

https://dspace.org/

The Council for Education, Witwatersrand: Private money for public good

Spargo, Peter Ernest

1976

Johannesburg College of Education

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27564

Spargo, P.E. (1975/1976). The Council for Education, Witwatersrand: Private money for public good. Symposium: A Journal of Education for Southern Africa, pp. 35-38.

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

the council for education, witwatersrand: private money for public good

PETER SPARGO

The Johannesburg of 1895 may have differed in appearance from the city of today, yet in many other ways it was remarkably similar. It was largely English-speaking, and yet was situated in a Republic which was overwhelmingly Dutch-speaking. It was cosmospolitan, brash, vigorous and, some would say, ungodly. Its citizens felt that the Transvaal government was unsympathetic to their needs and aspirations and that they had many justifiable grievances against that government. They felt themselves to be an island in an alien sea.

Education was one of the areas in which the citizens of the city — the much-maligned Uitlanders — felt their grievances most acutely. They saw that the state schools which were provided for their children were not only too few in number but were also very poor in quality. They also resented the fact that the medium of instruction in the state schools was Dutch, a language in which the great majority of the citizens of Johannesburg were neither competent nor interested. They looked critically at the few subsidised non-state schools and saw that not only was the subsidy too small but that the standard of Dutch required for a subsidy was unrealistically high — at least in their opinion! Added to all these problems was the chronic and overwhelming shortage of trained and competent teachers. Finally, there was simply a fundamental difference in outlook between the government of the Transvaal and the citizens of Johannesburg regarding the purpose of education. The South African Republic claimed, not unreasonably, that all the children within the Republic should be educated in such a way as to unify the Republic, ie in Dutch. The Uitlanders, to quote Horton[1] ". . . asked with equal reason that their children should be educated without emphasis on a language that was felt to be unnecessary and on a history that was felt to be biased" Clearly, a possible solution would be for the citizens of Johannesburg to provide their own schools run in their own way for their own children, and this possibility they now proceeded to explore with characteristic energy and enthusiasm.

Origins of the Council

On the evening of 2nd April, 1895, H S Caldecott, a Johannesburg solicitor, addressed a public meeting in the city. The meeting had obviously aroused considerable interest, for it was attended by a number of eminent citizens such as Lionel Phillips and J S Tudhope. In his address, rather engagingly entitled **Our Boys and Girls,** Caldecott highlighted the educational plight of the English-speaking children on the Reef and proposed certain measures which the community itself might take to relieve their distress. He pointed out that whereas the population of the Reef in the age group 5-16 years was about 15 000, only 2 000 were at school. He was also very alive to the language issue and made it clear that the medium of instruction of the children on the Reef should be English. Finally, he called for donations of up to £250 000, to be controlled by a 'Council of Education'.

A second meeting, held a few weeks later, decided, firstly, "to establish and support a system of voluntary education, suited to all nationalities and creeds, with a single desire of conferring upon the coming race the teaching and tuition which will be calculated to make them worthy and enlightened citizens of a good community", and, secondly, to appoint a Council of Education to put the first decision into practice. Very soon £10 500 had been collected and at the first Council meeting, held in June 1895, it was decided to canvas for funds and to draw up a constitution. It is of interest to note that this constitution, drawn up with the assistance of James Rose Innes, former Attorney General of the Cape, has stood the test of time so well that it has needed virtually no modification in 80 years. But who would provide the educational expertise that a group a business men would need? The Council felt, no doubt wisely, that "amateur administration or direction would lead to irregularities" and it therefore decided

to appoint a paid 'Director General of Education'. Thus in August 1895 a Scot by the name of John Robinson was appointed at an annual salary of £750. The choice could hardly have been better.

Robinson, a Glasgow MA and ex-Headmaster of St Andrew's, Bloemfontein, was a man of both ability and energy and he at once began a survey of education in Johannesburg and the nearby mines. His report showed that there were 1 755 children of school-going age not in school, or in private schools. The latter, Robinson found, were, to use Horton's phrase[2] "more of a danger than a help to the child". He also found that only one per cent of the children in the area he had surveyed had advanced beyond Standard III. He concluded his report with a number of suggestions for improving primary, secondary and technical education in the city.

But outside events, in the form of the Jameson Raid and the subsequent arrest and imprisonment of the Reform Committee, were to intervene and by January 1896 six members of the Council of Education were in Pretoria gaol. Nevertheless, in spite of this sudden and unexpected setback, the Council continued its work and soon had schools of its own in Fordsburg and Braamfontein. It also assisted a variety of private schools with grants and loans. In 1896 it decided to purchase the buildings of St Michael's Anglican School in Fawcustown. This school was renamed the Jeppestown Grammar School and became the forerunner of the three Jeppe schools, which were to play such a prominent role in education in Johannesburg in later years.

