

**ST. LEONARD'S BOYS SECONDARY  
SCHOOL'S  
50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY LECTURE**

**Secondary Education For The Masses: Critical Issues  
Then and Now**

**By Anthony Layne, Ph.D.**

**Presented at the Frank Collymore Hall,  
Central Bank of Barbados,  
Thursday, October 10, 2002**

## SECONDARY EDUCATION FOR THE MASSES: CRITICAL ISSUES THEN AND NOW

### Introduction

It is a pleasure to be here tonight to address you on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the St. Leonard's Boys' Secondary School. I have very fond memories of my years as a young teacher at St. Leonard's during the 1960s, and of many members of staff who gave me inspiration and guidance. I have maintained touch with the School ever since I returned to Barbados in 1979.

My topic for tonight is “**Secondary Education for the Masses: Critical Issues Then and Now**”. I propose to begin by defining the key terms to be used in this lecture, namely, “secondary education”, the “masses” and “educational reform”. Next, I will deal with the question of secondary education for the masses at two points in time: firstly, during the colonial period (1627-1966), and which I shall regard as the **Then**; and secondly in the post-colonial (post-1966) period, which I will refer to as the **Now**. For the post-colonial period, I will pay particular attention to the period from 1995. The year 1995 was the one in which the **White Paper on Education Reform** was published. It is a useful year of demarcation for the purpose of this lecture since part of the brief which I was given by the organizers is to “**explore the implications for mass education of more recent .... efforts at “educational reform”**”. Permit me, then to define the key terms.

**Secondary education** is defined in this lecture as education which is provided in schools officially recognized as secondary. It does not include education which is provided in **Composite** or **Senior** schools. On the other hand, it includes education in the Sixth Forms of those four schools which are privileged to have Sixth Forms. I wish to emphasize that since Sixth Form Schools appear as secondary schools in the Barbados Estimates, I differ from those people who like to refer the Sixth Form education as tertiary education.

You may wonder why I am taking the time to clarify how I am going to be using the term “the masses”. When some people speak of “the masses”, they do so in somewhat pejorative terms. Some dictionaries define “the masses” as the “lower orders”. And some people equate the masses with the “rabble” or the “vulgar mob”. I will **not** be using the term in this class-conscious and supercilious way. By “the masses”, I am referring to the vast majority of the population in a given country. Many, if not most, of the members of this vast majority may be poor and humble folk, but there is no necessary inference that their lowly estate somehow makes them inferior human beings.

The last term which needs to be defined is “educational reform”. This term is frequently used in a vague and diffuse way, and is usually defined as an attempt to change things for the better in a country, particularly among its population. However I wish to follow scholars such as **Paulston (1976:1)** and **Fagerlind and Saha (1989:145)** and make a clear and rigorous distinction between educational innovations and educational reforms. Educational innovations involve change, as does educational reform. However, whereas educational innovations seldom have economic, social, ideological or political

implications, important educational reforms **always involve a political process with implications for the redistribution of power and material resources.**

I share the view of Fagerlind and Saha that educational reform refers to a thorough change in the structure of an educational system of a country. It means a fundamental alteration in national educational policies, causing in turn major changes in some or all of the following five things:-

- the national allocation of resources to the field of education
- the allocation of resources within the existing educational system to other levels of the system;
- the percentage of students completing different levels of the educational system;
- the percentage of students from different social strata or the percentage of female students that complete different levels of the educational system, and
- The aims and content of the curricula.

*(Fagerlind and Saha, 1989:145)*

Assuming that it is genuine educational reform, and not simply educational innovation, that has taken place in a given country, the unique character of that reform can usually be explained, at least in part, by the theory of education and development which prevails in that society. Regrettably, I do not have the time in this lecture to discuss the various theories of education and development, so let me now turn to the evolution of secondary education for the masses in Barbados, beginning with the colonial period.

## **SECONDARY EDUCATION IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD**

As one would expect in any slave society, schooling or formal education in slave society in the British West Indies was for the fortunate few. It has been appropriately observed by Shirley Gordon (1963) that pre-Emancipation society in the British West Indies was a “barbarian community”. The slaves constituted the mass of the population, but were not instructed in any arts or skills other than those required for their unpaid labour. Their masters believed that to do otherwise would lead the Black slave majority to contemplate alternatives and possibly engage in revolution from below.

