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EXAMINATIONS AND SELECTION BOARDS

THE remarks which Sir Percival Waterfield, the First Commissioner of the Civil Service, made at Oxford in March regarding the low standard in personality and intelligence shown by applicants for entry into the Civil Service have aroused a considerable discussion and formed the subject of a debate on the Civil Service initiated by Viscount Mersey in the House of Lords on May 26. Sir Percival's statement that, of three thousand graduates interviewed, 40 per cent of those who wanted to go into the administrative service and 50 per cent of applicants for the foreign service scored marks for personality and intelligence which represented complete failure, is one of which industry and the universities as well as the Civil Service are bound to take careful note. His further statement that about five per cent of applicants for the administrative service and eight per cent for the foreign service were below even the lowest category may well be discounted, as was suggested in the debate, by war-time conditions and the absence of the screening which was practised by the universities with candidates for the written examinations; but the feature that, among those who failed, 60 per cent had university or college scholarships and 20 per cent were those who had State scholarships, should cause at least as much disquiet to the educationist and industrialist as to the Civil Service Commissioners.

The three fundamental questions which arise here were well indicated by Viscount Mersey in opening the debate: the training or education which the candidates have received; the tests or examinations to be applied to them when they desire to enter the Civil Service; and the qualities which are judged necessary for the Civil Service. This part of Lord Mersey's speech suggests that he was aware of the discussion on selection for management at the British Association meeting in Dundee last year. Neither he nor any other participant in the House of Lords debate, however, recognized that in selecting men for the Civil Service, or for any other walk in life, the chief requirement is, as Mr. A. Rodger pointed out at Dundee, a reasonably clear notion of what we are trying to assess. The first question to be answered is: "What are we looking for in our candidates?" Unless we can give a reasonably clear answer to that question, neither the written examination nor the selection board is likely to give us the men or women we require.

It might well be argued, therefore, that some of the criticisms of the selection—and rejection—of candidates for the Civil Service are due to the simple fact that, with the growth of the Civil Service and the increasing range and complexity of its duties, we have become less sure of the qualities we desire in our Civil servants, and less able to formulate precisely the relative weight we attach to initiative, integrity and other aspects of personal character for which no method of assessment yet exists, if, indeed, it could be found. We cannot expect to devise the appropriate methods of selecting and testing candidates while we are uncertain in our own minds about the precise

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requirements those methods are to meet. Even if that uncertainty and indecision were removed, we have still a long time to wait before we can be satisfied of the validity of the new methods, as was, indeed, repeatedly asserted in the debate by the strongest supporters of the new tests.

There are, in fact, sound reasons why we should not discard the intellectual tests, however imperfectly such written examinations may disclose the boldness, quickness, clarity and candour which, with self-discipline, marked the habit of Greek thought in its greatest days, as Prof. F. A. Adcock noted in his presidential address to the Classical Association earlier this year. Indeed, Lord Lindsay very pertinently remarked that people who showed themselves capable of passing searching written examinations with distinction could not be altogether devoid of ability. He himself thought that while the interview by the Civil Service Selection Board was much better in many ways than the half-hour interview, the right course was to restore the solid evidence of achievement in the written examination and supplement the examination with the interview.

Whatever the ultimate decision, it seems clear that, as Lord Moran suggested, we are only at the very beginning of a method of assessing accurately the suitability of men and women for the Civil Service or for any other sphere. The task should be approached in humility, and it is of the first importance that we should arrange for the records of candidates to be followed up to see whether they meet the criteria of success for the various branches of the Civil Service. These criteria are not really known with any certainty; but the time and expense of validation should not be allowed to constitute obstacles in a matter of such general importance.