Financial Problems

However, financial problems were beginning to loom large on the Council's horizon and by February 1898 the Council's bank balance stood at only £28, although of course it possessed substantial assets in the property and school buildings. Energetic measures to economise on its operations were taken, but in spite of these for a while it seemed almost certain that the Council's bankruptcy would force it to cease operations altogether. In desperation the Council sold the Jeppestown Grammar School to a group of local residents for £2 500. Evidence of the Council's desperate state is the fact that Robinson eventually sent a memorandum to Mansvelt, the Superintendent of Education for the South African Republic, suggesting that the Council should act as a Witwatersrand Central Education Board under the Government's auspices, i.e. be virtually taken over by the Government. No reply was received from Mansvelt.

Clearly the Council's day were numbered unless major financial assistance was forthcoming very quickly. But at the very time that the Council's fortunes were at their lowest ebb the tide turned dramatically in its favour. On 3rd March 1899 Percy Fitzpatrick reported to the Syndic, as the Council's Executive Committee has always been known, that he had succeeded in raising the very substantial sum of £50 000 from the London finance houses which were involved with the gold mining industry on the Reef, and further that he hoped to raise the amount to £100 000. Part of the quid pro quo was that the new donors would seek representation on the Council and as a result such well known Johannesburg figures as William Dalrymple and Dale Lace joined the Council. The actual amount finally subscribed amounted to £96 941 10s 0d, individual subscriptions varying from the magnificent joint subscription of £25 000 from Wernher Beit & Co. and H Eckstein & Co to a donation of five guineas from one J Rosenberg.

Education and War

At last the Council was in a position to put into effect the plans it made during the previous four years. However, war clouds were gathering on the horizon and once again politics was to intervene in the Council's activities. The outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War put an end to the Council's work in Johannesburg and a mere shadow programme was conducted from an office in Cape Town. The first phase of the Council's history had ended.

To describe the situation in which the Council found itself after the War one cannot do better than quote Horton[3]. "The Council of Education survived the Anglo-Boer War with its constitution unchanged, its personnel intact, its finances immensely strengthened and its **raison d'être gone".** The Transvaal Government, now under Milner, assumed complete responsibility for primary and secondry education and the Province's English-speaking citizens could watch with satisfaction as mother tongue education of a steadily increasing standard was provided for their

children. The Council of Education turned its attention to a variety of other educational activities — activities which have seldom caught the public eye and yet which had a profound effect in shaping White education in Johannesburg.

In 1903 the Transvaal Technical Institute was formed, with the Council supplying three of the ten members of the Institute's governing council. In September of that year the Council was asked to hand over its entire capital to the Institute. Not surprisingly, it refused but did agree to donate virtually its whole income to the Institute for a period of three years. The following years the Council decided that the Institute's development was vital for the future well-being of higher education in the city and, in an act of extraordinary generosity, donated the sum of £60 000 — more than half the Council's funds — to the Institute. By 1914 it had spent more than £80 000 on the Institute, which was then situated on Plein Square. It would be inappropriate to discuss here the problems concerning the interest on the Beit Bequest. Suffice it so say that the Transvaal Supreme Court in 1909 upheld the joint view of the Beit Trustees and the Council that by "The Board of Education, Johannesburg", Beit had in fact meant the Council. As a result the Council was awarded the interest on the bequest which at that time was the considerable sum of £8 000 per year. By this time the Institute on Plein Square had become the South African School of Mines and Technology but the Council's interest never flagged and it continued to support the Institute actively and energetically.

The Council and the University

At this point the Council became ever more heavily involved in the question of the foundation of a university in Johannesburg. The problem was that the School of Mines and Technology, under a 1908 agreement, was confined to teaching only the Applied Sciences and Law. The Council, however, had from as early as 1903 planned to develop the School into a full university for the Reef. To do this it hoped to use the Beit Bequest, Beit's estate at Frankenwald and a major portion of its own funds. However, the University Bills of 1916 took away the Beit Bequest and left the School of Mines with the choice of either being a constituent college of a federal university or continuing on its own with its severely curtailed curriculum.

Yet in 1922, a mere six years later, the University of the Witwatersrand, with freedom to offer a full range of courses and with a new campus at Milner Park, had come into being. The story is complex and tortuous but it must be recorded that in all the official negotiations, public protests, active lobbying and calculated arousal of local feelings that led to this dramatic reversal of fortune the Council of Education played a very major part. It was always present where the balle was hottest and on more than one occasion fought alone. If the University of the Witwatersrand ever wished to seek a Godparent who had vigorously and lovingly watched over both its birth and its growth then the Council of Education would have a strong claim to that title.

