

Simplified Spelling Bill. Friday, 27th FEBRUARY 1953. - *Second Reading.*

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Friday, 27th February, 1953
The House met at Eleven o'Clock

PRAYERS

[Mr. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

ORDERS OF THE DAY SIMPLIFIED SPELLING BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Motion made, and Question proposed.

"That the Bill be now read a Second time." - [*Mr. Follick.*]

11.5 a.m.

Mr. I. J. Pitman (Bath): I beg to second the Motion.

I should like to pay a tribute to the hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Follick) who has been lucky in the Ballot on two occasions and has allowed me to take a leading part with him in the promotion of this Bill. It is a high testimony to men with a common purpose that they can produce such an amicable and friendly co-operative effort as I am pleased to testify I have heard with the hon. Member for Loughborough.

I have one other personal point to add. I am told that that I ought to declare a potential interest in that I am a publisher. It is suggested, I believe, that there might be a vested interest in a simplification of spelling. In point of fact, the exact opposite is the case. If there is one thing that a publisher likes best, particularly when prices are rising or have risen, it is long life for his text books. Anything more calculated to defeat my purpose in my private affairs than the passing of this Bill and the introduction of this experiment. I find hard to imagine.

"Punch" is always a good beginning to a debate in this House, and this week there is in "Punch" an excellent story. It says:

"One argument in support of Mr. Follick's scheme to teach children simplified spelling is that most of them have mastered it already."

There are two good things about that and one bad thing. First of all, it is appreciated that this Bill is about [column 2418] children and not about grown-ups. Secondly, the story draws attention to one of the fundamental points that we shall have to develop later, namely, that children naturally tend to use the alphabet alphabetically and not to make picturegrams out of words.

The bad thing, of course, is that "Punch" says we are trying to teach children simplified spelling. That is completely misleading. Spelling is both active and passive, and under this Bill the spelling will be entirely passive. Children will not be spelling differently from what they are at present. The only people who would be spelling any differently would be the designated associations, the authors and the printers who produce the material which is presented to the children. There is no suggestion that the children should be made to spell differently. In fact, they will be taught, I hope - it will not be our responsibility - those words which are not to be altered in their writing lessons, and as reading goes ahead of writing there should be no teaching of simplified spelling to any child at all under this Bill.

I want to explain the Bill to the House. It is a Bill to carry out and investigation for young children. It is restricted in time, restricted in number, and restricted in the sense that it is the passive side of spelling and not the active side with which we are concerned.

Clause 1 provides, in subsection (1), for the appointment of the chosen instrument by the Ministers to carry out an investigation. It gives the Ministers unfettered choice of what body they like and even of how many bodies. The only point is that there shall be a single, indivisible and not a divided responsibility for carrying out the investigation and for reporting. Subsection (2) deals with the duties of the chosen instrument. The investigation is only in respect of the restricted number of children and for those children only when learning to read. The investigation is to find out what happens if there is a

simplification of their reading matter. It is restricted to that. The test and the final judgment of it are to be based on the ability of this restricted number of children to read without difficulty by means of the existing orthography.

Subsection (3) deals with the principles of simplification, and lays down that [column 2419] it shall be consistently alphabetic - in accordance with "Punch's" dictum - what the children would write naturally themselves. Subsection (4) deals with consultation with others, including the United States of America. We must recognise that, although we have taken the lead over the English language the language is world-wide in its use and that it would be wrong for us to go ahead with any investigation of this kind without laying ourselves open to receive representations from other people in respect of the choice of the particular simplification which is to be used.

Subsection (5) provides safeguards for teachers, children and parents. Subsection (6) provides for the investigation to be completely comprehensive and not to be limited or restricted to the particular aspect with which the Bill is primarily dealing.

Clause 2 deals with what happens after the investigation has been completed. Subsection (1) makes the designated association report its findings, and subsection (2) operates only if the report on those findings is favourable in each case. The association has then to settle upon a conventional spelling, which may if they desire it be slightly different from the one which it used at the outset. In any case the Minister is free to override the designated association in its choice of what might be called a "parallel Queen's English" for teaching children to read more effectively in schools. There is provision under subsection (3) for both Houses of Parliament positively to approve what the Minister has approved or decided.

The Queen's English to be used in parallel at this stage will be an approved and authoritative version of a conventional standard. We just do not want any old standard being played about with all over the place. The great advantage of shaking hands with the right hand is that all of us who have right hands - and fortunately most of us have - find it much easier that there is a convention about shaking hands. The laying down of an authoritative convention is a most important point.

There is a double safeguard. First of all, the report must be favourable before anything else happens, and secondly the Minister and both Houses of Parliament [column 2420] have to approve it, positively and not negatively. Then nothing whatever happens except by free will and by success. If the thing is successful, it is left entirely to the freedom of the British and of the world to go ahead with it and use it without any restriction of copyright or anything else.

Clause 3 is put in so that if the Minister selects a body receiving a grant from Parliament, the reception of the grant by the body is conditional on its carrying out the work that the Minister asks. Clause 4 is the interpretation Clause, and Clause 5 is the Short Title. I emphasise that the Short Title is potentially misleading because we do not have a distinguishing word for the passive use of spelling and another for the active use of spelling. The only people who will spell at all differently will be the designated association responsible for it and the authors and printers who will carry out its instruction. I emphasise again that the spelling of the children will not be altered. All children in Britain, even the experimental few, will be brought up to spell and to read in the existing orthography. The whole purpose of the test and the judgment of it lies solely in their ability at the end to read the existing orthography.

In other words, this is an investigation to discover improved methods of teaching reading in a comprehensive field so that teachers throughout the country may get better results. The present results are so deplorable that this House and the Minister must take notice of them. Some 400,000 to 500,000 five-year-olds begin their schooling every year and some 120,000 to 150,000 are destined to come out of the school system at the other end unable to read properly. They start as good, healthy children and come out unable to read.

Sir Herbert William (Croydon, East): Is that due to bad teaching methods?

Mr. Pitman: We want to find out. I do not think it can be due to bad teaching methods because the good children go ahead. There is no telling at the beginning which children are bad or good. They are all good, lively, healthy kids.

Dr. Horace King (Southampton, Test): Would the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Pitman) let the House know on what basis he makes his statement? Is he still [column 2421] referring to the figures that he got from the war-time investigation into reading ability among children educated in war time?

Mr. Pitman: I am taking them from a Ministry of Education pamphlet. The figure there is 30 per cent., and there is no supposition that there has been any significant improvement, I think the figures that I have worked out will tally with those figures, which are actually more than I am allowing. I am being conservative on this aspect of the matter to allow for the factor which the hon. Member rightly raises.

Mr. James Hudson (Ealing, North): I think the hon. Member for Bath used two terms. He spoke at one time of children coming out of school unable to read, and at another time he said "unable to read properly." Will he define the word "properly"?

Mr. Pitman: "Unable to read properly" is what I intended to say. I mean that the best of them can read a short, simple sentence but they cannot read a long sentence or a complicated one because the technique of reading absorbs so much of their faculties that by the end of the sentence they have forgotten the beginning and they cannot comprehend it. It is a reading age of 11 or worse. That is to say the average reading age of the country, including all the backward readers at the 11-year-old age. It is not a good standard. These poor children have a first-class education in the first three school years, but for the remaining seven years of their educational life in school they necessarily have a form of increasing misery due to the fact that they are different from and worse than their more successful fellows and cannot fully co-operate in the work of the class.

We cannot emphasise too greatly the importance of success in the first three years of school reading life. It is then that we lay the foundation of success or failure, which will get cumulatively worse as children go up through their chronological ages. This is a case where nothing succeeds like success and nothing fails like failure in the teaching field. Let a child get behind right at the beginning of his career and he will end up with seven out of 10 years of increasing unsatisfactory school attendance, with all [column 2422. 2 Q 2] the elements of shame, boredom, absence from school because it is not worth it, truancy, even juvenile delinquency and crime and great social embarrassment.

If I take 30 per cent. - and I have here possibly slightly not allowed for the figure mentioned by the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. King) - of the 5,911,000 children in our schools, as there are supposed to be this year, the backward readers and potentially backward readers of the future in our schools today are as much as 1,750,000 children. And those are not congenitally handicapped in learning to read; they are decent, healthy children when they first come to the school, and the teacher has no means of telling which will fail and which are the good ones.

It may be something to do with visual memory. We want the Government through this investigating body to find out something about it. The same sort of figures happen in Australia and America. It seems to be connected particularly with the English-speaking world and it is, therefore, important that, since we know there is something wrong somewhere, in our insistence that we do something - and I hope the House will insist that we do something about it - we do it by a modern scientific educational inquiry which will require the co-operation of the Minister and is a matter of major educational policy for the Minister.

Within that investigation it is essential that we should have one required investigation, namely, what would happen to a few hundreds of children taken in succeeding ages in succeeding years (to get the teacher teaching over a period of years and developing his own method within that method)? What happens? Will it be better? Obviously, the onus on those of us who believe in this Bill is to show that we are not using the children as guinea pigs. There is indeed a confident expectation that such children will learn to read, and read at least as well as the others, the control groups against whom they will be measured. So I will set about dealing with that point.

As I say, we are thinking in terms of very young children:- and to introduce them in the first stage to that which is simplest is one of the basic principles of teaching. "Punch" has already made the point that the children naturally look to [column 2423] the alphabet to be used alphabetically, and in teaching them to learn to read obviously we ought to do the same thing. What did we achieve by the invention of the alphabet by those great men our fore-fathers? What advantages has an alphabetic system got over, shall we say, modern Chinese and Japanese and over the prehistoric picture writing which was there before?

What about Spanish, Finnish and Russian which are consistently alphabetic? How do their children fare when learning to read? Ought not we to know a bit more about how long it takes a Chinese boy and girl to learn to read by purely visual memory, and how long it takes a Spaniard or Finn who is using an alphabetic system with no traps in it? English is half way between the alphabetic system of Spanish and the picture writing of Chinese. I have here some examples. Take the words "ought," "women" and "one." On this card in my hand is the word "ought" and also the word "out." If we tell the child that "o-u-t" spells "out," and then start him off with "o-u-g," the wonder is why he does not make it "oug."

Mr. Ellis Smith (Stoke-on-Trent, South): It is very clear.

Mr. Pitman: Then if we take the sounds "wim" of "w-o-m" in the word "women" and "wun" in the word "one" and "ohn" in

the word "only," I do not know what a child would make of them. Then there is our famous word pronounced "Marshbanks" and spelled "Marjoribanks." The only difference between "Marjoribanks" and "ought" and "women" is that "Marjoribanks" is so infrequently used that it draws itself to our attention, whereas the "oughts" and "womens" and all the others are so frequent, and we are so familiar with them, that we do not realise that we are looking at a Chinese picturegram which bears no resemblance to an alphabetic system at all.

