(This article is the text of a paper given at the seminar DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION conducted by the South Australian Institute of Teachers in Adelaide in September this year. Mr. Ashenden was debating the topic "How Democratic is South Australian Education?" with Mr. K.E. Barter, Director of Secondary Education, South Australian Education Department.

I have often been a critic of Australian education, and my criticism has usually been severe. I suppose, then, that I'm the sort of person Mr. Barter referred to when he addressed a student meeting at Adelaide University on May 16 this year. He said:

It is all too common these days to hear public spokesmen voice the opinion, with a lack of close knowledge, but with a confidence usually reserved for certainty, that Australian education is poor and even worse. (1)

By the time I read this remark, reprinted in the Education Gazette, I was well into the preparation of this paper, and so I decided that, common or not, another piece of such criticism would have to be inflicted on a helpless public. When I read the next sentence, though, I was ready to give up the attempt, for Mr. Barter went on to tell his audience that he was able to deny that Australian education was poor or even worse and, he continued, that he could:

add emphasis from my close knowledge of what is happening in South Australia by saying that such criticism is rubbish. (2)

At this stage, I realised that there was no point in going on. I rang Murray Haines, told him the Institute had backed the wrong horse, Brin Munro (3) was right after all, and he'd better scrub the conference. Murray pointed out that this would leave the Blue Moon catering service with hundreds of unwanted cocktail frankfurts, that dozens of teachers would lose their day off, and what with one thing and another, I'd better press on regardless. Here, then, is your reluctant critic.

The topic of the debate is How Democratic is South Australian Education?, and the usual thing is to define your terms.

The first part is the most difficult, and so I'm happy to subscribe to the idea of democracy which Brian Abbey stated or implied in his paper this morning. The part of the topic that does need clarification is 'education'.

I want to separate the process of education from the institutions of schooling. This is not to say that the two are entirely separate, for it is notorious that education often occurs in the schooling system. It is less often realised that education, of a kind, also happens outside the formal school situation. Sometimes this is a fairly obvious process -- radio, newspapers, TV and the like influence the way people understand the world and themselves, and whatever one might think of the consequences it is, in its way, education. People are also affected by their everyday experience, they learn from it, are educated by it. These sorts of education lie, I think, outside the terms of this debate, but I think it important, before I get onto the schooling system, to point out that whilst this sort of in-


The Gazette is the official publication of the Education Department, and the appearance in it of Mr. Barter's statement suggests that he was enunciating an official line in response to left and progressive criticism of the Department.

2. loc. cit.

3. Murray Haines is current President of the South Australian Institute of Teachers, and Convenor of the Democracy in Education seminar; Brian Munro is a leading DLP activist in SA education, and was foremost in an attack mounted against Haines and the Institute for allowing itself to become the instrument of the subversive left, etc.
formal education is pretty universal, it is in consequence undemocratic. The media confirm the addictions of passive consumers and serve to protect them from ideas or information which would lead to a questioning of their society's order. The media's more crucial function is to confirm the lessons of experience in society — that the 'average man' cannot expect to create, decide or influence, but must labour, accept, and be swayed. This diffuse, informal education is so thorough-going that the 'average man' will be unlikely to conceive of man as a creative being capable of choice; to suggest that he could be, flies so flatly in the face of experience as to seem to him to be pie in the sky. Such are the results of informal learning. Is formal schooling different?

The schooling system in South Australia has three main components. There is the infant, primary and secondary sector, with its subdivisions of state and private schools. There is the tertiary system, including universities, teachers' colleges, colleges of advanced education, and various trade and specialist institutions. And thirdly, there is a variety of other institutions, including pre-schools, adult education, the university radio, and the like. We can describe this complicated set of institutions by asking six questions about them:

1. Who gets into them?
2. What processes go on in the system?
3. What happens to the schooled as a consequence of their schooling?
4. Who manages the system as a whole?
5. Who manages the components of the system (e.g. a primary school)?
6. In whose interest does this system operate?