Lord Simon of Wythenshawe as well as Lord Piercy were confident that the new methods had proved their worth by helping the Final Selection Board to make fewer mistakes and a better selection. Nevertheless, we are only at the beginning, and it may be possible to devise an entirely fresh system. Lord Elton, for example, in urging once more that since character as well as intelligence is indispensable to all high achievement, character as well as intelligence should be the concern of the scholarship examination, directed attention to the Rhodes Scholarship system, which for forty years has been trying to do exactly what the Civil Service Selection Board is now attempting by the new methods. Lord Elton believes that the traditional tests were over-narrow in that they confined themselves to selecting persons likely to absorb readily and reproduce lucidly the ideas of other people. He emphasized that the Rhodes selection committees have been able to rely greatly on the school and academic record of the applicant, and that on none of these sixty or seventy selection committees was there a psychologist.

Lord Pakenham, who concluded the debate for the Government, had little difficulty in showing that Lord Elton had gone too far in implying that the Civil Service Selection Board should likewise dispense with the services of the psychologist. He indicated that particular importance is attached to studying the

previous records of the candidates, and he promised that some sort of White Paper on the subject would be prepared. His speech itself gave an admirable account of the working of the methods at present used; and he submitted that the Government is taking the wisest course in trying out both systems and seeking to judge which system appears to select Civil servants who will maintain and enhance the great traditions of the public service of Great Britain.

Lord Pakenham's speech dealt mainly with this question of selection boards; but he made several specific statements of considerable interest. First, he said that the Departments of State were emphatic that they were getting very good material; but that the standard for the Home Service, and to a lesser extent for the Foreign Service, appeared to have been pitched too high. Accordingly, in the Home Service it had been decided to lower the pass mark slightly. The Foreign Service authorities, who had decided to rely on the selection board method for their recruits during the next few years, had not yet decided how to fill their much smaller gap. Lord Pakenham agreed with Lord Lindsay that in the post-war period many people had entered for the examination who would not have entered before the War; but he also said that a later and larger sample of candidates than that cited by Sir Percival Waterfield gave figures of 26.6 per cent and 30.7 per cent, respectively, of candidates for the Home and Foreign Services who passed the original qualifying test but who were finally graded as out of the running.

Nevertheless, although this is a slightly more encouraging picture than that given by Sir Percival Waterfield, the Government is proposing to review the national State scholarship system, and the Minister of Education has appointed a 'working party' to consider, in consultation with local education authorities and others, the various problems concerned with university awards. It is to be hoped that the 'working party' will grapple with the question of character which Lord Lindsay emphasized in this connexion, for it grows more important as the proportion increases of candidates coming from schools where there are fewer opportunities for the training of character than in the public schools, where it is traditional. Something must be done, as Lord Lindsay suggested, to secure that the State scholarships do not go to those who take no part in the ordinary activities of the school. Nor is the problem solely one for tackling at the secondary school level; Mr. J. W. C. Adams, warden of Crewe Hall, Sheffield, points out in the *Universities Quarterly* of May, that many of the universities could do more to encourage participation in the corporate life of the university, both by making halls of residence a more prominent feature of the civic universities and in other ways.

The debate in the House of Lords accordingly confirmed the value of the experiments in selection now proceeding; but it also underlined their experimental character and emphasized that the experiments must be so conducted as to permit judgment after a year or two of their reliability. Equally, it vindicated the very high standard of the university man at the present day: there was no evidence that

the universities are selecting the wrong people or training them wrongly, and the whole trend of the debate was against premature or excessive specialization, in science, the arts or any other field. Lord Cherwell in particular commended Sir Percival Waterfield's suggestion that no arts student should be without some knowledge of science, and no science student without some knowledge of the humane studies.

The increasing demands of the Civil Service on the trained man-power and woman-power of Britain raise the same problems of education and training. Just as the validity of the selection board's methods for the Civil Service is a matter of deep concern to industry, so the educational quality and attainments of the graduates from which both industry and the Civil Service are recruiting men and women are of much concern to them both. Nor indeed could the universities themselves be indifferent to the views of either industry or the State service in this matter, or attempt any considerable changes without having regard to both points of view.