So, for the very young children we are talking about, it is important to remove these traps of the picturegram words and generally, while doing that, to simplify the matter so that if there is anything in the belief that some people have a visual memory which is good and others [column 2424] do not but like to build things up, We are catering for both.

The Chinese or picture writing has two great disadvantages. I have in my hand a book dated 1558 in which Dr. Timothy Bright, talking about the Chinese characters, says in the most lovely spelling which I can still read:

"Befides, they wanting an alphabet, fal into an infinite number, which is a thing that greatlie chargeth memory, and may difcourage the learner."

There could not be anything more apposite from 1558 to 1953 of the task we are giving our little children of five, six and seven than those words coming back to us over the centuries.

The other great advantage of an alphabetic system is that the child can work things out for himself. If he has a hesitation, he can go back and work it out afterwards. He can not only look at the word itself, at a picture, but at the sentence as a whole, because Gestalt philosophy tells us that is the correct way to do so. However, there is nothing inconsistent between that and the ability of the child within his own breast to solve his own difficulties as he meets them.

The Chinese system in which, if the child has a hesitation, he has to wait until the teacher can come and arbitrarily tell him whatever that picture stood for - in other words that "o-u-g-h-t" is "ought" - means that the Chinese child is labouring under a relatively great disadvantage. Anyhow, I would say that it is a general principle of teaching, first, that we should teach the easiest things first, and secondly, that we should proceed logically from the known to the unknown.

There is another question which has to be faced and on which the onus is on those of us who support the Bill. What happens when we have dealt with these children, even if they learn it easily? How are they going to make the transition to the existing orthography which is to be the test, and what about confusion during the period? I would say here that the promoters of this Bill have equally solid ground for expecting confidently that there will be an easy transition and that there will not be any confusion.

May I exhibit yet another of these words? On the card I am holding is the word "telephone" written in upper [column 2425] case block capitals and in lower case small letters.

TELEPHONE
telephone

Hon. Members will notice that each of those letters has no relationship whatever as regards the upper case "T" and the lower case "t", the upper case "E," and the upper case "L." Each pair of letters, except for the "p" and "o," are as dissimilar (to use the wording of a "Times" leading article) as Greek and Cyrillic. If hon. Members use their own handwriting - and I did not like to give mine away - they will find that the "p" becomes different and that the "l" becomes different, too. In fact, while our children are learning one script they are constantly exposed to the other, but they do that transition successfully and are not confused.

I do not know what the designated association will choose, but let us suppose they choose the spelling "t-e-l-e-f-o-e-n" for telephone, as a new spelling to make it easier for the child. Do hon. Members think that that will create difficulties of transition? Do they think it will be confusing? After all, I circularised all hon. Members, and I hope they managed to read my signature. The written forms of all hon. Members of this House are in fact 625 different word-forms and yet, thanks to context and thanks to our reading ability, once we have the reading ability we can do also those transitions to almost anybody's handwriting. Some signatures, possibly, are "dusty," but it is wonderful what one can read and it is wonderful what assistance is given by context and meaning and reading ability.

Since fluent reading and the rapid passage of the eyes backwards and forwards is the objective, I want the children to pass through this stage which is the magic portal of reading. Once they are through that magic portal, they increase their vocabulary and get the interest out of reading. A comparable situation is when mother says: "Johnny, turn out the light and

go to sleep. You have read enough." That child is a real reader, and he will never go back; he will go forward steadily. If we reach that stage we have a complete ease of transference from one extended reading to another extended reading even to the extension of reading my handwriting.

[Column 2426] I will quote, for instance, the way in which the international phonetic alphabet is used by some people in teaching French and then is transferred. If you took a French-speaking English boy who had never read a word of French but had read English, and who could speak French fluently, within an hour he would be reading French fluently from a textbook or a novel. In my own case, I had not the slightest difficulty in reading Latin and Greek. My only difficulty was in understanding what it meant. It is not the difficulty in the transition of the reading matter which presents any problem.

May I point out the interaction of words spoken, words heard, words read and words written? These four aspects of language, all different, all interact and improve the English, the vocabulary and the experience of the child immensely. That magic portal of reading, through which not more than 70 percent. of our people pass, is the most wonderful opportunity for living a fuller life, and it is dreadful that people should be denied that opportunity.

That being so, why not have a small-scale experiment in this direction? I know that leading educationists who have studied the system can be found to vouch for its effectiveness on the ability to read ordinary matter at the end and on the lack of confusion and the ability of transition. We could readily launch on the small expenditure, out of some £350 million which is spent on education each year in this country, so as to try to do a better job for these 1,750,000 young children.

If it is done through the National Foundation for Educational Research for England and Wales and the Foundation for Scotland, the Government will not have to pay the whole cost but will pay only a share of the cost - and it will not be a very large amount. The L.E.A.s and the N.U.T. contribute to that body and I should not be at all surprised to find that we could get a contribution from some educational trust. It seems to me, however, that the Minister must take responsibility for this major issue of policy in her educational system, and I should have thought that, with the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Mr. R. A. Butler) as Chancellor of the Exchequer, with his sympathy for the 1,750,000 young children, it would [column 2427] be easy to persuade him to give the relatively small sum which is needed.

When we remember that the right hon. Member for Woodford (Mr. Churchill) will be present at that Cabinet meeting and that he has already sought to persuade the country to spend and has spent very much larger sums on basic English, which has a foreign use only whereas this system has both a home use and a foreign use, it seems that the Minister of Education should have no difficulty in getting the money from the Cabinet.

Mr. James Johnson (Rugby): Will the hon. Gentleman link this very moving appeal with the cuts in adult education made in the last few weeks?

Mr. Pitman: I am trying hard to keep my speech short and it is very difficult to do so and, at the same time, to cover all the ground. What about U.N.E.S.C.O.? If this is a world English language, it may well be that, by arrangement with U.N.E.S.C.O., the Minister could say she had earmarked some of her contribution to U.N.E.S.C.O. for this purpose. It may well be that Colonel McCormick of Chicago would assist, because I know that the figures in Chicago are, if anything, worse than the figures disclosed by the Ministry in Britain. He is very interested in this subject and he might give a donation.

In any event, the Minister must take the lead, and I regret that my information suggests that, while she says she is greatly interested in the subject and while she is not averse to including this investigation in her own investigation, she makes the condition that not a penny shall be spent. Both the hon. Member for Loughborough and I regret the form of the Bill. The form has been virtually dictated to us by the Minister's refusal to contemplate the expenditure of even a penny. The hon. Member for Loughborough and I have no designs against the National Foundation, nor have we designs against the Minister. We do not want to proceed in this rather Draconian way, and if it is in a Draconian way only the Minister herself and the rules of order of the House are to blame.

As Private Members we are not allowed to bring forward a Bill which imposes any charge upon Her Majesty. If we [Column 2428] are to bring forward a potentially viable Bill which is worth discussing in the House at all, we can do so only in this form if the Minister refuses to co-operate on the financial side. If the Minister feels that the Bill is in an unsatisfactory form, let her not forget that she has had it on offer since last December. We asked her to put it in whatever form she liked and to draft it for us. I sent a description of the Bill to her on 19th December. On 31st December the Parliamentary Agents had provided the drafts and I sent them to her, explaining the necessity for the form of the Bill and offering to take her wording of the Bill. I said in my letter:

"May I then, with all this display of sweet reasonableness and desire to co-operate over everything with the

exception of the one thing of jettisoning any Bill at all, ask that you draft for us your own Bill and table in due course the Financial Resolution?"

We also offered to alter both the Long Title and the Short Title of the Bill, but still the answer was, "Not one penny." I do not know what the Minister is going to say; all I can do is to report what was said to me - that the problem is admitted, that the desirability of even including simplification in any such investigation is conceded, and that money is the only bar.

Why do we need a Bill? Why do we need to proceed by way of a Bill? I think that one of the first reasons is that the hon. Member for Loughborough drew lucky, which in itself is a very good reason. The second reason is that this question of simplified spelling is an issue of major policy and not an issue of administration within the Department. The Minister has special responsibilities in regard to spelling which she has not got in regard to the size of classes. The bit of investigation which I hope will deal with what happens if we have smaller classes is, I believe, very proper for the Minister to do administratively in the ordinary course of events. But anything like playing about - in a compulsory education system - with something which does not have any relation to the Minister's administrative duties without prior approval by, this House is just asking for trouble.

I know that had I been against spelling reform and found that young people in Bath were being, as I would say "monkeyed about with," in that way with [column 2429] public money under a compulsory attendance system, I would raise very awkward questions in this House. I would say that as a provision for such an event it is very wise for the Minister to have behind her a specific and definite Vote of this House in support of anything that is as apparently radical - it is not really radical - as this.

There we are; the Minister has said that no legislation is necessary. I am prepared to agree that there shall be no legislation if this Bill is withdrawn at a later stage, but I think that it is essential that it should go through Second Reading today in order to allow this particular issue to be really worked out and found out. On behalf of the hon. Member for Loughborough and the rest of us, I definitely renew the offer that the moment the Minister gives us any real guarantee, as it were, of intention and of good will to provide the money, we will either amend the Bill in Committee so that the form is precisely as she wants it, or, if she really wishes to proceed by way of no legislation, we will withdraw the Bill at a later stage, but not, as I say again, by jettisoning the moving and passing of the Bill on Second Reading.

I commend the Bill to the House. It is an attempt to improve our teaching and to give the teachers an opportunity of doing what I believe they want to do. After all, this country over many years has given leadership to the world. Either this investigation will show we are leading again, or it will be a failure. At any rate it will have shown we are active and not passive. We have fine children. We have a fine language in our Queen's English. We know that the Latin language spread out in the Roman Empire and eventually disintegrated. This is a question of the decadence or the vitality of the English language, and I ask the House please to give this Bill a Second Reading.

11.44 a.m.

Mr. Gordon Walker (Smethwick): I should like to support the Bill and I do so on grounds rather wider than those put forward by the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Pitman), although I agree with what he has said. I think this Bill would help the teaching of spelling to backward children, but I think it would have other very great advantages also.

[Column 2430] My main reason for supporting it is that I want to restore flexibility and liberty to the spelling of our language. I want to set English free again from the shackles of uniformity which have been imposed upon it. I regard it as a great denial of a man's liberty to compel him to spell in a false and artificial way. I want to be free from that. I can only be free from it if my fellow citizens also begin to set themselves free.