During the slave regime, secondary education was reserved for the Whites and, to a much lesser extent the Coloureds, that is, persons of mixed European and African descent. Those White parents who could afford the expense sent their sons “home” to be educated in English upper-class schools and the two English universities. In Barbados and Jamaica, in the eighteenth century, the demand for grammar school education for the less wealthy White boys was met through bequests by wealthy planters to endow schools in those islands, for example Harrison’s Free School in Barbados (established in 1733) and Wolmer’s School in Jamaica. In Barbados, the only superior grammar school in the British West Indies during the entire slave regime was opened in 1745 in the Mansion House on the Codrington Estate. That school was the Codrington Grammar School. It was later re-named Lodge School (in 1825), and had the distinction of being regarded as a “school for the sons of gentlemen” rather than as a common “Charity School” for poor Whites.

The emancipation of the slaves offered the first opportunity to provide schooling for the masses. I do not have the time to go into the details of the **Negro Education Grant** which laid the foundation for mass primary education, since my focus is on secondary education. Suffice to say two things. Firstly the Grant lasted from 1835 to 1845, and on its termination the Barbados Legislature made the first grant for popular education, in 1846. That grant was for £750.

Secondly, by 1846, the very ruling class which during the slave regime had resisted religious education for the slaves on the grounds that it could lead to revolution, had come to regard religious-oriented primary education for the ex-slaves as a key means of staving off revolution. Witness, for instance, the following statement which the Barbados Legislature made in its reply to the Governor's Opening Address on May 27, 1851:-

**We rejoice that we are able ..... to give a fresh impulse to a work in some degree coeval with the settlement of the Colony... We sincerely trust that the increased attention to general knowledge will not in any way impair, but improve the religious instruction given and help to fit the rising generation both in mind and character for the satisfactory and cheerful performance of their unavoidable duties.**

*Emphasis added*

*(As reproduced in Gordon, 1963:57)*

It was only from the 1870s that the colonial government began to give any attention to secondary education for non-Whites in the British West Indies. In Barbados, the famous **Mitchinson Commission** of 1874-75 broke new ground in calling upon the Government to provide a limited number of exhibitions for non-Whites to attend secondary school. The Mitchinson Commission certainly had no such thing as the promotion of mass secondary education in mind, and it was clear from that Commission's report that the call for a limited number of exhibitions was intended to strengthen, not undermine, the power and influence of the hereditary aristocracy. Here is the Mitchinson Commission in its own words:-

**Mitchinson Report, 1875**

**But it is not only desirable that the best stratum in each primary school should gravitate upwards, i.e. should struggle into a more advantageous position socially speaking; it will also conduce to the interests of the community and the stability of its institutions, if the very best units in that best stratum be placed, through means of access to our highest type of education, within reach of the best social and professional positions attainable in the Colony. The hereditary aristocracy of England gains strength and influence by being frequently recruited from the middle classes. There will probably be but very few in each generation who are worth this exceptional treatment, and even of these some will turn out failures after promise. It is, however, an experiment worth trying, and the existence of even one such exhibition per annum from primary to first grade schools, will have a wholesomely stimulating effect on primary education generally.**

*(As reproduced in Gordon, 1963:247)*

The promotion of mass primary education as an instrument of social control while reserving secondary education for a fortunate few continued to be the defining feature of educational policy in Barbados right into the twentieth century. In Barbados in the year 1900, there were 169 officially-recognized elementary schools, more than one per square mile, and those 169 schools had a combined enrolment of 24,145 pupils. There were also eight Government-Assisted secondary schools, three classified as First Grade and five as Second Grade. Those eight schools had a grand total enrolment of 532 pupils. Bear in mind that this was well over a half century after the passage of the Act of Emancipation of 1833. School fees in the elementary schools ranged from 1<sup>d</sup> to 3<sup>d</sup> per week. In the secondary schools they ranged from £5 to £15 per annum, which was well beyond the reach of the average parent.