Questions 2 and 5 are the concern of the next two sessions of the conference, and I'll steer clear of them. (4) I will try to answer the four questions, which, to repeat, are:

1. Who gets into the schooling system?
2. What happens to them as a consequence?
3. Who controls the system as a whole?

4. In whose interests does the schooling system operate?

Most people concerned with education would say that everybody gets into the schooling system. This belief is summed up in the slogan of 'equality of opportunity'. Thus, the Karmel Report:

The schools provided by the state therefore attempt to provide the means to realise equality of opportunity between children from every kind of home (5)

This seems to approximate reality, for it seems obvious that everyone has a more or less fair go at what the schooling system offers. In fact, if we can imagine South Australian society sliced down the middle, and hold it up for inspection, things look different.

If we look firstly at the ten year old layer, we can see that all, or nearly all, the ten year olds are to be found in the schooling system. But quite aside from the undemocratic processes of school life (a descriptive task belonging to tomorrow's sessions), the arrangements of groups of ten year olds is markedly unequal. Small numbers of them are comfortably closeted in private schools, usually because their parents belong to an elite or, on occasions, because they want their sons and daughters to join one. We can also see inequalities which come from class or race or ethnic group, and to some extent, from where the ten year old lives (itself a consequence of class or ethnic group). But at this point in his life, the ten year olds share a relatively equal life-situation in the school, and this is one of the few bouquets one can accord Australia's centralised education system. Lest Mr. Barter thinks I've decided to stop talking rubbish and start talking sense, I'd remind him that whilst the shared experience of these ten year olds is equal, it is equally unpleasant and undemocratic.

If we now look at the twenty year olds in South Australia today, a very different picture emerges. The life-situations of the twenty year olds vary enormously. Firstly, we can now see that the ten intervening years have taken their toll, and very few remain inside the schooling system. There are approximately 26,000 ten year olds in the schooling system today; there are approximately 5,000 twenty year olds. Even allowing for population structure, it is safe to say that, at best, only one in four will survive the schooling system to their twentieth year.

If we inspect them closely, we find that the notion of equality of opportunity has long since been abandoned. In the first place, these people are there because their parents are higher up the scales of salary, status, school-
ing success, and class; they may also owe their life-circumstances to their race, or ethnic group, or their sex. Further, their actual place within the system will be strongly influenced by the same variables. As we climb up the schooling ladder from trade school to technical school to teachers' college, college of advanced education to university (and within the university from arts up to medicine), we will find more and more Australian, middle class, eastern suburbs, males, and less and less migrants, workers, females, or residents of Bowden. The schooling system, in short, has not merely failed to counteract the circumstances to their race, or ethnic group, or their sex. Further, their actual place within the system will be strongly influenced by the same variables. As we climb up the schooling ladder from trade school to technical school to teachers' college, college of advanced education to university (and within the university from arts up to medicine), we will find more and more Australian, middle class, eastern suburbs, males, and less and less migrants, workers, females, or residents of Bowden. The schooling system, in short, has not merely failed to counteract the

Secondly, the argument implies that individuals should be put into a highly competitive system and given fat rewards for being good at what the system demands. Neither competition nor discrimination, however, help to make democratic man. The twenty year olds, the argument runs, are where they are because they deserve to be there. This argument seems to me to ignore two crucial considerations. Firstly, success in schooling is probably less dependent on such intellectual ability than it is on the ability to conform, to perform routine tasks to survive schooling. (6)

Thirdly, and briefly, we can look at the thirty year olds. A few of them are still in the schooling system, for varying periods of time. They take post-graduate courses, attend re-training schools, or come to conferences. They are almost entirely members of an elite. By any calculation, they have succeeded in cornering most of what this society offers in the way of a chance to make decisions, realise self and to influence others. Any equitable use of social resources would be at least wanting to compensate the losers for the lack of any of these in their life experience, but in fact they get nothing, and those who already have more get more. Here again, another small bouquet is due to the WEA, Adult Education, district libraries and the like. Their size and resources are an accurate reflection, however, of the forces which determine the allocation of resources.

I have already gone some way, then, to tackling my second question -- what happens as a consequence of experience in the schooling system? In brief, two undemocratic things happen. Firstly, the schooling system partly confirms, partly determines the distribution of wealth, of self-esteem, of chances for self-realisation, of power. Secondly, it places power in the hands of people who have not only had long experience of a highly competitive, hierarchical and undemocratic social system, but have been very good at surviving it, and are therefore likely to identify themselves with it, to see the world in its terms. That is, the schooling system has served to perpetuate undemocratic social arrangements -- and has in the process generated an ideology which so shapes and selects views of those arrangements as to make them appear the reverse of what they are; at least I assume that's why Mr. Barter, in the talk already quoted, said that: "Without complacency we can be proud of our system." (7)

The two most difficult questions remain: who controls the schooling system, and in whose interest?