There was a time when Englishmen would not have stood for this artificial dragooning of their right to spell as they wished. It was Dr. Johnson who enslaved us. He did violence to the natural growth of English spelling which had been a feature of our language for many centuries before. He distorted and tortured our language at the same time by Latinising spelling, for instance, by putting a "b" into such words as "debt" and "doubt" which had never had that letter in them before. Although I have a great regard for Dr. Johnson, I contend that he standardised the language at a moment when our spelling was unnatural and alien to the spirit of the language.

What we now call normal spelling is not in the least normal; it is extremely abnormal and not in the general run of the English language. People may say that this has been going on for a few centuries. I think the answer to that is a remark which used to be made by a friend of mine at Oxford, that the last 300 years had been a very exceptional period. That is certainly true of our spelling. I believe that the reason today we have an artificially standardised spelling is that it is very closely connected with snobbishness. It was in Johnson's day that snobbishness triumphed over good sense in the field of

spelling and standardised spelling has become a mark of breeding and education - and a quite false one. The insistence on standard spelling today is rather like the motorist who had mastered the old-fashioned gears and did not like the introduction of simpler methods of gear changing because he had become skilled in the more complicated methods.

Mr. Charles Pannell (Leeds, West): Surely my right hon. Friend is drawing a different simile, as the manipulation of old-fashioned gears required a high degree of mechanical skill, but in regard to the case he is making - I am trying to help [column 2431] him make it - the standardisation of spelling springs from an easy snobbery.

Mr. Gordon Walker: No analogy is complete, of course. What I was saying was that because people had acquired a special skill they resented a simpler method which would destroy their special skill. I quite agree that one had to be extremely skilful to use the old gears - I used to be able to do it myself.

It is very unfortunate that employers have a habit of applying spelling as a test of education to people who come to them for employment. In fact it is nothing of the sort, but a test of a particular sort of parrot memory and a rather subservient mind. The other day I could not for the life of me remember how to spell "untrammelled." It caused me a lot of trouble but I should like to be able to put in m's and l's as I wish. I do not accept that my ability or capacity to spell "untrammelled" at a particular moment shows that I am more or less educated.

The other devil in this piece is the printer who has the last word and is a diehard. In my limited way I have attempted a long battle with the printer over such words as "centre," which I like to spell "center" and "programme" which I like to spell in an English and not a Frenchified way, by leaving out the last "m-e." But whether one writes it like that in manuscript or in the final proof, the printer always has the last word and scores over one.

In pleading for liberty I do not wish to force any spelling on anyone else. I do not want to make any radical changes. I do not agree with some of the proposals, such as the new alphabet, and so on, of my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Mr. Follick). I want a simplified, free and liberated spelling within reason. I want to spell the words "axe" and "have" without the final "e," as the great poet Bridges did. That is the sort of line along which I think we should go.

I want a new atmosphere of liberty in the second Elizabethan age, corresponding with the liberty in this respect that there was in the first Elizabethan age. I think that if we had that, it would lead our language back gradually, with the give and take of things, to a closer approach to the sound of the words we [column 2432] speak, but I am prepared to leave that to the liberated good sense of our people.

I agree that simplified spelling would help backward children, which is vitally important, but it would also help normal children. I do not see why we should impose upon our children a year more than would be necessary if we had simplified spelling to learn reading and writing. That is a very great burden on normal children as well as backward children, and the teacher too.

There is also an important Commonwealth angle to this problem. It is related to the idea the Prime Minister had when he decided to put money into basic English. There is the same idea behind the two. One of the most vital links of Commonwealth is that English shall continue to be accepted in the Commonwealth as an official educated common language. If that did not exist, the Commonwealth would go to bits. If when people from the Commonwealth came together at No. 10, Downing Street, they had to have interpreters, the whole Commonwealth relationship would disappear. English will not disappear overnight as a common language in the Commonwealth; it has got a tremendous start. But we cannot guarantee that this will go on and on for ever if we put obstacles in its way and do not do all we can to encourage the teaching and learning of English in all parts of the Commonwealth.

It is not only among Asian members of the Commonwealth and the African Colonies who will become members of the Commonwealth that there is this problem, where the whole of the people speak different mother tongues from English. The problem is very widespread in other Commonwealth countries. In Canada less than half the population is of British origin; there are not only French-speaking Canadians, but very large numbers of people from Baltic countries, Germany and Scandinavian countries. In the same way, in South Africa the majority of the people are Afrikaans-speaking. In Australia a steadily increasing percentage of people are of non-British stock.

If we do not do all we can to make the learning of English in these countries easy, we shall gradually reduce the chance of English remaining the normal official educated means of exchange in the Commonwealth, because nowadays [column 2433] the survival of English in that respect depends upon willing learning, and we have no longer any power to decide what should be taught in the schools of India, and so on. It has all got to be a willing, voluntary act on their part. We ought to do very much more than we are doing - if I may put this in here - to help to teach the teachers of English in these

countries. We ought to put more money and energy into it than we do.

One way to ensure that English will remain recognised as the common language of the Commonwealth would be to have a gradually simplified spelling closer to sound. It would reduce the effort involved in learning English, and would, incidentally, avoid many pitfalls of pronunciation which are very grave for people in India or Africa who learn English without coming to England in schools, the teachers in which have very often never been to England either. The great divergence between spoken and written English is beginning to be a very serious obstacle to the maintenance of English as a genuinely common language.

When we talk of strengthening and serving the Commonwealth, as we all do, we ought to do the things that are necessary to strengthen and serve the Commonwealth, and we should not let prejudice and hidebound traditions, and a sort of affection for acquired skills that we have, stand in the way.

11.54 a.m.

Brigadier Ralph Rayner (Totnes): This Bill has, within the limitation imposed, been very well drawn up, if I may say so, and I must congratulate the hon. Members for Loughborough (Mr. Follick) and Bath (Mr. Pitman) on the way they have stuck to their guns. After the way in which my hon. Friend the Member for Bath has introduced the Bill so clearly and fairly, I feel quite sorry that I have to oppose it. I will not follow the right hon. Member for Smethwick (Mr. Gordon Walker) into the Commonwealth angle.

I feel that I must oppose the Bill on two main questions of principle. We read in the Explanatory Memorandum:

"The recent report of the Minister of Education discloses that 30 per cent. of the children who in 1948 were fifteen years old were classed as 'backward readers'."

I agree that that is a bad setback on the results we used to obtain before the war. I will not go into those figures now, [column 2434] though they are readily available, but I should like to ask, first, why that is.

I would not suggest that any of those hon. Members whose powerful names are on the back of this Bill are cranks - I would not dare to do so - but I think they would all agree that this country has been so free in the past that it has become something of a hothouse for cranks, and that our education particularly has become the happy hunting ground of every sort of sentimentalist and faddist; and has, indeed, become a sort of vast laboratory for psychiatrists.

Teachers have had to come into line willy-nilly, and the human boy, instead of being barked at in front and well belted behind, has to be cooed at and cosseted and brought along by every sort of modern method of kindness. If little Willie has left three drawing pins the wrong way up on teacher's chair, he is more to be pitied than punished as his great grandmother may have been bitten on the behind by a boa constrictor back in 1888. There is no doubt at all that discipline has been growing weaker and concentration has become less and less, and I think that is the reason for the unfortunate state of affairs mentioned in the Explanatory Memorandum.

My feeling is, therefore, that we should not impose any more new experiments on children. We have had too many already. We should go back to some of those simple methods of teaching the three R's that our little village schools with their small asphalt playgrounds used to make such a success of in the past, and we should rather move away from the fancy methods of the *de luxe* establishment we now look for in the way of a school, with its psychiatrist on the board of advisors.

Mr. Ellis Smith: Introduce hard times again?

Brigadier Rayner: My second reason for opposing this Bill is another one of principle. I feel inclined to oppose all new legislation unless it is absolutely necessary, and here is a Bill that I can oppose without getting into too much trouble with the Whips and the what-nots, so I propose to oppose it. We are, perhaps, the most law-abiding country in the world. One has only to notice the way our people pay their taxes to realise that. Yet we cower under a constant [column 2435] spate of new legislation. It is put across with the best will in the world, under the delusion that Parliaments and Governments can make people good, contented and happy. But surely that is a complete fallacy. As Burke once put it:

"The amount of good which Parliaments and Governments can do is minimum, but the evil they can wreak is maximum."

Governments have to legislate - it would be silly to pretend otherwise - but all Measures brought forward should be really necessary. If they are not - and there have been plenty which were not in the last eight or nine years - they should go straight

into the waste-paper basket. Therefore, at the expense of falling out with some of my hon. Friends who have put their names to this Bill, I definitely oppose it.

The Minister of Education is responsible for these matters. We elected a Government, and it is the Prime Minister who appoints the Minister of Education. I am by no means satisfied with everything done by the Ministry of Education. I think it a good thing that all Ministries should receive a kick in the pants occasionally -

Mr. J. Hudson: Particularly that one.

Brigadier Rayner: - but in this case I feel that the Minister should be left free to make her own plans. Therefore, I am speaking against this Bill with the greatest pleasure.

12.2 p.m.

Mr. Ralph Morley (Southampton, Itchen): I have very considerable pleasure in supporting the Bill, in support of which the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Pitman) produced so many cogent arguments and telling illustrations. It is very unfortunate that a number of our children should leave school without being able to read properly or to understand fully what they are reading, but I do not wish to exaggerate their number. From my experience, I do not think there are any more children who cannot read leaving school now than there were 30 years ago, but today they are more apparent.

Thirty years ago, in our old elementary schools, we had promotion by ability. If a boy could not learn to read he remained at the bottom of the school, in standard I, or II, and he left at the age [column 2436] of 13 or 14. Everybody said of him, "He is just a dunce and will only be able to do casual labour for the rest of his life." Today we have promotion by age. A boy or girl automatically proceeds from one class to the next at the end of each year, so that today we have boys and girls of 15 in the top class of the school, although they may be only in stream B or stream C of that class. When they leave school unable to read, or to understand what they are reading, the matter is considerably more apparent

If we take into account children in all types of schools, in the secondary modern and the grammar schools as well, but there is no greater proportion of children who leave school unable to read than there was years ago. But today at the age of 11, 21 per cent. of the cleverest children in the primary schools are creamed off to go to the secondary schools. For that reason, there is a lower average of

intelligence in the modern secondary schools than there was in the top classes of the old elementary schools. Therefore, in the top class of the present secondary modern school there may be a bigger proportion of children who are unable to read when they leave school than was the case 30 years ago.

The boy who leaves school unable to read is handicapped in his job. He can undertake only repetitive work. He has very little chance of promotion. His inability to read becomes known to his workmates and he is made the butt of their ridicule. Because he cannot read he is debarred from a great mass of information. It would seem to me difficult for him to fulfil properly his duties as a citizen. How can he vote intelligently if he cannot read the leading articles in the newspapers?