By the end of World War II, the secondary school system in Barbados was still as elitist as ever. During the 1945-46 school year, there were 8 pupils enrolled in secondary school for every 1000 persons in the 12-18 age group. According to Howard Hayden, who was Director of Education in Barbados at the time, that ratio was the highest in the British West Indies, with the closest competitor to Barbados being British Honduras with a ratio of 6 per 1000 (**Hayden, 1945**). However, the high enrolment ratio for Barbados in relation to the rest of the Region was of little consolation to the Black poor who, as a group, were still denied access to secondary education even though they had taken violently to the streets in 1937. In 1945-46, there were 2504 students enrolled in the Government-Assisted secondary schools, as compared with the 532 in 1900. Of those 2504 students, 234 or about 9.3% were exhibitioners with tuition-free places while 240 or 9.6% were exhibitioners who were enrolled at reduced fees (**Department of Education 1945-46 Report: 15-16**).

Thus far, I have not mentioned the Barbados Scholarship, which was the crowning glory of the secondary school system, and I should do so at this point. In 1945, there were 17 candidates who competed for the Barbados Scholarship. Fifteen of those candidates were from Harrison College, with Lodge School and Queen's College each offering one candidate. The 17 competitors were seeking to join the 7 Barbados Scholars in residence in universities at the time. Four of those 7 Scholars-in-residence were in Medicine or Law, traditionally the most popular fields of study for Barbados Scholars.

The educational system that produced the Barbados Scholar was one of which many Barbadians were and continue to be proud. However, no less a writer than Gordon Lewis (**1969**) has drawn attention to the snobbery that graded the school pupil on the educational ladder in terms of his social class position in 1945. In the words of Lewis, educational culture in Barbados at that time meant the ornamental development of the privileged individual, not the general enlightenment of a community. It also meant:

**the subjection of the school population to a murderously competitive regimen, with pupils exercised like racehorses in a steeplechase only a chosen few could hope to win, and producing in those few, the well-known phenomenon of the colonial Oxonian only too often made unfit, by experience, for creative service to his own community.**

*(1969:230)*

The global diffusion of democratic ideals after World War II did not by-pass Barbados. There arose in Barbados non-White leaders, themselves a product of the educational system, who felt that something had to be done to curb the excesses of the planter-merchantocracy and to make secondary education available to larger numbers of people. Acting on a recommendation of the **Marriott-Mayhew Commission of 1932** the Barbados Government introduced the first two Secondary Modern schools, St. Leonard's Boys' and St. Leonard's Girls', in 1952. At July, 1965, that is, on the very eve of Independence, the number of Secondary Modern schools, renamed Comprehensive, had risen to six<sup>1</sup>. Those six schools had a total enrolment of 6265 students, as compared with 4716 in the 10 Government Grammar schools, all of which had been established by the year 1928.

It should be mentioned here that by Independence, and especially from the 1950's, the private

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<sup>1</sup> Namely, St. Leonard's Boys', St. Leonard's Girls', Princess Margaret, West St. Joseph, Florence Springer and Parkinson

sector also played an important part in the extension of secondary education to larger numbers of people in Barbados. Those private secondary schools which were officially recognized and known as Approved Private or Approved Independent secondary schools had a combined enrolment of approximately 7000 pupils at July, 1965 (Gov't of Barbados, 1965). Thus, when the enrolment in those schools was added to the 10882 in the Government-maintained secondary schools (where tuition was free for all pupils as of 1962, the overall enrolment stood at almost 18000. This figure bore no resemblance to what it had been in 1945. The provision of schooling for the mass of the secondary school-age population was beginning to take shape.

At Independence, the progress which Barbados had made in making access to secondary education available to larger numbers of people was not to be scoffed at when one compared the enrolment figures for Barbados with those for countries elsewhere in the Region or in what was then referred to as the "Third World". However, the task of democratizing the traditionally elitist secondary school system was far from over. The secondary school enrolment had been expanded, but the secondary school system remained as stratified as ever, with the Sixth Form schools at the top, the other Grammar schools beneath them, and the Comprehensive schools occupying the lower rungs of the ladder of prestige. The system functioned relentlessly to produce a few Barbados Scholars, from Harrison College in particular, who would make the trek to prestigious universities overseas, particularly in the United Kingdom, and return to Barbados a few years later to take their places in the sun. The biggest challenge facing Barbados in the field of education at Independence was to have the secondary schools transformed from serving as instruments for the promotion of **sponsored mobility** to instruments for the promotion of **contest mobility**, to use two terms coined by the American sociologist Ralph Turner (1966) in his discussion of modes of social ascent through the school system. Let me now turn to secondary education in Barbados after Independence, and especially since 1995 when the **White Paper on Education Reform** was published.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE SYSTEM TODAY**