Who controls the system? I don't think anyone would want to deny that the schooling system is at least partly controlled by its bureaucracies. Each school has its internal bureaucracy, and in the case of the State schools, its point of connection with the bureaucracy beyond is the headmaster. The headmaster's function within the school is not really my province in this paper. I wish it were, because Mr. A.W. Jones has been helpfully candid about that matter. “Let me say at the outset,” he says in his well-known memo Freedom and Authority, “that you as Head of your school, by delegated authority from the Minister and the Director-General, are in undisputed control of your school.” (8)

This same remark also suggests where control goes from there. It belongs to a large and complex bureaucracy which is made up of people, almost invariably middle-aged males, who have been successful in the political environment within the school and in the conduct of relations between that school and the bureaucracy. This mechanism of recruitment ensures the continuity of a strict definition of role and function,


8. As quoted in ibid. This is, in my view, the heart of this notorious memorandum. Many readers will remember Mr. Jones bruiting it about on the ABC's Great Debate, in a sales line already familiar to South Australians, as a progressive democratic document. In fact, it opens the way for a despotism which is all the more pernicious because it is on site, not away in Flinders St.; it also exploits the popular confusion in teachers' minds about the real role of the headmaster and by projecting him as a staff-member-cum-embodiment-of 'the school', it divides teachers' loyalties; thus, when previously teachers were almost unanimous in their opposition to Flinders St., they are now often unable to oppose administrative dominance of education because it is carried out by the headmaster, a role not so clear in their minds as that of a 'Flinders St. bureaucrat'. The same memorandum uses the same strategy in its promotion of SRC's, school councils, etc.
of conduct regulated by finely-detailed rules, instructions and regulations which accrete like coral. It ensures a strong emphasis on continuity, and where change occurs, it must be change which can be accommodated by the structure and its personnel -- often the changes are not merely accommodated, but are co-opted to reinforce the system. Student reps, school councils, staff meetings and so forth are just such changes.

We must also remember that those who are in the bureaucracy have been attracted into it -- after all, no-one made them go there, and the attraction is the apparent potential for decision-making, for influencing people, for exercising power. Those who have joined the bureaucracy soon become aware that such opportunities are relatively greater as one rises up the internal ladder. A very few realise, to their dismay, that bureaucracies have very often been too successful in making their operations routine, reliable, defined and regulated; that matters for decision are so selected and so defined that the real choices available to an individual are relatively small in size and number. One has only to hear Hugh Hudson (9) bemoan the tiny amounts of money available to him for "discretionary spending" to realise that if things are so crook for the whales, it must be positively crummy for the minnows. And when one remembers that there is a high degree of identity of views and dispositions amongst these individuals, it is scarcely surprising that there are few surprises.

The characteristics of this system will percolate downwards. This is partly because those in the bureaucracy control entry into their own ranks, and its members will approve of those who embody their own best qualities - regularity, predictability, commitment to system stability, competitiveness, and a willingness to acquire and use power. In this way, people in the schools are encouraged to take on these qualities. The process of downwards percolation is further assisted by the willingness of bureaucrats to define the site, nature, and, they hope, content of conduct regulated by finely-detailed rules, instructions and regulations which accrete like coral. It ensures a strong emphasis on continuity, and where change occurs, it must be change which can be accommodated by the structure and its personnel -- often the changes are not merely accommodated, but are co-opted to reinforce the system. Student reps, school councils, staff meetings and so forth are just such changes.

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The Education Department sets the broad policy aims, gives advice, and sets up training schemes on ways to achieve such aims. It appoints skilled advisers in curriculum and teaching methods in the form of inspectors and consultants who visit the schools. (10)

Further, the bureaucracy reserves for itself the right to regulate, weigh-up, and adjudicate between various competing "interest groups". Mr. Barter again:

working rules are adopted as policy by the Education Department, taking into account opinions, points of view and needs of the various parts of the community, including teachers, teacher organisations, universities and other tertiary bodies, parents and parent organisations, employers advisory boards and committees and by the students themselves. (11)

Note the assumption that the view from the administrator's box is not only better than that of others, but is in fact so uniquely clear that the administrator alone is in a position to make the large, the "broad policy" decisions. That is why Mr. Barter was telling the student whether or not the education system was poor -- he should have been asking them.