Mr. Ede (South Shields): How can he vote intelligently if he does?

Mr. Morley: I do not think my right hon. Friend would condemn equally the leaders in all newspapers. The leaders in some newspapers are intelligent. I will not name them, but my right hon. Friend knows the newspapers to which I am referring. If my right hon. Friend does not like my mentioning newspapers, then let me ask how a man can vote intelligently if he cannot read the election addresses of the candidates at election time.

[Column 2437] A boy or a young man who cannot read inevitably develops some form of inferiority complex, because his abilities are less than those of the average person. He may compensate for that by anti-social behaviour. I do not think that Craig or Bentley would have committed the crimes they did if they had been able to read. Nearly all the observers who inquire into juvenile delinquency say there are two main causes for it. One is broken homes and the other backwardness in attainments at school.

Reading is one of the main pleasures of life, and it endures longest. When we are old - a state of life to which I am happy to know that you, Mr. Speaker, will not reach for many years, in spite of the Resolution passed recently in this House - we are no longer able to play games; walk 30 miles a day or cycle 100 miles as we could in our 30's and 40's. The pleasures of the senses start to fail. We may think the young woman is smiling at us, but we quickly find she is smiling at the young man behind us. But we still have the solace and pleasure of reading. That lasts until the end.

I do not wish it to be assumed that we only want boys and girls to be able to read when they leave school at the age of 15. We want them to be able to read before then. The children who leave the infant school at the age of seven to go to the junior schools should at least be able to read simple books and sentences. If children cannot read at the age of seven, they cannot take advantage even of the education at a primary school. Every teacher knows the drag of eight or 10 children unable to read in a class of 40 or so. The teacher is unable to adopt many interesting modern methods of instruction which could be used were those children able to read. It is even more important, indeed, in my judgment essential, that by the time a child reaches the age of 11, and goes to a secondary school, he is able to read fairly well.

I fail to see how secondary education can be given to a child who cannot read. A child cannot be taught history or geography if he cannot read. The most interesting oral lessons may be supplemented with illustrations of all kinds - diagrams, maps, wall sheets, picture books - but if the child is to learn history and geography he has to read the text books which supplement the oral instruction. [Column 2438. 2 Q* 2] If he cannot do that he cannot learn.

A child cannot even learn arithmetic unless he can read. In the secondary school teachers have to teach the children problems. The problems are set down in writing. If the child cannot read he cannot understand what the problem is about and, of course, he cannot work out the solution. Therefore, we want children to be able to read reasonably well at the age of seven and quite well at the age of 11.

I am convinced from my experience as a teacher - I was a class teacher for over 40 years - that it is our illogical and ridiculous spelling which is the chief handicap in teaching children how to read. There was a time, as everybody who has read the first folio of Shakespeare will know, when the English language was spelled very much as it was pronounced. If my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. King) is fortunate enough to catch your eye, Mr. Speaker, as he is a Shakespearian scholar of repute, he may be able to embroider upon that theme.

Then in the 17th Century the printers became more influential. More books and pamphlets were printed and the printers tended to conventionalise the spelling of the English language. The Printers, so to speak, photographed the words. Printing is static, but language is dynamic and constantly changing. If we could go back to the first Elizabethan Age, we should find some difficulty in understanding the men and women when they were speaking, although they would be using words which we know, because their pronunciation would be quite different.

To add to what the printers did, the pedants came along. And after the pedants came Doctor Johnson. He was in many respects a great and good man. He produced the first real English dictionary. It was not the first lexicon of English which had been produced, but it was the first standard English dictionary. Although Doctor Johnson was a scholar, he knew nothing at all about etymology. He thought that the word "doubt" came from the Latin *dubitare*, so he put a "b" in the word "doubt." As a matter of fact, it comes from the French word, *doute*. He thought that the word "isle" came from the Latin *insula*, [column 2439] so he put an "s" in it, whereas it comes from the French *ile*.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Education (Mr. Kenneth Pickthorn): That had an "s" in it.

Mr. Morley: As far as I remember from reading Voltaire and other 18th Century writers, the "s" had been dropped in the 18th Century.

Mr. Pickthorn: I claim no learning on this point, and it is not of the least importance, but I think that the "s" was dropped pretty late, certainly in the habits of many printers.

Mr. Morley: It is a matter for research. My recollection of my reading of 18th Century French authors is that they spelled the word without the "s" at the time that Doctor Johnson was compiling his dictionary.

The result is that many words in our language are spelled in a way which has no reference to their actual pronunciation. What is the poor child, when learning to read, to make of the fact that "h-a-s" is pronounced "has," but "w-a-s" is pronounced "was." What is the child to make of the fact that "f-i-g-h-t" spells "fight," and "k-i-t-e" spells "kite." What is the child to make of the spelling of "through," "bough," "cough," "dough" and so on? How many hours of my life have been wasted teaching children spelling rules? We say, "i before e except after c," though why the position of "i" and "e" in believe and deceive should not be the same I really do not know.

Because the spelling of so many words in the language does not reflect the spoken sound, most teachers now teach reading by the "look and say" method. The word is written down on a card, a slip of paper or a wall sheet. The teacher tells the child what the word is and the child repeats it and continues to repeat it until he has learned the word. He learns by the look of the word. That is all very well for children who have good visual memories, but many people do not have good visual

memories. Many people have audile memories. They learn much more easily by listening than by looking. The result is that if a child has not got a reasonably good visual memory, it is difficult to teach it to learn by the "look and say" method.

[Column 2440] Although many children learn to read by this method, it does not necessarily follow that they learn to spell correctly. They get a general picture of the word but do not get exactly the way in which the letters run. How many people say "renumeration" instead of "remuneration"? At a meeting of a Standing Committee last Thursday, I heard two hon. Members say "renumeration." That was because they had a picture of the whole word.

In spite of the time we spend in teaching spelling in schools, a very large number of our adult population cannot spell correctly. I notice that even the very clever young women who act as secretaries to Members of Parliament usually have a dictionary on their desks when they are dealing with correspondence. My hon. Friend the Member for Bilston (Mr. Nally) said yesterday that he was talking to his wife when she said, "I do not know why Doctor Follick wants to trouble about simplified spelling. Our three boys adopted simplified spelling long ago." That is true of many adults. If when we start teaching reading we started by teaching a simplified method of spelling, we should have fewer backward readers at a later stage.

I am in favour of simplified spelling because it would help to make English World language. The Minister, with his superior erudition, will correct me if I am wrong, but I suppose that English is spoken by a greater number of people than any other language. But it is still not a world language. In many ways, English is an extremely easy language to learn. There is practically no grammar in the English language, and what there is most Englishmen take no notice of. We have no declensions except in the case of verbs. We do not have to change the adjective or the article in accordance with the gender of the noun as they do in other languages. We can say, "the boy, the girl, the house" whereas in German we have to use the definite articles, "*der*," "*die*" and "*das*."

The English vocabulary is a mixture of Romance and Teutonic words so that most Western European people, at any rate, can pick it up very easily. The only great handicap to the learning of English is our illogical and absurd spelling, and I think that if we had a simplified system of spelling English would be well [Column 2441] on the way to becoming a world language which I am sure would please my hon. Friend the Member for Yardley (Mr. Osborne).

I cannot see how anybody can vote against this simple little Bill. All it asks is that the Minister should find an appropriate body to inquire into the reason why children do not learn to read, and whether a simplified system of spelling would help children to do so. It would also have to inquire into the allegations made by the hon. and gallant Member for Totnes (Brigadier Rayner) that the classes are too large and whether the pendulum has perhaps swung too far from the strict discipline which there used to be when I first became a teacher, with a plentiful use of the stick, to the much freer discipline and freer activities of today.

Having made those inquiries, the people concerned would submit a report to the Minister who could, if she liked, submit a resolution to the House of Commons. If that resolution were passed, it would become a guide to local authorities, but in no way compulsory on local authorities. There would be no sanctions imposed upon them, and both the local authorities and the teachers could adopt the suggestions if they wished.

I remember the time when the Board, as it then was, used to send out suggestions to teachers. They were not orders, but all conscientious teachers read them and tried to put them into practice. If a resolution in favour of simplified spelling were passed by this House and communicated to local authorities and teachers, I am sure they would do their best to carry out the suggestion within a year or two.

The expense involved would only amount to a few thousand pounds a year. According to figures given to me yesterday by the Minister, we are spending on the education of a child between the age of five and 15 an average of something like £350. Of course to some extent that £350 is wasted if the child leaves school without being able to read. Therefore I do not think that anybody ought to cavil if the expenditure of a few additional thousands would correct that state of affairs.

I hope that the right hon. Lady the Minister will be favourably disposed to [column 2442] this suggestion. I regret that she is not present today, although of course, she has a very able substitute in her Parliamentary Secretary.

Mr Pickthorn: I ought perhaps, to say that my right hon. Friend genuinely had an engagement which it was almost physically impossible to cut. I will do the best I can.

Mr. Morley: I quite understand that. I know the right hon. Lady's devotion to duty and that she would not be absent unless it were unavoidable. However I hope she will agree to let this Bill have a Second Reading. She has been much criticised and

attacked lately because, of course, she became Minister at a rather unfortunate time, when the voices demanding economy were strident in the land.

Mr. Pickthorn: And still are.

Mr. Morley: I have no doubt that pressure was exercised on the right hon. Lady to introduce economies which, if left to herself, she might not have introduced. As a result she has become considerably unpopular in the educational world. But if she agrees to this Bill, that may put a feather in her cap. I do not know whether ladies wear feathers in their caps nowadays.

Mr. Ellis Smith: They are beginning to; they are becoming fashionable.

Mr. Morley: At any rate, it would be a plume in her *panache*. I hope that the Parliamentary Secretary speaking on behalf of his right hon. Friend, will be able to say that he will allow this Bill to have a Second Reading, that he will try it out and see if the experiment is successful.

12.26 p.m.

Commander J. W. Maitland (Horncastle): Nearly three years ago the pamphlet called "Reading Ability" was issued, and shortly afterwards we had a debate in this House in which I and other hon. Members made it the theme of our speeches. But nothing very much seems to have happened since then. The reason I support this Bill is that I believe that, however we may look at the particular virtues that of this new method, we should be prepared to try any method to improve the reading ability of our children.

[Column 2443] It may be argued that some of the facts in that pamphlet are now out of date and are not, perhaps, based on the most modern information. But be that as it may, I think that while one child who should normally be able to read is unable to do so, we must do everything possible to try to solve this problem which is the basic problem in education today.