Secondary education is provided in 23 public secondary schools and a small number of Assisted Private. As you know, admission to secondary schools is based primarily on the pupil's performance in the Barbados Secondary Schools' Entrance Examination (BSSEE), popularly known as the Common Entrance Examination (CEE). Students write the examinations of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) at the Basic and General Proficiency Levels between the ages of 15 and 17 years. Most students write four (4) or more subjects. Those whose performance is deemed to be excellent may write the Advanced Level Examination of the Cambridge Syndicate of Great Britain two years later at 17 – 19 years old. Currently, the Caribbean Advance Proficiency Examination (CAPE) is entering its second year as a replacement for the Cambridge "A" Level Examination. Excellent performance in the examinations at the Advanced Level may result in the award of scholarship or exhibitions to pursue studies at colleges or universities within the Region and/or overseas.

Virtually all of the enrolment in the secondary schools is in the public sector. During the last school year (2001-2002), there were 20573 students enrolled in the 23 Government Secondary schools. Of that total, some 8180 (39.8%) were in the 9 former Older Secondary schools, 12168 (59.1%) in the 13 former Newer Secondary schools, and 225 (1.1%) in the sole "alternative secondary" school. In marked contrast, enrolment in the Assisted Private schools stands at about 1300 students (**Gov't of Barbados, 2001a**), as compared with 7000 back in 1965.

The gross enrolment rate for secondary education in Barbados is about 100% (**Gov't of Barbados, 2001:13**). The net enrolment rate is 100%, according to the UNDP's **Human Development Report** for 2002. It is perhaps for this reason that the Government of Barbados has been proud to announce to the world that:-

**In Barbados, there are no barriers to educational achievement base on colour, class, or religion. The educational system is free to all. There is no gender discrimination as girls enjoy the same right to educational opportunity as boys. In fact, any child with the necessary intellectual aptitude can move from public/private nursery to university, unimpeded.**

*(Gov't of Barbados, 2001:13)*

Or again, the high secondary school enrolment rate helps us to understand why the Government of Barbados has been stressing that:-

**Now that universal access to basic education has been achieved, the major challenges, which are in part the result of changes in the economy and the labour market, remain the improvement of educational quality and the reduction of the lag in the reform of the education system to keep pace with economic and technological change. In other words, the educational system must now shift its emphasis from learning by rote, to causing children to think critically, so that they may participate in the higher value-added parts of the knowledge-based and skill-intensive industry.**

*(Government of Barbados, 1995:2)*

Let there be no doubt about it. Barbados, a country which endured two centuries of slavery and which was, until just over a generation ago, formally in a colonial condition, is to be lauded for having universalized access not only to primary education but to secondary as well. There are many countries in the world today, in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, that would dearly love to be in Barbados' position in terms of the aggregate figures for school enrolment. However, there are serious issues related to the structure and function of secondary education in Barbados today which should not be played down, and the rest of this lecture will attempt to deal with some of the key issues as we focus on the **White Paper on Education Reform**.

### **The White Paper on Education Reform**

As was previously mentioned, the **White Paper on Education Reform** was published in 1995. In that important document, which may be considered as **the** document containing Government's official policy statement on "educational reform", it is stated that Barbados has traditionally had a sound educational system facilitating mobility for the population, but that there have been "some disturbing features occurring in the system over the past decade or so". According to the **White Paper**, these "disturbing features" have included:

**Negative attitudes (to self, family the environment, law and society in general), persistently poor academic performance and absence of mechanisms to adequately reflect the attainment of students or the success or failure of the methods used in the delivery of education.**

*(Gov't of Barbados, 1995:2)*

The authors of the **White Paper** made it clear that it was "imperative that the system be reformed to address these and other issues" (**ibid.**)