From that day to this the Council has never ceased to be an active and enthusiastic supporter of the University — although occasionally its kindly critic as well! Its support has taken too many forms to mention in detail. But it may be stated that these have ranged from making housing loans to members of staff in the 1920's to supporting generously for many years one of the University's prestigious "shop windows", the journal **African Studies;** from starting the University Press to founding the Faculty of Education; from assisting the University to build the housing and office accommodation for the Yale University Observatory to making both a generous grant and loan to the University to repair the terrible damage done to the University Library by the tragic fire of 1931.

Concern for our High Schools

But it must not be thought that during all these years of heavy preoccupation with with higher education the Council had lost interest in the schools. Far from it. In 1905 the Council was asked to assist in the founding of grammar schools for boys and girls in Johannesburg. This it did with enthusiasm, assisting in the acquisition of the sites for Jeppe High School for Boys, King Edward VII High School and the Johannesburg High Schools for Girls. Each school also received £7 500 from the Council and in return the Council was given the right to nominate three representatives to serve on the Governing Body of each school. In the years that followed these and many other Provincial

schools in and around Johannesburg received a steady stream of loans from the Council. The loans were used for a wide variety of projects — libraries, sports pavilions, swimming pools and various other facilities that the Provincial education authorities either would not or could not provide.

One particular incident is worthy of special mention here. In 1932 the Council's attention was drawn to the particular plight of English-speaking rural scholars and as a result soon afterwards the Council publicly charged the Transvaal Provincial Administration with neglect of these children who, the Council reminded the authorities, "were very much in the situation of the children of the Witwatersrand in 1895, for whose benefit the Council of Education was founded." As a result better schools and hostel accommodation was provided for English-medium scholars in places like Pietersburg. The Council, which virtually never assisted a school outside the Reef, also gave warm support to a school which it has always regarded as very special — the Settlers Agricultural High School near Warmbaths.

One of the great privileges enjoyed by the Council was the right to nominate representatives to the Governing Bodies of certain Provincial secondary schools. By making wise use of this privilege the Council was able to involve numerous men of outstanding ability in the affairs of Provincial schools when their natural inclination and habits might have been to associate themselves entirely with private schools. Tragically, this privilege enjoyed by the Council was withdrawn by the Transvaal Education Ordinance of 1953.

The Private Schools

Before the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War the Council saw the foundation of private schools as one of its natural functions. However, after the War the Council became heavily preoccupied with higher education and assisting the Province in the foundation of secondary schools. Thus it was not in a position to may much attention to private schools, but it nonetheless made several loans to private schools in the period 1902-1910, as well as making St. John's College a grant of £1 500 for the purchase of more land. It also became heavily involved in the affairs of Park Town School and later in those of St. Mary's, which had been founded in Jeppestown and in the mid-1930's was moved to the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. The Ridge, St. John's, Roedean, Kingsmead, St. Dunstan's (Benoni) and several others, all approached the Council for loans or grants and it was rare indeed for a school's request to be turned down — altough it was not unknown for the Council to make some fairly sharp remarks on the unbusinesslike way some schools were run! During the last twenty years the Council has assisted Provincial and private schools with strict impartiality and it is of interest to note that from its inception in 1895 to the end of 1974 the Council had granted loans totalling R914 700 to schools and other educational bodies.

One of the very few Council projects which has been unsuccessful has been the attempt to found a private, parallel-medium, boys secondary boarding schools somewhere between Johannesburg and Pretoria. The cornerstone of such a school would be equal support from the English and Afrikaans-speaking communities, but when extensive private enquiries were made the Council discovered that Afrikaans support was lacking. The scheme was therefore reluctantly dropped.

Travel Bursaries

In 1959 the Council began one of its most successful projects. This was a Travel Bursary scheme, whereby one or two male graduate teachers from the Transvaal were enabled to gain valuable experience by teaching in a leading British school for a year. This scheme was complemented in 1970 by the institution of a Major Scholarship for Teachers, which enabled a younger teacher to spend a year studying some advanced field of education at an overseas university.

The Council of Education, which has just celebrated its eightieth birthday, is a relatively unknown body, even in the city for whose education it has done so much. In these eighty years of work for education the Council has sought neither praise, thanks nor reward, but what it has gained is more valuable than either praise, thanks or reward — the satisfaction of seeing the many institutions it helped to found continuing to flourish.

1. Horton, J. W., **The First Seventy Years 1895-1965,** Witwatersrand University Press, 1968. I freely acknowlede the assistance that I have obtained from Horton's history of the Council.
2. Horton, op. cit., p. 23.
3. Horton, op. cit., p. 36.