I do not think it is a criticism of the Bill to say that the figures given for reading ability are not really as bad as they appear to be, and so forth. I think they are pretty bad and that, as the hon. Member for Itchen (Mr. Morley) pointed out, they are getting worse. One of the ways in which this fact is brought more particularly to our attention is when our children are called up for National Service. Personally, I think that National Service is magnificent as a training - I am not talking about the other side of it - and that it is extremely good for boys coming from all types of homes and having had all sorts of education to mix together. That is what happens today in the Services.

One of the remarkable things is how often boys come back and tell one that other young men have had to ask them to read their letters for them, and things of that sort. They also have an opportunity of seeing the type of stuff that their fellow Service men read, and it is becoming most noticeable that much of the literature read by these young people is becoming a slur on our education system.

As I say. I support this Bill because I believe it is vital that we should overcome this problem with every available means. I think that the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Pitman) certainly made a case for giving the system a trial. It cannot possibly do any harm and might do a great deal of good. My second reason for supporting the Bill is that I remember only too bitterly the boredom of learning to read. I probably learned to read in a very old-fashioned sort of way. I can remember, even now, that it was about somebody called Sam who had a nag, and the things that went on about Sam and his nag were so boring that it was not only a question of trying to learn to read - I could do that part of it - but a question of the sheer boredom [column 2444] of continually hearing about this fellow Sam.

I believe that searching for phonetically sound words with which to teach a child to read certainly makes for this frightful boredom in reading. During my life I have had to spend quite a lot of time in trying to teach grown-ups.

Mr. John Taylor (West Lothian): Will the hon. and gallant Member inform the House what parts of the words "Sam" and "nag" are not phonetic?

Hon. Members: They are phonetic.

Commander Maitland: I meant, the reason they were chosen was that they were phonetic. Perhaps the hon. Member has missed the point of my argument.

During my lifetime I have had quite a lot of experience of trying to teach grown-ups, but I never realised how difficult teaching could be until I had five children of my own and from time to time had to try to teach them to read. I know that I have not been taught how to do it and that there is a great art in it. I certainly found it extremely difficult.

Another reason for supporting this Bill is that it will save the time of teachers and make things a little easier for them, because there is nothing more boring than dealing with Sam and his nag. I remember very distinctly some children who were very keen on birds. One day they were lying on the floor reading a bird book. They were asked "What are you looking at?" And one of them said, "One bird is called a 'Hed-gy-spa-rue' and the other a 'Ston-y-ker-hat'." They meant "hedgesparrow and stonechat," of course. That is the kind of thing a child has to go through, and this Bill would do away with those difficulties.

The final and most important point is that I believe that there is a great amount of harm done to young adults today by the type of literature they read. I am afraid that this is a bee in my bonnet. When I visit bookstalls and see the type of sadistic sexy literature which is dished out to young men and women, I frankly believe that that literature is one of the causes of criminal activities among the young. I am sure that inability to read enters into the matter. These sort of books always have a large number of pictures and it is the pictures [column 2445] that attract the buyers. One always sees somebody who is not a very good reader going for the pictures.

If we can teach children to read at an early stage during their school career, we can do what the school ought to do - that is, teach them to read the right kind of books. That is the most important thing that a school can do and the greatest gift that it can give a child. If we teach children to read the right books, if we give them that gift, they will pass by the kind of literature that is so frequently displayed on bookstalls. They will realise the great happiness and the opportunity which has been opened to them in the great books which have been written in the past.

12.34 p.m.

Mrs. Freda Corbet (Peckham): If I rise to speak, it is not because I imagine that I have anything particularly new to say after the magnificent contributions which have already been made by the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Pitman) and other hon. Members, and particularly by the hon. and gallant Member for Horncastle (Commander Maitland). I do not remember having to learn to read.

Mr. Ede: Hear, hear.

Mrs. Corbet: I suppose it is because I have not a very long memory. But I have had some experience of teaching. At the moment I am engaged in trying to get a girl aged 21 interested in reading. I am holding out the bait to her that if she does not know how to read no young man will want to marry her.

I do not know that that bait will be half as useful as having a phonetic system spelling. I have the great advantage having a visual memory, of which the hon. Member for Itchen (Mr. Morley) spoke, to such an extent that it is only necessary for me to see a word once and I never again have difficulty in spelling it.

I have been a teacher of English for a good many years and I appreciate the tremendous difficulty which youngsters have with spelling in the English language. Perhaps hon. Members may not realise how conscientious a teacher I was. They would realise it if I could show them some of the exercises which I corrected, with literally hundreds of under-linings of certain spelling mistakes [column 2446] which I insisted should be rewritten correctly hundreds of times.

I have also made an attempt - admittedly only an attempt - to assist foreigners to learn our language and here I have had the same difficulty. When I have been learning other languages, such as French, Spanish, and German, I have been helped amazingly by the fact that I could look at a word and could pronounce it correctly. I could not always do the reverse - spelling a word which had been pronounced - because of the idiosyncrasies of grammar in languages. Therefore, I have come to the conclusion over a large number of years that we ought to look into this problem. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the hon. Member for Bath, who not only thinks that this problem should be looked into, but on his own account has made a great deal of careful research.

I do not think that it would have occurred to me that the method proposed in this Bill was a way in which we might promote the object which we have in mind, namely, facilitating the reading and writing of their own language by the children of this country. Yet this method is, of course, in consonance with a great many of the things which we do. We can use a simple method and then, when facility has been acquired, transfer to something more difficult. I am hopeful that if research were conducted by a body such as that mentioned by the hon. Member for Bath, we might well arrive at something which would be of great value to our people.

As I understand it, the first job of the designated association would be to settle upon a spelling that would be not only alphabetic but the nearest possible to the present system of spelling; that is to say, it would preserve all those boring words like "Sam" and "nag" which, of course, in their way came to bore us so much because, being phonetic, they were used so frequently. I understand that at least half the words of a page of written matter suitable for these youngsters would be capable of being written in the orthodox spelling. That would mean that spelling would be settled by the association. Then, naturally, the association would have to go on to produce a number of textbooks in the new spelling.

[Column 2447] But it would have to go further than that. It would be necessary to make a live experiment. As in the case of all experiments in this country, it must be a voluntary experiment. No one should be compelled to participate in that experiment. There would be the local authorities concerned, the schools, the teachers and the parents of the children, and with their voluntary co-operation one presumes that the designated body would seek to secure some conclusive experience. We all attach a great deal of importance to the voluntary aspect of this matter.

I noticed that "Education," the official organ of the Association of Education Committees, while being in sympathy with the objects of the Bill, nevertheless expressed some apprehension lest any measure of compulsion were exercised. I do not think they were referring to the experiment but to the compulsion that might take place after the experiment had been proved worth proceeding with.

I think everybody should be assured that at every stage, both in the experimental stage and later if the system is proved to be useful, we should proceed as usual in the educational system of this country - that is, by the gentle method of persuasion and consent. We all know that that is what distinguishes this English system of ours from that of so many other countries, and we believe that it is because of that fact that we have come to the forefront in the educational field.

I hope that one of these days Her Majesty's inspectors will go to the experimental school and, having seen the result of the experiment, will report favourably upon it and suggest that some other schools might adopt this method. I want to emphasise the necessity for the voluntary nature of this proposal, so that everybody may be assured that we who favour this proposal believe in and endorse most thoroughly the methods whereby all kinds of education and thought are introduced in this country.

The designated body, having started the experiment, would naturally wish to make a test that should be as conclusive as possible. Therefore, it would take care to ensure that for comparative purposes the proper controls were [column 2448] exercised. I suggest that there might be in the same school or in schools nearby two classes, one using the new method. It might be that intelligence quotients would be taken; certainly care would have to be taken to see the children were in every possible respect on equal terms. At the end of the experiment all the facts would be collated; statistics would be compiled, comparisons made and there would be a report.

The essential part of the experiment must be that as soon as a child can read without effort - that is to say, mechanically, as we all do, without having to think - he should be transferred to reading the ordinary textbooks with orthodox spelling. That is most essential. Having acquired that facility, it should be possible to transfer with ease to the orthodox system of spelling.

Some mention has been made of the possible difficulty in transferring from one system of spelling to the other. I would remind the House that many children have been taught French by means of phonetic spelling and then have transferred to the normal French spelling. Personally, I deplored phonetic spelling because I was not introduced to it until a late stage in my childhood and I never quite understood it. Therefore, I did not see the advantage. I am assured, however, by teachers of French that teaching by the phonetic spelling enables the pupils to get the correct pronunciation and that the transfer to the reading of the ordinary French is not too difficult.

One might point out the transitions that have to be made, for instance when learning German. The German script writing and the German Gothic print are very different from the Roman characters and present some difficulty to us, but we get over this difficulty. Under the system which we are discussing, however, a child would have no such difficulty. After a child has spelt "light" as "l-i-t-e" - and I hope it will be "l-i-t-e" and not "l-i-e-t" because the former spelling is the one which children would tend to adopt, and it would look more English and less foreign - it will not be so difficult to explain to the child "When you are reading you will find that there are words with 'i-g-h' in them but you will not have to bother about the 'g-h' at all; try and think of the word as if [column 2449] 'g-h' were not there, and then you can see what the word is."

Mr. Ede: The word would then be "lit."

Mrs. Corbet: I agree; one would have to explain that the effect of the "g-h" is to make the short "i" into the long "i". I have not studied that, but it would no doubt be possible to give a child some rules which would facilitate the transition. I think the

designated body should be able to accomplish this experiment, and at the least it would be able to present a report on whether or not the scheme would be of any value. None of us would want a system to be adopted if it would not help. We are all anxious to devise a system that will enable children to read fluently, mechanically and well, so that they would take a delight in reading and would be able to benefit, as they do not today, from a large part of their secondary education.

We do not want to encourage any child in the formation of bad habits although I would say, as I have always said, that I would rather a child read anything so long as he reads, and I would rather he wrote anything so long as he writes. Nevertheless, we want to keep some protection against forming habits that may be difficult to break. I am assured that with regard to writing in the early stages, when a child is learning to read - which is a much less frequent occurrence than the reading process alone - there will be plenty of words whose spelling will be unchanged by this system and a child will be able to practise the writing of the language. That, again, will be a matter for the designated association to consider.

As was suggested by the hon. Member for Bath, the designated association should see what have been the results in countries which have reformed their spelling. This might well be one of the first tasks of that body. If they got figures which indicated that phonetic spelling had helped children to read, they would be encouraged to go on with the other part of the research. While I feel a great deal of sympathy with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Smethwick (Mr. Gordon Walker) said about libertarianism in spelling, I am a little worried that the thought that I might not be able to do my crossword puzzles if spelling were so undecided.

[Column 2450] 12.51 p.m.

