

Article Section

VIRGINIA SHOWS A WAY

By FRANK CHODOROV

PARLIAMENT, said a British wag, has been known to do the right thing, but never for the right reasons. That is another way of saying that a political body, following the line of expediency, may accidentally hit upon a course rooted in right principle. The result is none the less desirable because it is arrived at by chance. Many a patient has been cured that way.

The Virginia General Assembly last December authorized a referendum on whether to call a convention for the purpose of considering a change in the State Constitution. On January 9 the referendum was held, and the people approved by a 2 to 1 vote the calling of the convention. The ultimate effect of this vote is to clear the way for the use of public funds for the support of private, non-sectarian schools. This purpose is the central theme of the report of the Gray Commission, which was appointed by Governor Stanley in August, 1954, after the United States Supreme Court outlawed race segregation in public schools.

Briefly, the report proposes that local communities be allowed to discontinue public schools at their discretion. Whether or not such schools are maintained, a student who prefers an accredited private school will be allowed a tuition grant equal to the present per-pupil school cost of public schooling. There are other recommendations, but they all rest on this one.

The effect of this proposal — and that is the implied intent — will be that white parents will have the choice of sending their children to schools which do or do not enroll Negroes, and Negro parents will have the choice of public schools, integrated, or schools for Negroes only. That is where a point of principle comes into play: should parents have the right of deciding on the companionship of their children? (Involved is the larger question of whether the selection of associates is a prerogative of the individual or is a matter of public policy.)

From the point of view of egalitarians, collectivists and all advocates of majority infallibility — sometimes called "democrats" — the choosing of their children's companions is not a right inherent in parenthood. The exercise of such choice, they hold, is a social evil. To Virginians, and other southern citizens, the choice of associates is not only a private matter, but the parent who does not concern himself with it is neglectful of his obligation to his children. Even in the North, where there is no "Negro question," it is common practice for white parents to seek out schools which have no Negro pupils and to locate themselves in such districts; this too is segregation, by choice, not by law.

One side or the other in this matter of race discrimination, or maybe both, must be in error. But, since when is it sinful to be wrong?

Each of us is in error from somebody's point of view; to the Hindu the Christian is in dire need of understanding, to the socialist the individualist is benighted, and Republicans look upon Democrats as fools of the first water. Taking us as a whole, therefore, we are all wrong. But, since each of us values his opinion highly and wishes to hold on to it, it behooves each of us to concede to the other the right to hold on to his; social life would be impossible without that concession. To deny to any of us the right of opinion is to curtail freedom, besides stultifying thought. If there is any absolute wrong, any positive error, it is the use of force in an attempt to achieve conformity — which is exactly what is wrong with the decision of the Supreme Court on segregation.

Thus, whatever the motivation behind the action of the Virginia legislature and the electorate, in the referendum, the accidental consequence is to point up a basic principle of freedom — the right to be wrong. For that the country should be thankful.

IF THE GRAY COMMISSION'S report is put into law, we may expect other accidental consequences that should go a long way toward solving some of the current, vexing problems of our educational system. Nearly everybody, teachers as well as parents, is convinced that the system needs some overhauling, although there is violent disagreement on what should be done. The Virginia experiment may very well settle the argument.

The effect of tuition grants — which is really the remission of taxes — will be to create an effective demand for private schooling. In economic parlance, an effective demand is a desire backed up with the wherewithal to satisfy it. In this case the parent will have the capital to

invest in a school of his own choosing; a market for private schools will arise.

At first, of course, the difference between private and public schools will be along segregation lines. Once this matter is taken care of, other points of differentiation will show up, either in curricula or methods of teaching. There will be some prescribed requirements imposed on the private schools, but these will be necessarily general in scope; many details will come within the discretion of the school management, as well as of the local communities, which have the authority to abolish public schools altogether.

For instance, some private schools, at the insistence of their customers, will go in for teaching along traditional lines, with emphasis on subject matter rather than methodology, leaving what is called "progressive" education to others. We can be sure of that because "progressivism" has come in for a great deal of criticism throughout the country. Under the Virginia plan, this controversy will be settled by the inexorable law of competition. Perhaps "progressivism," with its insistence on educating the group rather than the individual, will in time prove itself to the satisfaction of its clientele; perhaps the trade will actually prefer that conglomerate course known as "social science" to the old fashioned disciplines of history, geography and civics. The market will decide.

The big change will be in the high schools. Some parents still hold that education is a process of disciplining the mind, not the learning of a trade, and are of the opinion that a knowledge of mathematics, rhetoric, literature and even Latin will prosper their offspring more than knowing how to behave on a "date" or how to drive a car. For their children, if

they can make the grade, there will be a classical high school; the public high school, with its emphasis on functional courses, will be available to those children whose talents lie in that direction. Parents, with money in pocket, will shop around for the kind of education they deem best or for which their children show an aptitude.

