting for them. His greatest good fortune, perhaps, was to discover that in joining the Department of Education, he had found a career direction that engaged all his considerable talent and provided a sense of purpose and fulfilment. Even if the problems with which he had to deal, in New Zealand or in his international work, seemed intractable Beeby always insisted that the satisfaction of finding a novel solution gave him a sensation that he could only characterise by words like "fun" or "pleasure". His good fortune served education well.

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