Sir William Darling (Edinburgh, South): I join the hon. Member for Peckham (Mrs. Corbet) and other speakers in commending the enterprise and public spirit of my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Pitman) and the hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Follick) in bringing forward this very interesting Bill, the object of which is to persuade rather than compel. I am all for persuasion.

I should not have taken part in the debate except for something that caught my eye this morning in the Notices of Motions of 26th February, 1953, No. 62, where I found the following:

"As an Amendment to Dr. King's proposed Motion (Parliamentary Memorials) . . . Line 4 after 'being' insert 'James Keir Hardy', M.P.'."

The spelling of Keir Hardie's name is, of course, incorrect. If spelling of Members of Parliament or those who serve them is so desperate as this, it is indeed worthwhile spending some time in discussing the subject. Although I am no longer a member of the Independent Labour Party, I could never think of confusing Nelson's colleague with the former Member for West Ham. It shows how the standards of education have fallen when persons of importance are unable to write the King's English either phonetically or accurately.

I am opposed to this Bill. There are many practical difficulties, which have not been ignored by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath and the hon. Member for Loughborough; and I was not impressed with a special pleading of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Horncastle (Commander Maitland) who, in his bluff sailor-like way, said that spelling is so bad that anything is worth trying. That is not a very statesmanlike approach to the problem.

I can think of many things which would be worth trying, but this proposal is certainly not one of them. We could try, for example, to get back to the better days of teaching gone by. I was not a very clever boy at school, but I was taught to spell and when I did not spell correctly I got the tawse - an instrument which was just as effective as the stick. I can assure hon. Members that whether teachers deal with the so-called simplified spelling or the spelling that I learned, it will be equally difficult to impress the [column 2451] reluctant mind if a teacher with the effective means of imparting information is not in command.

During the speech of the hon. Member for Peckham I noticed that the right hon. Member for South Shields (Mr. Ede) did not seem to approve of what she said about her experience with former pupils. As I was reluctantly in his company the other evening, I should like to think that I have his powerful educational support here. I have yet to learn that teachers as a body have recommended these proposals. The hon. Lady in fact mentioned a body representing educational authorities who have expressed a doubt about this Bill if not frank disapproval.

Mr. Pitman: They have expressed great approval for the principle of the Bill and for its detail. The only parts to which they object are those which have been necessarily imported into it by the attitude of the Minister and the rules of order of this House.

Sir W. Darling: I am grateful for the correction. I shall continue by referring once more to what was said by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Horncastle. He, at any rate, put forward a proposition which few will support, when he said that anything is worth trying. I dissent from that view, and I repeat that it might be better to go back to the principle of teaching by forceful punishment which has at least enabled me to be in a position to stand here this morning and make a speech to a small but doubtless interested audience.

The hon. Member for Itchen (Mr. Morley) made reference to certain children who have the habit of visual memory and for whom the learning of words unrelated to pronunciation is easy. I understand that that is the accepted dictum of those who are studying this particular method. If that is so - as I admit it is - in these days, when the visual memory is being willingly used to an ever greater extent by children, is it the time to change to another system? If children are attracted to the cinema for their means of education it is a retrograde step to make the educational aids less visual. Those children who have a visual appreciation of letters and words will be discouraged by this system and the confusion will be worst confounded.

[Column 2452] **Mr. Morley:** The hon. Member is confusing the argument, which was that some children have a much better visual memory than others and learn to read more easily because of that fact. That has nothing to do with what has been said by the hon. Member - that children go to the cinema and see a number of visual scenes. They may do so, but it is probable that the children with bad visual memories do not remember what they have seen at the cinema for very long, while the children with good memories do.

Sir W. Darling: I do not accept that argument. In the days when aids to visual understanding were few and far between many children had good visual memories. I suggest that many children now, of their own choice, are becoming more used to visual aids to spelling, and simplified spelling might add to the confusion.

Mr. Pitman: I think the hon. Member is confused by the expression "visual education." Visual education is a misnomer: the word ought to be "non-verbal." It is education which removes the words - and words are one of man's divine gifts with which he thinks. I think we should all agree that verbal education is much better than pictorial non-verbal education.

Mr. Ede: It is better for publishers.

Mr. Pitman: No. I understand a good picture takes up more printed space and costs more than the words which describe it.

Sir W. Darling: We now know visual education is not visual education. In that case I shall proceed to deal once more with my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Horncastle. He made great play with words like "Sam" and "nag," and he told us with great candour that they were repeated so frequently when he was a boy that they became boring. I agree; but I do not agree with his deduction that that is an argument for simplified spelling. His proposal would mean that the whole of our rich literature would be filled with boring words. His introduction of the words "Sam" and "nag" had the very unfortunate effect of demolishing what might otherwise have been a very good argument.

[Column 2453] My hon. and gallant Friend said that this would save the time of the teachers, but it would mean the addition of another item to certain curricula, and so that suggestion does not deserve a moment's consideration. I can imagine it would add to the confusion of their labours. I would need further proof than I have heard this morning that this would save their time.

I am sorry that my hon. and gallant Friend is away at this moment. He lapsed into an error in pronouncing the word "pronunciation" not according to what I was taught by my teacher and according to my own painful and laborious desires to spell and pronounce words correctly. At the conclusion of his arguments, when he mispronounced the word he almost converted me to simplified spelling.

I look at the Bill from the practical point of view, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Bath attempted to meet that in his speech. But the question arises, which local authority will find the schools for this experiment? It would be a very daring local authority who would undertake it. I doubt that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland would find any local authority prepared to agree to this experiment, but can my hon. Friend the Member for Bath tell me whether there is any local authority in Bath prepared to back him in this matter of simplified spelling.

Mr. Pitman: The hon. Member is asking me a question and I would point out to him that the Association of Education Committees in their official publication, have come out in favour of it. That is a very responsible organisation, and I can hardly think that the director in charge would launch out to that extent unless he were convinced, as I am, on that point. I could also quote the willingness of London to do this in association with the University of London.

Sir W. Darling: It is an interesting observation, but I put it to the hon. Member for Bath, which local authority will have the courage, the temerity and the extravagance to come forward and say that one of its schools will be made available for this scheme? If the school is made available, which teachers in the school will be agreeable to submit to the considerable disorganisation which will result there-from. Which parents will agree that this [column 2454] experiment should take place, and which children will be agreeable? It seems to me that my hon. Friend is up against great practical difficulties. I would say he will have difficulty in finding an education authority to undertake the scheme, and it is against that difficulty that his well-intentioned policy looks like failing. I reflect that if a school, teachers, parents and children are found willing to operate this scheme with success, what will happen then? It will not stop there. I visualise it going on in one school or in several schools throughout the country, and we will have two different systems of spelling. There will be the children emerging from those schools where they were taught simplified spelling and the others from schools where they were taught conventional spelling. There would be confusion in the country as a result.

I employ a secretary. It would surprise me if at some future date a new secretary presented to me a document in simplified spelling. It would be very alien and distracting to me, and yet one could not blame the poor creature. She would be a victim of the experiment of the hon. Member for Bath and of the education authority which selected the school. It will not stop there either. If this proposal is carried through there will be an inter-regnum period. Simplified spelling will be a part of our education and of our economy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath, like me, is interested in books. I am something of a publisher, and I am a bookseller. I have a couple or three shops selling books. If these proposals are as good as my hon. Friend thinks they are and this system is launched upon our unhappy country, then we should have ordinary books being sold on one side of the shop and on the other books which are in simplified spelling. Once the children have learned simplified spelling there will be two systems in the country. We will spend five years teaching them the simplified system and then when they go out into the world they will find another system in operation.

The next stage will be that someone in this House will get up and ask, "What is the good of teaching a child two forms of spelling? Obviously one should do, and we will continue with the so-called [column 2455] simplified spelling." Thus all our books from the Old and New Testament and Shakespeare right down to the latest book published last month will have to be converted to the new system. Think of all that that means in type and type-setting. NATSOPA will have something to say about that. The compositors and the like will be concerned, and a great revolution in the whole of our thinking, reading and writing may well come from the proposals in this Bill.

Dr. Barnett Stross (Stoke-on-Trent, Central): The hon. Gentleman talks about a revolution, but how is it then, that Chaucer is still published much as it was spelt when it was written all those centuries ago?

Sir W. Darling: I have not the erudition or the learning of the hon. Member, but he will agree with me when I point out to him that when I first went to school I was not taught Chaucer, Langland and the classical language. I was taught simple English and how to spell the ordinary words. I read Chaucer and Piers Langland as text books concerned with certain periods of English literature. I remember learning one piece of Langland which was:

"In der somer saison
When soft was der sonne."

I can still remember it because I learned it for an examination as I knew it was a question that I would be asked. I do not speak or try to use the language of Chaucer or Langland in a current daily speech. Chaucer and Langland are still read just as are the original English versions of the Old and New Testament, which are in the language in use when they were translated. There is also the Authorised Version in a different kind of language, but what we are talking about here is the general field of educational reading, not the specialised examples to which the hon. Member refers.

The truth as I see it is that there is no need for this Bill either in a Parliamentary or an educational sense. I think, however, there is a very good reason for bringing it to the House, discussing it and exploring its possibilities. I am of the opinion that it is an attempt to step down our education standard, because reading English is a little difficult inasmuch as it requires concentration and [column 2456] thought, and well-intentioned persons should not make it easier. I have said before in this House that William James, the psychologist, said on one occasion, that he who is helped is hindered, and I think that is a profound truth in education as in many other things.

To make reading easier or simpler is not to make it more valuable. It will be at our peril if we try to make spelling too easy. I would hope to convert the other 30 per cent. of our people unable to read if the remaining 70 per cent. had learned to read and apply themselves thoroughly. I would hope to convert the other 30 per cent. from their illiteracy. There is no need for

this Bill. I have not had any evidence that it is being asked for. All that this Bill is going to do is to make things easier for the bad spellers, and in those circumstances would oppose it.

1.9 p.m.

Mr. James Johnson (Rugby): Others who have spoken have declared their interest in this matter, and I declare that I am a teacher. I think the hon. Gentleman the Member for Edinburgh, (Sir W. Darling) was the first non-teacher to speak in this debate, and therefore he should have declared his lack of interest. I can assure him that there was no lack of interest listening to his interesting and witty speech, and I can go quite a long way with him. For example, the one thing that I would emphasise, as he has emphasised, is this question of teaching spelling. Like him, I was taught school to learn to spell eight words each day, but I was not flogged as much as he appears to have been. Perhaps I learned them better.

Sir W. Darling: I was not flogged, I was pucked.