The situation is already serious. It is clearly undesirable that an excessive proportion of the outstanding ability to be found each year among those leaving the universities of Britain should be drawn into any one section of life. It has already been suggested that the Civil Service is obtaining more than its fair share of the first-rate ability at present available. The nation is best served by a reasonable distribution over all those spheres of life which call for such gifts. Statements by Sir Lawrence Bragg and others have indicated some reluctance on the part of the ablest science students to enter industry. If such a tendency became too marked, the effect on industry would be serious. It would be equally unfortunate if industry itself attracted too large a proportion of our most gifted investigators and left the universities depleted in this respect.

Before the schemes of university expansion proceed too far, we should therefore reconsider the whole question of the aims and content of university education. Something more should be done along the lines that Dr. Percy Dunsheath attempts in his recent book "The Graduate in Industry"*. The graduate needs to be informed about the openings that exist in industry and the real conditions of work which obtain there; equally the industrialist does not always appreciate the contribution which the trained mind, when matured by experience, can make to industrial efficiency. Dr. Dunsheath has indicated many ways in which the university appointments boards could make invaluable contributions to the more effective use of trained man-power. From them, too, may well be expected some of the quantitative data by which we should revise our estimates for the rate and direction of university expansion, particularly if, as seems likely, difficulties arise in meeting the requirements for graduates in applied science suggested in the recommendations of the Barlow Committee on scientific man-power in 1946. Beyond this there is a wide field for research into

* The Graduate in Industry. By Dr. Percy Dunsheath. Pp. x+276. (London: Hutchinson's Scientific and Technical Publications, n.d.) 10s. 6d. net.

the demands which various occupations make upon, and the scope they afford to, the various attributes of human personality.

The House of Lords debate is to be welcomed for putting the whole problem in its true perspective. It is not simply a question of the methods by which industry and the State can best select their recruits. Nor is it solely a question of the conditions which will enable the universities, industry and the State to attract to their service a fitting proportion of the ablest minds available from those graduating each year, or even of the way in which those men and women are to be trained and nurtured before they enter the universities, during their residence there, and in their subsequent careers. What stands out above all is that an unparalleled opportunity for experiment is in front of us, of which selection methods are only one facet. The problem of the development and wise use of the trained man-power and woman-power of Britain calls for the closest co-operation between industry, the State and the universities, as well as those institutions like the British Institute of Management and the National Staff Administrative College which are seeking to explore new methods and raise the whole standard of administration. Further, it should be remembered that, both in industry and in the Civil Service, the wise and full use of our ability involves increasing attention to its use and training after recruitment, so as to ensure that the keenness of young and able minds selected with so much care is not blunted by failure to use their talents to advantage, and in ways that afford satisfaction to their ideals as well as to their intellect and personality.

WHAT IS PHYSICAL CHEMISTRY?

- (1) *Rational Approach to Chemical Principles*
By Dr. John A. Cranston. Pp. xii+211. (London, Glasgow and Bombay: Blackie and Son, Ltd., 1947.) 8s. 6d. net.
- (2) *The Elements of Physical Chemistry*
By Prof. Samuel Glasstone. Third printing. Pp. vii+695. (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc.; London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1947.) 25s. net.
- (3) *Physical Chemistry*
By A. J. Mee. Third edition. Pp. xix+782. (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1947.) 20s.
- (4) *Physical Chemistry*
By Dr. E. D. Eastman and Prof. G. K. Rollefson. (International Chemical Series.) Pp. viii+504. (New York and London: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1947.) 22s. 6d.

PHYSICAL chemistry emerged as a separate subject at a time when physics and chemistry were separated by a fairly wide *terra incognita*, and the application of physical and mathematical methods to chemical reactions and equilibria offered an attractive field which was catered for by neither of the parent sciences. It soon developed a homogeneous subject-matter of its own, which has remained the backbone of physical chemistry courses