As set out in the **White Paper**, the existing policy on educational reform in Barbados has 11 major objectives (**see ibid.: 2-3**) We do not have the time in this lecture to deal with these 11 major objectives in detail. Suffice to say that the statement of these objectives has been informed by a stated commitment by government to the notion that "the delivery of quality education to each person is central to a system that has achieved 100% access" (**ibid.:ii**). The actual proposals for reform as contained in the **White Paper** relate to the following:- **the teaching profession** (teacher empowerment, teacher training, teacher awards, teacher appraisal); **curriculum reform** (including programmes for low achievers); **special education** (including mainstreaming in the majority of the public primary schools); **pre-primary and primary education** (including diagnostic testing, the Common Entrance Exam, flexible transfer and partial zoning); **Senior and Composite schools** (abolition of these by 1996); **secondary education** on which I will expand in a moment); **Sixth Form education** (which is treated as a separate matter from secondary education); **tertiary education**; **the Audio-Visual Aids Department**; **institutional strengthening**, and **legislative amendments**.

With specific regard to secondary education, reform proposals include: the introduction of a National Certificate of Education (NCSE) which would be applicable to 100% of the population and which was supposed to commence from September 1997; the provision by Government to Assisted Private schools of teachers trained in remedial education in lieu of the customary grant of \$1000; the provision to such schools of a subvention for

one additional subject – Computer Studies – at the rate of \$4 000 per school; employment by the Ministry of additional psychologists and reform of the curriculum to target children at risk for deviant behaviour, introduction of areas of excellence in the public secondary schools; setting up of a committee to look into the rationalization of subjects taught in the Sixth form education in the schools and at the Barbados Community College (BCC); and the amendment of the Education Act to facilitate the award of Barbados Scholarships to outstanding graduates of the Associate Degree programmes of the BCC.

The list of proposals just mentioned for secondary education is not exhaustive, but I believe that it is generally representative of the proposals set out in the **White Paper**. You will note that I have not mentioned the **Education Sector Enhancement Programme (ESAP)** which, as you know, has four main components: physical rehabilitation of schools, equipping of the schools with computer hardware, software and technological infrastructure, curriculum reform; and human resource development (teacher training and institutional strengthening). I have not included the **ESAP**, familiarly known as **EDUTECH** because **EDUTECH** relates to the school system as a whole and the Ministry itself and not simply to secondary education, the focus of this lecture.

### **Some Critical Issues Today**

What then are the critical issues in secondary education for the masses today, as I see it? And what are the implications for mass education of the post-1995 efforts at what the Government of Barbados has described as “educational reform”? That the secondary school system has been changing is beyond dispute. Secondary schools are being equipped with computers to help modernize the classrooms in an era of globalization. Teachers are being trained in the use of the new technology. They are also under pressure to become more “child-centred” and “constructivist in their approach to teaching. Continuous assessment has been introduced in the primary schools with a view to having the child’s score in the Common Entrance Exam count for only 60% of his final grade by the year 2005. Additional assistance is being given to the Approved Private schools. Nor have such schools been left out of the **EDUTECH** programme. An effort has been made to introduce areas of excellence in the public secondary schools. CAPE has been introduced. The promise to award Barbados Scholarships to outstanding graduates of the Associate Degree programme of the BCC has been kept, as of this year. All this and more has been done to improve the quality of the education offered, and to make “Each One Matter” in keeping with the big bold letters on the front cover of the White Paper. However, while these changes definitely constitute educational **innovations**, I am not sure that they meet the requirements for major educational **reforms** as I defined the term at the beginning of this lecture.

To begin with, the **highly stratified secondary school system** which Barbados inherited from the colonial era is still very much alive. It is still very much alive, with two of the Sixth Form schools, Harrison College and Queen’s College still very much at the apex. The Common Entrance Exam is still used, as it has been since 1959, to promote academic segregation which, in my view, is as bad as segregation based on sex, race or class.

Speaking of class, those who would argue that we should not ignore the fact that Harrison College and Queen's College are now attended by lots of working class children are right. However, they are wrong in implying that the children of the middle and upper classes are not very heavily over-represented in those schools and are conspicuous by their absence in schools such as St. George Secondary, Grantley Adams Memorial and the like.

It is good to see that something is being done to lessen the impact of the Common Entrance Examination on the allocation of secondary school places. However, the status quo will remain essentially intact since it is those same pupils who perform outstandingly in the Common Entrance Exam who will perform outstandingly in the Continuous Assessment. I refer to the children of the middle and upper classes.