Mr. Johnson: I accept that correction, Mr. Deputy-Speaker. Both the hon. Member and I learned our quota, and it was a thoroughly healthy discipline to be given an assignment of words to be learned, because it built up our vocabulary. That may be an old-fashioned thing to say, but I think the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction these modern days. I should like to go back to the more formal days. The hon. Member spoke of Chaucer but I was taught to call him "Chowker," in my young days.

[Column 2457] Those of us who have an interest in the younger people in our population could go a long way with the mover and seconder of the Motion, but in this matter of simplified spelling we have, like Agag, to walk warily, and more warily than he sometimes did. The right hon. Member for Smethwick (Mr. Gordon Walker) spoke of this Simplified Spelling Bill as a good thing for the peoples of the Empire because it would make it easier for them to learn the mother tongue in basic English. The Bill has nothing to do with that kind of thing. It is not a Bill to bring simplified spelling to peoples beyond the Channel or beyond any other patch of water. It provides for an experiment to begin with youngsters of five years of age to test whether there is an easier and more effective method of teaching them to spell their mother tongue.

Mr. Pitman: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me to say on that point that the right hon. Member for Smethwick (Mr. Gordon Walker) was naturally referring to the possibility that if this first approach to learning to read English were in use in our schools it might be of equal use in the schools in the British Commonwealth and even more widely? It would bring up non-English-speaking British citizens to utter a word of spoken English corresponding with the word which an English child would use naturally.

Mr. Johnson: Perhaps I will come back to that point. I am in sympathy with the point of view of hon. Members North of the Tweed that to give boys and girls of five years of age - that tender age - whatever may be their visual memory, words of a different shape, pattern and contour from that which they will meet in the environment outside would do them a disservice.

It is bad enough for them to be baffled by certain arrangements of letters in words which have been mentioned this morning, but under the proposal we are now considering they would have to discard simplified spelling at the age of seven, eight or 10, and learn the ordinary arrangement, the conventional word pattern, that they would meet outside in the larger world of which the school should be a microcosm and they would be baffled still further. We should not only have to train teachers for the simplified spelling but psychoanalysts to examine the new teachers.

[Column 2458] The children would see a quite different pattern of words in newspapers, on the hoardings and everywhere else. That is a very important point for the people who have done teaching. We should bear in mind that the school should be a microcosm of the adult world, and that there should be a continuing environment for sending children out into the larger adult world when they become older and have to leave the schools.

We are constantly having the picture of the "poor foreigners" put before us. We are given examples such as the word "bough," and told of difficulties of pronunciation. Are they to pronounce it "oo" or "uff" or "ow"? We are told of the wonderful combination of letters "ough" and its various pronunciations. Let me remind hon. Members of the saying "The jungle begins at Calais," and ask them to think not of the poor foreigner but of the poor Englishman. Hon. Members have held up to us the virtues of the Chinese alphabet, with its picture language, and of the phonetic Continental languages, yet when I go over the Channel I find such words as "*verre*," which in that form means "glass," but in its pronunciation can mean "bean," "green," "worm," "maggot," or "towards," according to the context. Then we have to say "Pity the poor Englishman" who is confronted with such words.

I believe that some wonderful visual aids are available in connection with the Chinese picture alphabet. I am told that in the last war many Chinese, and even more Japanese, had been poring for so long over tens of thousands of picture signs that their eyes had become very bad and they were compelled to wear spectacles. In this modern world there can be too much of this sort of thing. It might create a vested interest for opticians, but we ought to watch how far we go in this matter.

Are spelling and illiteracy so bad as the newspapers make out? Is the factor really 30 per cent.? Some of us have conducted a survey, admittedly unofficial. Let us take a city like Coventry which has quite a cosmopolitan intake and a mixed adult population. In the schools of Coventry we estimate that not more than 20 per cent. in our secondary modern classes are so-called "backward" children. I do not see how we get the high figure of 30 per cent. over the whole [column 2459] of the school population. We ought to keep this matter in perspective. The newspapers paint an unreal picture of illiteracy. It is easy to ask: Are we getting value in our schools? The schools are becoming a cockshy today. That may be a psychological throw-back to the days when we were at school, but the teachers now tend to be shot at almost as much as do civil servants. Their standards are not quite as bad as we are told.

Dr. King: My hon. Friend has mentioned the 30 per cent. Will he make it clear that that is the estimated figure of backward readers in the pamphlet, which shows also that there is 1.4 per cent. of illiteracy?

Mr. Johnson: I hope that the debate, if it does nothing else, will make the point clear that backwardness is not synonymous with illiteracy. The public tend to confuse the two. The pamphlet upon reading ability has been bandied about this morning. Its definition of backwardness is that children of 15 should be considered backward if they had a reading age of less than 12. In the other words, even if they could read such words as "fascinate, campaign, physics, plausible, classification, institution, genuine", that is the criterion by which they were classified as "backward." I would not call a child backward who could use words like those, and we ought to be a little more canny in conveying, as the newspapers often do, that our schools are so backward as is sometimes made out.

In conclusion, I shall switch this debate to a wider aspect, because this is not only a question of literacy or the ability to read up to a certain standard; it is the challenge of backwardness in the wider sphere of education. I sometimes fear that we tend to look upon backward children in a school as something that should be put in the wastepaper basket. Unfortunately, too often the inexperienced teacher is given the chance of looking after the backward class. It is not just a matter of teaching them a new type of spelling - I nearly said a newfangled type. We must be fair both to the schools, the families and the children, and look at this matter in its wider context of backwardness.

[Column 2460] It was said earlier in the debate that if the children in the backward class are left with an inexperienced teacher, they are less inspired. They get the feeling that they are not worth bothering about and in that way they tend to slip behind in the school life. The difficulty of the backward child who, by definition, is a bad speller, is that he finds life becoming too difficult for himself too early. I am not too much in favour of this attempt to give a new type of spelling to the schools, because I think we have to ask the Minister to do much more than that. We have to ask the Minister to be less parsimonious, to address herself to the much more important question of smaller classes, of having more teachers and, in particular, of having qualified, enthusiastic teachers for teaching the backward classes amongst whom we tend to find this awful handicap of being a poor and backward reader.

Mr. Pitman: But the hon. Gentleman would agree that the Bill provides for that, if the Minister or the research body considers that it is worth investigating, as I personally hope they will.

Mr. Johnson: Earlier we were told that only a few thousand pounds would be necessary to carry out this desirable project and a moving appeal was made to the Parliamentary Secretary to give that small sum. I was unkind enough to interject something about a cut in adult education. I feel that there is no need for a Bill of this kind if the Ministry is doing its job and will spend money. If the Ministry will show enthusiasm and good will in this sphere of education there is no need to chivvy it here in the House of Commons. If she had the will, the Minister could easily find the way and put in hand research which would enable us to find out how much value we can attach to this new method of spelling in our schools

To my mind the solution does not lie in this Bill *per se*. It lies in a changed outlook on the part of the Minister, the Parliamentary Secretary and the Ministry. We appeal to them this morning: "Never mind this Bill. Set on foot something on these lines within the Ministry to make spelling easier and to make learning easier for our children aged five, six and seven."

[Column 2461] **Mr. Pitman:** Before the hon. Gentleman sits down, may I call his attention to Clause 1 (6)? It is within the powers of this Bill as drafted to do on an experimental basis precisely what he is asking. For instance, we do not know the effect of having 30 or 20 pupils in a class. If individual attention is to be given in a 40-minute period the class cannot be

much larger than eight, because that number allows the teacher only five minutes of individual attention per child. That may be one of the things which should be investigated. I should like the hon. Gentleman to say that the Bill does what he desires, and I do not see that is an argument for opposing it.

Mr. Johnson: I accept that, and I am on the side of the hon. Gentleman as far as this debate is concerned, because it will give another small push to the Minister to get on with this vital task in our schools.

1.25 p.m.

Captain Richard Pilkington (Poole). It shows the objective, non-party approach which the House of Commons can often make to a subject like this that the Bill is supported by hon. Members from both sides and that in supporting it I find myself in disagreement with two hon. Members who are my neighbours on these benches and very much in agreement with two hon. Members who have spoken from the other side of the House, though not with the hon. Member for Rugby (Mr. J. Johnson).

Most of the speeches we have heard have been in favour of the Bill, and I have listened with great attention to the arguments produced against it. From what we have heard it seems to me that they boil down to two main points. The first, which was supported by the hon. Member for Rugby, was that it is no good trying to make learning easier for the backward child; that the fact that our modern spelling has certain difficulties is perhaps a good thing and will bring that child on better than if the spelling is made more easy. The answer is that the modern child has so much to learn in the course of his school career and afterwards that if the earlier, elementary tools of his trade can be made easier, the amount of wisdom and knowledge he will be able to accumulate will be much greater.

[Column 2462] **Mr. J. Johnson:** The point I made was that if we begin with this new simplified method of spelling there will be a changeover within a year or two to what I might term the usual type of spelling in the larger world outside. That would cause confusion in the mind of the child and I would deprecate it.

Captain Pilkington: I see the point, but I do not agree with it. I think that the average backward child, after being taught the present system and then discovering that there is another one to which he can go on, will not feel confusion but a sense of great relief that he can spell, for instance the word "through," "t-h-r-u." or however it is to be spelt, instead of in the way he was taught earlier.

That brings me to the second main argument against the Bill, that there may well be distraction and upheaval if there are two systems. Surely the answer is that this Bill is extremely modest. It is nothing like the earlier Bills which the hon. Member for Loughborough (Mr. Follick) introduced and which went a little far. Indeed, I wish this Bill went a little farther. I do not believe it will create any big upheaval because there will be two parallel systems. All it will mean is that some of our more difficult words will be made easier for people to learn, both when they are young and later on, and also for foreigners.

I think it would be fair to say that to some extent there are in fact already two systems, because many words in the dictionary are spelled in two different ways. I was glad to bear the hon. Member for Smethwick (Mr. Gordon Walker) admit that he had already launched out in a pioneer spirit - private enterprise at its best - with his own spelling of some words. He spells "programme" without the final "me," and I do precisely the same. It seems to me that the effect of the Bill would be to introduce the simplification of a small number of words, with the number gradually growing as experience proved their value. There will be no sharp clash between the present spelling and the spelling which the Bill may introduce.

Several hon. Members have referred to the benefit which, in their opinion, will accrue to children beginning to learn our language. I agree that that is one of the principal arguments in favour of the [column 2463] Bill. A second argument is that to some extent it will restore the flexibility of our language, a flexibility which it has tended to lose in this modern age of the printed word. Our language in the past, in the times of Chaucer and Shakespeare and Johnson, was fluent and flexible, was growing and expanding, was responding to the needs of the times. It is a great pity that the dead hand of the printed word has tended to stereotype the spelling of our language. This very small Bill will do something to arrest that tendency.

