

Bertrand Russell and Public Education

TWO apparently dissimilar newspaper stories on the same day covered events that have decidedly similar social implications. On the last day of March the New York State Legislature struck from its calendar the bill to cut salaries of teachers in New York City. On the same day a Supreme Court Justice revoked the appointment of Bertrand Russell, British mathematician and philosopher, as lecturer at the College of the City of New York.

In both instances a problem in public education was presented. In each instance the solution was found in political action.

Whether or not the teachers are overpaid could be determined only if a competitive condition prevailed. No one doubts that New York City school teachers—municipal, state and federal employees generally—are paid more than they could earn in private fields. That is why they are on the public payroll. Given a healthy economy, one depending on production rather than on privilege, the more skillful and industrious of these teachers would leave the stultifying security of public employment for the greater adventure of competitive production.

Yes, in a free economy the State would have to compensate handsomely for the deadening routine which government employment entails, or it would get only workers of the least initiative. In a free economy, with high wages the rule, parents would tend to buy the best education for their children, and private schools, like private doctors, would build up reputations for service. This would create a competitive condition among teachers, and the best would command the highest salaries.

But, in an economy of which the prime stigmata are poverty, low wages and unemployment, the worker's necessary flight is from enterprise to security-at-any-price. There is no competitive field.

Therefore, there is no standard by which the value of services can be measured. To say that one is overpaid where there is no market is like saying that milk given one's pet poodle is overpayment.

The price paid to public employes is fixed mainly by political pressure. The bill to lower teachers' salaries was withdrawn by its sponsor because of the "pernicious activities" of the "teachers' lobby" with an "\$80,000 war chest." That is the pot calling the kettle black. The legislators get their jobs that way; so do practically all public employes.

So long as private employment can be had only at starvation wages, so long as a continuing poverty economy precludes the possibility of remunerative venture, just so long will people seek public employment, and will use the only effective method for securing it—pressure.

In the Russell case it was a matter of the fitness, not the salary, of a public teacher. Public pressure, rather than competitive standards, again resolved the issue. It is quite within the scheme of things that this should be so. Since the public pays the cost of maintaining City College, it has the moral and legal right to force upon its management its ideas on faculty personnel, curriculum and equipment. It can persuade its legislators to ban the teaching of evolution. The public may be stupid, but it pays for that privilege.

Mr. Russell has been appointed also to the faculty of Harvard University. But that is a private institution. The action of its trustees is ultimately determined by its paying students and its contributing alumni. It cannot afford mediocrity on its faculty, at least any more mediocrity than can be found on the faculties of similar institutions. Competition rather than public pressure determines its standards.