Let me now touch on the issue of **Flexible Transfer** and **Partial Zoning**. I have no problem with children proceeding to secondary school from the age of nine years if they are ready. I myself entered the then Preparatory Department at the Boys' Foundation School when I was nine years old. However, there are at least two problems with the policy decision to allow children to remain in primary school for another year if they are not yet "ready" for transfer to secondary school. The first is that there is a financial cost attached to grade retention. The second is that some clever parents, who are bent on getting their children into Harrison College or Queen's College at any cost, may deliberately choose to keep their children in primary school for another year to heighten their chances of gaining admission to those schools, at the expense of some children who would have taken the Examination at the age of eleven.

On the question of **partial zoning**, in principle I see nothing wrong with having three zones even though which schools should be included in which zones may be a debatable matter. I have no information on how the policy-decision to have each public secondary school take at least 30% of its intake from its zone has been working out in practice. I do know that the Principal of St. James Secondary has publicly stated that this particular policy-measure has had a negative impact on the performance of his school. However, I must say that inequity in the allocation process will remain for as long as each school is denied the opportunity to have its fair share of students with the whole range of abilities. The only policy-measure that I can see addressing this issue in a serious way is **full zoning** which, I admit, is not very popular with some Barbadians.

If we are not prepared to abolish the Common Entrance Examination and move to full zoning, then we at least need to adopt a **value-added** approach to assessing school effectiveness. It is simply unfair to distribute student abilities among the secondary schools in the way that we do, and then at the end of five years criticize those schools who were given nothing for not doing well as those who were given everything.

I know that I have just about run out of time, but there are two other key issues on which I need to touch before I close. The first is the competition between the four Sixth Form Schools and the BCC for the Barbados Scholarships or, to put it another way, the emerging confrontation between CAPE and the BCC's Associate Degree programme.

There can be no doubt that the battle is being joined between those who would like to see Harrison College continue to exercise a virtual monopoly over the Barbados Scholarships and those who see the process of democratization as being promoted with the inclusion of Barbados Scholarships for Associate Degree students at the BCC. In my view, we need to decide whether we are going the CAPE route or for the Associate Degree. If we insist that we want both, all doubt would have to be removed about the value of the various areas in which scholarships are being awarded as well as about the integrity of the marking process.

Finally, a word on co-education. Once again, the battle has been joined, this time between the advocates of single-sex schools and the advocates of coeducation. My own position is that it would be a retrograde step to go back to the days of single-sex schools, even though I attended one. The Girls' Foundation School was literally just a few yards away from the Boys' and that did not distract me. In any case, even if one could establish a connection between co-education and the alleged (repeat "alleged") educational **underperformance** of males, it is a **non-sequitur** to conclude that co-education has been **causing** such under-performance.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen that the battle to provide a secondary school place for every child in Barbados has long been won and that recent efforts at what the Government of Barbados has called "educational reform" have been designed to improve the quality of the education offered. The improvements which have been made are not to be scoffed at, but a lot more needs to be done if major educational reform is to be said to be taking place. An end must be put to academic segregation which is still linked to some extent to unequal access of the social classes to certain schools. These issues need to be tackled first and foremost at the point of transition from primary to secondary school. Current efforts at what is supposed to be educational reform will fall short of the mark if it is not recognized that we should no longer basically accept the system as it has been and is, and that there should be an alteration of power relationships among those in the system and within the classroom. There must be genuine empowering of teachers since teachers cannot create and sustain the conditions for the productive development of children if those conditions do not exist for teachers themselves. I am planning on carrying out a study on teacher motivation and satisfaction in Barbados, and I will let you know more about this once it gets off the ground.

If we are genuinely interested in reforming secondary education in the interest of the mass of the population, we need to ensure that the following comment by **Sarason (1990)** in his interesting book entitled **The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform** does not apply to us:-

..... **The proponents of educational reform (in the United States) do not talk about changing the educational system. They couch their reforms in terms of improving schools or the quality of education. And if there is any doubt that they have other than the most superficial conception of the education system, that doubt disappears when one examines their remedies,**

**which add up to ‘we will do what we have been doing, or what we ought to be doing, only we will now do it better...’**

(p. 13)

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