One more example of the percolation process will suffice. The Director-General's memorandum already referred to tells the head that he should extend prerogatives to his staff just as he (the Director-General) is extending prerogatives to heads. The head is, of course, free to construe this as he likes. As for the parents, the memo says that things should be done "with their full knowledge". It also adds that "student opinion should make itself known". (12)

Thus the bureaucratic values of clearly delineated individual responsibility and power, paternalism and noblesse oblige, and the notion that olympian neutrality can be combined with individual power find their way into the school. Thus the great majority must consent or resist -- a resistance loaded with all the risks involved in crossing a more or less benevolent despotism.

I have gone into the disposition of power within the Education Department in a little detail because it is the largest schooling bureaucracy. I think that the same general description could be applied to the smaller bureaucracies which manage the universities, the private schools and so on. Without going into that assertion, the point of interest now becomes the place where these numerous power structures merge into the over-arching structure. Obviously, the Education Department is very directly coupled to the State Minister; increasingly, but less obviously, private schools and the rest are, in varying degrees, also influenced by him as the keeper of the purse, for beyond the Minister is the Federal Government and its bevy of commissions and boards which regulate the flow of cash. This cash sometimes goes through the State Minister, and sometimes directly into universities and colleges of advanced education and schools.

This disposition of resources is interesting in two ways. Firstly, its amount determines the extent of the schooling system, and thus its place in the social

11. loc. cit. Note who comes last.
system as a whole. Secondly, it is often parcelled out in specified directions or under specific conditions, and thus the priorities of the federal administration are directly reflected in the shape of the schooling system. The shape and functioning of this system is extremely complex, and rather than try to describe it more carefully, I refer you to Doug White's excellent chapter in Kirsner and Playford. (13)

For my purpose, the actual operation of these mechanisms is less important than the imperatives which determine its functioning. That is, these structures certainly do have an independent influence on the systems they service, but more fundamental and crucial are the forces which shape their distribution of resources.

Thus we come to the fourth question. In whose interest does the schooling system operate?

Much of my paper has implied that the kind and amount of schooling made available to people varies with their class, race, sex and language group, and whilst this is clearly so, the most powerful single factor from the beginning of the secondary schooling on is, however, the potential productivity of that person. That is, money and resources will only be available to an individual in the form of schooling insofar as there will be a greater return than there was expenditure on him. The usual phrase here is "investment in manpower".

Like any other investment its purpose is to ensure the stability of the productive system and to increase production and profit. I am claiming, then, that the purpose of schooling in our society is overwhelmingly dominated by the needs of the economic system. Perhaps I can best make this clear by contrasting this version of the purposes of schooling with a more common version.

Thus, my own institution, Bedford Park Teachers' College, states the purposes of a "liberal education" as they particularly apply to a teachers college, but I think you'll find that the words have a familiar ring:

Pervading all our efforts ..... is the ideal of a liberal education. By this I mean that education which endeavours to free the individual from the limitations of ignorance, prejudice, and provincialism and prepares him to seek the truth in all fields of human thought and endeavour through the use of reason. It is the education which enables him to make wise decisions independently, discriminate between truth and falsehood, the worthwhile and the trivial. It is, echoing the view of the Athenians, the education of free men and women -- free in the sense of having knowledge and mastery of the selves as well as their environment. (14)

This seems to me to be very far from describing what are, in fact, the functions of the schooling system, or even the small part the teachers' colleges play in it. Oddly enough, a more realistic summary is available in the Karmel Report, even though we may have to translate a few terms. Thus, the report says:

From the point of view of society the steady march of technological progress is dependent on an increasing flow of highly educated persons in the field of technology, economics, business administration, psychology, education and so on. (15)

The key terms here are society, progress and educated. They are misleading terms. In fact, the word "society" refers to that part of social activity which leads to production, and is much better termed the economic system. The word "progress" is loaded with favourable connotations, and a more objective description is "production". The term "education" conjures up the world of the handbook when, in fact, what is referred to is the acquisition of highly specific skills, a process better known as "training". We can now get close to the truth by offering a translation which reads:

From the point of view of the economic system the steady march of technological production is dependent on an increasing flow of highly trained persons in the fields of technology, economics, business administration, psychology, education and so on.

