

higher education by means of loans of one kind or another.

The arguments one way and the other have recently been summarized by Maureen Woodhall in a book published for the University of London Institute of Education (*Student Loans*, George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd, 45s). The starting point for this valuable study is the experience of Scandinavian countries in the operation of loan systems. Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland have for decades financed a great deal of the cost of higher education in this way. Each of them has its own arguments to make against the view of those who fear that student loans can have only evil consequences. Certainly in Scandinavia there is no reason to think that relatively poor families are discriminated against more severely by the loan system than they are by poverty alone. Miss Woodhall is, however, wise to draw attention to the way in which the widespread acceptance of loan financing in Scandinavia stems in part from the way in which the system predates the great expansion of university numbers in recent years. Nobody could guarantee that a system that works well in Scandinavia would function at all in the very different circumstances in Britain in which, among other things, it is assumed that higher education should be for practical

purposes free. At the same time, it is plainly quite untrue to argue that student loans would place an intolerable burden on young people in the years immediately after graduation—if the extra £70 a year for which the National Union of Students is now asking were made available as a loan and not a grant, it would be entirely possible for most graduate students to make full restitution within three years or so. In any case, it would always be possible to shade the starkness of the system by arranging that repayments would be linked to starting salaries or some other index.

But is this not the thin end of a nasty wedge? That is what the students ask. And of course it would be a great step back if the British university system were to become again a privileged preserve. In practice, however, there is no danger that any government will be able to pretend that the demand for higher education can be ignored—the product of the system is far too important to be dispensed with. And what the students might gain from a recognition that the public purse is not the only source of money is a unified system of grants and loans applicable not merely to those at universities and polytechnics but, equally important but frequently forgotten, the students at colleges of education as well.

No Right to Die ?

THE British Medical Association has never been known for its capacity to move ahead of the times—by all appearances, the association has to struggle to keep up with lay opinion, as its timorous and unwilling acceptance of abortion legislation has shown. Its latest declaration on social policy, a report on euthanasia published this week (*The Problem of Euthanasia*, BMA, 3s), may be right in its chief conclusion that voluntary euthanasia should not be legalized, but it is at once muddled and complacent in its argument. Briefly, the special panel set up for the purpose under Dr H. C. Trowell (who is religiously as well as medically qualified) has concluded that it would be “impossible to provide adequate safeguards” in legislation to permit voluntary euthanasia in the sense that there would certainly be errors of prognosis and errors in the decisions of patients suffering from chronic or terminal disease that the time had come to put an end to life. In general, of course, there is much weight in these arguments and also in the view that doctors brought up instinctively to believe their task to be the preservation of life would be perplexed and possibly demoralized if they were told that they must also occasionally put an end to life. One of the panel’s arguments is that if the “right to die” were legally accepted, doctors would be at a loss to know whether to resuscitate unsuccessful suicides. But the panel also says that death is usually a peaceful process, that some of the chronic diseases most distressing to patients and relatives will ultimately benefit from research and that society should spend more effort on the care of the chronic sick.

The most serious defect of this line of argument is that it quite ignores those parts of the case for legalized euthanasia which deserve to be taken seriously. To begin with, there seems to be a substantial number of the elderly and chronic sick who want not to live. Their reasons may have nothing to do with their physical condition but may instead be born of loneliness or frustration. To say that these people have no pain is beside the point. Second,

at a time when it is proper to expect that all rational questions should be answered, it is a great intellectual difficulty to know how a person’s request to die shall be denied. By dodging this issue, the panel on euthanasia has simply fallen back on the old precept that the patient never knows best. And on the need for better care for the elderly and chronic sick, the panel makes it plain that it is more concerned with the problems of severe pain and disability than with the emotional and psychological discontents of those who want to die.

The unsuccessful attempt in the last Parliament by Dr Hugh Gray to carry his Voluntary Euthanasia Bill should in short have been a powerful stimulus to British doctors as well as their customers to worry constructively about the problems which arise. Most probably the panel is right in saying that the risks of euthanasia legislation would be unacceptable but it is timorous and unimaginative in suggesting how a real problem might be made to go away.

100 Years Ago



The Eclipse Expedition

How about the Eclipse Expedition, which, I presume, you helped to sanction? I informed the public that it would prove a complete swindle, and so it has turned out. As long as such professional liars as the Astronomical Society are allowed to gull the nation, what chance is there of arriving at the truth?

JOHN HAMPDEN

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