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Maintaining a Pluralistic Society

The tides are running against the private sector in education and in American life generally. The watchwords are equality and cost-effectiveness.

There is nothing new about egalitarianism in this country. De Tocqueville in the early 19th century already saw it as the hallmark of democracy in America. But today it is assuming vigorous new forms. According to this tendency, equality of opportunity is not enough; what must be guaranteed is equality of result.

In the United Kingdom we are seeing what "equality of results" means to the private sector in secondary education in the Labour Party's announced determination first to remove the tax advantages and government support now enjoyed by Eton, Harrow, Rugby, and the rest, and then to wipe them out entirely by making it illegal to charge fees for full-time school attendance. The rationale, in the words of Roy Hattersley, M.P., is simple: "Competitive education, which allows the few to leap further and further ahead, insures that the less fortunate fall further and further behind. That is why the pursuit of equality of opportunity had to be replaced by the pursuit of equality itself."

The notion that one student's progress necessarily implies another's failure may seem preposterous. Yet we are hearing logic like Mr. Hattersley's more and more often in this country.

Perhaps equally threatening is the newfound passion for rationalizing the allocation and use of resources throughout our society. We are seeing the creation of new authorities, armed with fresh powers of investigation and recommendation, sometimes even outright implementation, whose task it is to eliminate inefficiency and duplication throughout the private and public sectors alike. These so-called "superboards" oversee not only the tax-supported institutions of higher education, but the privately supported, and can shape or limit the latter virtually as if they were parts of the state system.

We believe that a society is more likely to be open and free when the individual citizen's capacity to stand up against the otherwise overwhelming force of modern government is strengthened, and when the state does not possess a monopoly of service to the public—when side by side with great public school systems there are strong independent schools.

The classic defense of the pluralist society is that of Edmund Burke, stimulated (or provoked) by the French Revolution. The revolutionaries, Burke argued, in their zeal for liberty and equality in the abstract, were busily tearing down all of the intermediate corporate bodies and parochial loyalties that stood between the individual and the State. These "little platoons," as Burke called them, were attacked in the name of the most high-sounding principles: Down with feudal distinctions, down with the special privileges of the guilds and the obscurantism and greed of the 18th-century Church. But the result of thus wiping the slate clean, Burke concluded, was to leave the individual defenseless and alone, confronted by the power of an all-encompassing State, which was theoretically his, but over which he had in actuality little or no control.

The message has startling contemporary relevance. We who are responsible for the continuing health of our "little platoons"—and even the greatest of the private universities are "little platoons" when matched against the dimensions of state-supported higher education—we have our work cut out for us, and we don't have a Burke to lend eloquence to our cause.—RICHARD W. LYMAN, *President, Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305*

Adapted from "Remarks" before the 1974 Annual Conference of the National and California Associations of Independent Schools, San Francisco, 21 March 1974.