Surprisingly, the Karmel Report also comes close to making clear the crucial role of the schooling system in all this - namely, the weeding out of unfavourable investments, and the transmutation of people into personnel. Thus the report says:

The individual, by equipping himself (note the equal opportunity ideology here) with sophisticated skills, raises his earning power relative to others and fits himself for a high level of employment. Indeed it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain responsible and interesting jobs without a tertiary education. (16)

Now I want to remind you that three-quarters of the population of this democracy of ours are pushed out of the schooling system before they get to any kind


16. loc. cit.
of tertiary schooling at all. The full impact of that can be gleaned by inverting that last quote from the Karmel Report:

The individual, by failing to equip himself with sophisticated skills, lowers his earning power relative to others and fits himself for low level employment. Indeed it is becoming increasingly difficult to get anything but irresponsible and boring jobs without a tertiary education.

On the face of it, then, clearly only a quarter or less, of the population stand to gain whilst the schooling system performs its present functions. I think that it's worse than that, however. The economic system, for which schooling provides such crucial services, is rigged even more thoroughly than the schooling system itself. In the first place, don't forget that all these expensively schooled people go on to make money for their employers, but are provided to the employers at public cost. Just as roads, railways and the like are run at public expense for private profit, so, too, is the schooling system.

This singular fact points to the role of the modern state in servicing the needs of capitalist economies. What's more, I don't think it needs a detailed statement on my part to demonstrate that capitalism is not oriented to social goals such as democracy. Prof. Frymier, the keynote speaker of this seminar, put it quite succinctly when he said approvingly of US capitalism:

The basic purpose of the economic enterprise as we know in this country (and we know about capitalism in this country, too, Professor Frymier) is to make money: to show profit. Unless the individual or organisation engaged in economic activity can show financial gain, the basic objective has not been realised. (17)

That basic purpose demands social arrangements which are the converse of democracy. It demands that people be competitive, not co-operative; it demands that their success in a lifelong competition be measured in material terms; it demands that there be many, many more losers than winners; it demands that people be organised in such a way as to make them productive, and this demands that they behave in highly routine, predictable and uniform ways. It requires that social and financial resources be spent upon people only insofar as that expenditure will make them more productive. Thus, the men who wrote the Karmel Report are not villains; they are merely the sophisticated interpreters of the imperatives of a system of production whose aim is to make more profit from more production. They are ideally suited to the task because they have so absorbed the imperatives of the system as to scarcely notice when they are describing them. Let me quote from them once more:

Many large employers recognise the advantages of recruiting employees who have completed their basic tertiary education: these employees are more adaptable, are ready for specialised in-service training, and can devote their efforts more wholeheartedly to the interests of their employers. (18)

It's the kind of thing you'd expect to find on the secret files of the Chamber of Commerce!

What conclusions can we draw from this? The schooling system is highly competitive and selective; its successes are those who learn to be good at its competitiveness, accept its essentially bureaucratic characteristics of order, efficiency, routine; who can submerge the self and not mind the concentration of real power; they are those who really desire its rewards. It goes without saying that these essential characteristics are the reverse of democratic. It is urgent that teachers and students realise that it is no accident that their life-experience in the schooling system is as it is. The schooling system does not merely imitate many of the qualities of the system outside it, but it is because the system of which it is an integral part requires that it be so. On the face of it then, any attempt to bring democracy into the schooling system must wait on the end of capitalism. It is certain that this is in large measure true. It remains, however, the urgent task of socialists in schooling to lighten the weight on the inmates of the system by striving to make experience there creative, critical and chosen, for these are the qualities of education, not schooling, just as they are the purposes of socialism, not capitalism. Such an attempt will be part of the achievement of a socialist and democratic society.

17. Jack R. Frymier. This remark is made as part of an amazing thesis - that if US education could only be made to more closely imitate the US economic and political systems, it would at last be on the right track.