All sorts of schools, within the limits set up by the authorities, will cater to the trade. Educators, like merchants and manufacturers, will set up in business, either to supply a known demand or to offer something "new" or "different." Teachers will heed the call of the market place, not the dicta of a bureaucracy. Proficiency will be rewarded; the better schools and the better teachers will become known by their product and will reap the deserved harvest; the others will fall by the wayside, according to the law of competition. Yes, parents will buy education even as they buy medical or legal services or even groceries, and will of necessity become as keenly interested in the mental progress of their children as they are in their health.

Incidentally, there may be schools in which the tenets of collectivism, even Marxism, are taught and preached. There can be no objection to that, if the parents use the tuition grants, which was their own money in the first place, to support such schools. Much of the criticism now levelled at the public school is that such subjects have seeped into the curriculum and that children, having no avenue of escape under the law, must submit to the indoctrination. In point of fact, it is compulsory support of, and compulsory attendance at schools, in which collectivism is furthered, that is irritating; no one would bother if the compulsion were removed. Perhaps, in spite of the noise they generate,

the collectivists will prove themselves to be a minority too small to support schools of their own. The market will tell.

Perhaps the tuition grants under the Virginia plan will not be sufficient to meet all the costs of private school operation, and parents will have to dig down for the difference. Those who have the means will not object to that; even after paying public school taxes many now send their children to private schools, sometimes at considerable sacrifice, and enrollment at these schools is on the increase. But, the need of supplementing the tuition grants will diminish as competition and increased demand force costs down, even as has happened with automobiles and television sets; the free market has a way of adjusting price to effective demand. In the meantime, or until the market place gets up a full head of steam, some parents may find the private school, even with the tuition grants, beyond their means. Americans being what they are, there will be plenty of scholarships for children who show an aptitude for learning; the Virginia plan will thus arouse the virtue of charity, which tends to go to sleep when government takes over its offices.

THERE IS NO social ill, real or imaginary, that competition cannot cure. Right now there is a great clamor from professional educators for Federal aid to education. It is asserted that there is a great and increasing shortage of classroom space, and that states and local communities are in no position to make up the deficiency. The money for construction must come from the Federal government, they insist, ignoring the fact that the Federal government has no other source of income than the taxes it levies on citizens of those states and communities.

If there is a shortage of classroom space, the Virginia plan will, in time, overcome it. For, it will put into the educational business the same profit motive that finds space in any other line. Undoubtedly, as the opponents of the Virginia plan insist, the private school will find classroom space hard to come by, especially as, according to some lawyers, the state and the communities are forbidden by law to lease or sell their equipment. But, admission that there will be a shortage of space is admission that there will be demand for space; that is, that the private school will not want for customers.

Until capital is enlisted in the private school business and construction can meet the demand, makeshift devices such as private homes, vacancies in commercial buildings and churches that are empty the greater part of the week can be resorted to; in pioneer times, the church often doubled as a schoolroom. Good teaching is not a matter of physical equipment, it is a matter of skill and dedication. However, an effective demand always creates a corresponding supply, and in due time there will be school space enough, and without resort to higher taxes, bonds or Federal aid.

As private enterprise will solve the space problem, so it will solve the teacher problem. Some educators complain that there is a shortage of teachers and that this is due to the prevailing low scale of wages. Perhaps this is so. The private school that renders the best service, in the opinion of the buying public, will attract the most students, and its increased income will enable it to pay accordingly; it will have to in order to attract teachers who attract more students. The rising pay scale will thus induce more young men and women to enter the profession.

To be sure, this will go hard on the public school. To stay in business, it will have to meet

the standards set by the private school. If it does not, it will quietly pass out of existence. It may sound like sacrilege to suggest the end of the public school. But if it passes out because the children are getting their education elsewhere, will it be missed? If it disappears because it cannot throw its inadequacies into the lap of the public, if it cannot ask for more taxes to get itself out of its own dilemmas, its passing will be a blessing.

THUS, the Virginia plan, put forth for the single purpose of satisfying the Supreme Court decision without offending local sensibilities, has within it the potential of liquidating the acrimonious cross-country debates over public school taxes and bonds, over curricula and operational methods. The professional educationists, and their collectivistic friends, will at first make the going hard, even to the extent of appealing to the Supreme Court for help in blocking the plan. Private capitalists and enterprising teachers will be hesitant about entering the field until the smoke dies down, but ultimately the private school will come into its own in Virginia, and its progress will be watched by every state in the Union. For, putting the matter of segregation aside, the public school question is hot all over the country. Virginia could well be rendering a national service by its experiment.

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