The third reason, and in my opinion the most important reason, for supporting the Bill is the wider implications which I think it will have. In by-gone years, as one hon. Member said, the Latin language very nearly spread over the whole civilised world and nearly became a means of communication between all the civilised elements at that time. For reasons which we need not discuss now, the Latin language virtually died and its use dwindled until it is now very limited indeed.

Today, there are a number of living languages which to some extent compete for use as a common means of communication between nations. At one time it seemed as though French would supply the need. There are some who argue for Spanish,

while others argue for other languages. But surely the English language starts with a tremendous advantage because of its simplicity, because of the small amount of its grammar and because it is already spoken by very many millions of people in the world. At any rate, let us have the test of survival of the fittest. If our language is the one best fitted to become the language in which all people can make their views and thoughts known, by all means let it be used and let us do what we can to further that end. This Bill is one step towards it.

I agree with what the Prime Minister did in the war when he gave the push of his great authority and enthusiasm to the spreading of "Basic English." We have not heard a great deal about it lately and I hope we shall hear more. I do not suggest that the fact that people will be increasingly able to use our English tongue for the exchange of ideas will in itself create a new Utopia, but [column 2464] I think it will do something towards creating wider agreement among the nations. Nobody wants our tongue to replace the languages of other nations, but there is a vital need in the world today for some second language which everybody can learn and which they can use to make their views understood by others. I do not know what attitude the Ministry will take towards the Bill, but I hope they will follow the majority of opinions expressed during the debate and will do what they can to further the aims of the Bill.

1.36 p.m.

Dr. A. D. D. Broughton (Batley and Morley): I have paid close attention to the speeches made in this interesting debate and have found myself listening to a series of very able contributions. The majority of the speeches have been in favour of the Bill, and I am sure that all hon. Members will give careful consideration to the arguments advanced. I only hope that those present, with the courtesy which is invariably shown in the House, will give equally careful consideration to my arguments in opposing the Bill.

Although I am opposed to the Bill, it is only fair to my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Mr. Follick) to say that I believe that hon. Members on all sides of the House admire and respect him for his intelligence and his knowledge, for his resourcefulness and persistence, and for his sincerity of purpose. He is deserving of congratulation for his manner of drafting an apparently innocent Bill. In the speeches made in support of the Bill, strong arguments have been advanced and it has been described as "little and modest." The Bill and the majority of speeches which we have heard make the Bill appear to be very reasonable in its demands. Indeed, there seems to have been a combined and powerful effort to

suspicion.

In my view, we must ask ourselves what is the fundamental purpose of the Bill. After close examination of it and after careful attention to all that has been said in its favour, both today and when the subject was discussed previously, there has been revealed to me, beneath an innocent surface, a design with which I cannot agree. I regard the [column 2465] Bill as the thin end of a wedge, later to be driven in, for a radical change in the spelling of the English language. I think it is fair to say that that is the ultimate aim and ambition of the promoters of the Bill. If that is not their aim and ambition, nevertheless that would be the ultimate effect of the Bill.

Mr. Pitman: The ultimate aim of anybody interested in this subject is to make reading easier. There is no possible purpose in simplification except that of serving a utilitarian end, and the utilitarian end in question is to make reading easier.

Dr. Broughton: I quite agree that the purpose of the Bill is to find out if reading can be made easier for certain children who may benefit by easier reading. But I am expressing an opinion on the effect that such a Measure would have upon the spelling of the English language in the future. The hon. Member for Bath raised a point in which he used the word "utilitarian". I should like to leave that for a moment and refer to it later in the course of my speech.

I believe that the adoption of simplified spelling would debase and impoverish the character of the English language. Therefore, I rise today to plead for caution and to issue a note of warning. I admit that the English language is illogical and wayward in its spelling, but that is because it is the language of an illogical people. But it is a living language of a living people and its spelling cannot be transfixed without the language becoming petrified. The promoter of this Bill is a distinguished linguist. He has written books on simplified spelling expounding what I heard him describe in this House four years ago as "a streamlined alphabet." The idea has not met with ready and great response. It has not fired the imagination of the English speaking people. That is because they have no wish for their language to become streamlined, stereotyped and soulless.

From what I have seen of suggestions for a new form of spelling, I greatly fear that there would be a danger of the simplified spelling being far too crude for our expressive language. I understand that in the English departments of some universities the contemporary spelling of some of our English classics, which was modernised in Victorian editions, has now been restored because we have come to [column 2466] respect its ability to preserve an essential distinction. Thus those finer shades of the authors' meaning are not lost. I believe that simplified spelling would violently impair the delicate

fabric of our own contemporary language. To a sensitive ear, the proposed system may not supply the exact equivalent in sound and it certainly would not provide the exact visual equivalent. I think it would tend to put language out of the poet's reach, and that we must regard as a serious matter since we have been described as a nation of poets.

Now I come to what was said by the hon. Member for Bath. I think the idea is a good one, when viewed from a purely utilitarian standpoint, but I believe that it would eventually rob us of a precious heritage, a great and natural living language. The House should not risk taking this first step towards such a drastic alteration in the spelling of our language. We should allow the English language to mould itself naturally and spontaneously in accordance with normal influences. I believe that it is wrong for Parliamentary pressure to be exerted and brought to bear upon the delicate, continuous process of natural adjustment.

1.45 p.m.

Sir Herbert Williams (Croydon, East): I do not think I am so much opposed to this Bill as some of the speeches made in favour of it. That often happens because speeches are not always too closely related to the Bill.

I have some right to speak as my father was a schoolmaster and my late brother was a schoolmaster and so was my other brother, and on occasion I have tried to teach French-speaking people and Spanish-speaking people and Portuguese speakers the English language. I have tried to explain the difficulties which arise from the spelling of "tough" and "thorough", and such curious anomalies. We have to consider the historic origins of the language. When Julius Caesar came here, there were the ancient Britons and then there were the Angles, Saxons and Danes, and then we had the great influx of Latin through William the Conqueror. After that there was the Renaissance, which brought both Greek and Latin, and our language has become a curious mixture of diversity. I believe that there are more synonyms in our language than in any other.

[Column 2467] One of the promoters of the Bill referred earlier to "the Queen's English." I do not know to what Queen he was referring. I think he meant Her present Majesty who bears the name of Elizabeth, but I have here in the Statutes Revised the first Act of the first Elizabeth. It is the Act of the year 1558-9 and if hon. Members want to study phonetic spelling they should read that Act. Act is spelled with an "e" and Crown is spelled with an "e". They spell the words "the ancient" as "thaucyant" and refer to "the state ecclesiastical and sp^uall." They mean "spiritual" but they use a funny little tilde on the top. They talk of abolishing all foreign power and spell the word as "forreine."

They go on to refer to "the Lords sp^uall and temporal" spelling Lords with an "e" and Commons with one "m", "in this Parliament assembled." They also refer to "the reign of your dere father King Henry theight." If any hon. Member wants to consider simplified spelling there is another volume in the Noes Lobby. Her late Gracious Majesty Queen Elizabeth was not only able to speak Queen's English but was well known as a highly educated lady who studied Latin, Greek and other things and this was the result on her mind, or on the minds of

"the Lords sp^uall and temporal and Comons assembled."

Of course in those days Parliament was not quite so expeditious as it is now. There is a famous story of Her Majesty meeting the then Speaker and saying, "What has passed in the Commons?" and he replied, "Three weeks, an it please Your Majesty." That reminds me of what was happening here before Christmas.

I think we have to go slow on this matter. I think we are wasting a tremendous amount of money on education as it is. The results are absolutely deplorable compared with what they were when I was at an elementary school many years ago.

Mr. Ellis Smith: Children are smarter and better than ever.

Sir H. Willams: The methods of teaching are different and there is the idea that the child can learn without working hard. That is the stupidity of [column 2468] the present situation. What we must have is real industry and, occasionally, resort to a little punishment, if the child does not do its job properly and try hard. My father was a schoolmaster. He tried to teach me to read, but did not have much success, largely, I think, because the discipline was not quite rigid enough, so he sent me off to the village in North Wales in which he was born to go to the local church school. In that part of the world none of the children spoke English until they went to school. When I met Welsh children in the street and spoke to them in English - I knew but few words of Welsh - the reply was always "*Dim Saesneg*" - "No English." These Welsh-speaking children went to a school where they were taught in English -

Mr. M. Follick (Loughborough): Welsh is a phonetic language.

Sir H. Williams: It does not matter whether it is phonetic. They did not learn the phonetic part of English. In the Welsh language they have a funny habit of changing the consonant at the head of the word which gives it a very different aspect, making the sound sweeter, but that does not necessarily make it phonetic. Then they have a pronunciation for "ll" which is a little difficult for most English people. They pronounce "u" as the "i" in "build," and "dd" as "the." I went to this school when I was about seven. The Welsh children entered at five, but none of them had learned any English at all until they went to the school, yet by seven and a half we could all read English. There were no exceptions. We do not find that today.

There is something wrong with our educational system. There have been too many fancy people getting into it inventing new methods of teaching which are failures. We all know that a certain fraction are unteachable, but another small fraction are unwilling to be taught because there is the lack of incentive. A little while ago a great friend of mine, the headmistress of an elementary school, told my wife and myself this most attractive story. One day she met the son of the school caretaker who was then about 17. He had left the school quite unable to read. They greeted each other, and she asked him, "What are you doing?" He said that he had a job at So-and-so, and added [column 2469] with great pride, "I can read now. I find I must." When she asked "Why?" he said, "Because I could not do my football pools." Whether football pools are the right inspiration, I do not know.

As a young man, when I lived near Liverpool, the father of a friend of mine was a small ship-owner, and he said to me, "What is the use of algebra?" What an extraordinary attitude. Without algebra and its extensions of trigonometry, spherical trigonometry and the calculus we could not have the Nautical Almanac without which his father's ships could not have been navigated.

Mr. Henry Osborne (Birmingham, Yardley): Nor would we have the atom bomb.

Sir H. Williams: The atom bomb had not been invented then. World Government had not been established then, and still is not, so all is well. I do not think it will be established next Friday either. That is in passing and quite irrelevant, but I am grateful, Mr. Speaker, that you did not call me to order.

We must get down to the idea that if people want to learn they have got to work. We have not got the presence today of the hon. Member for Wednesbury (Mr. S. N. Evans), whom I should like to call my personal friend. I once tried to get elected to Parliament at Wednesbury. The hon. Member takes the view that we are all "feather-bedded" far too much. I think there is something in that. When I was candidate for Wednesbury I remember meeting a dear old lady, whom I had known for some years before I was the candidate. She spoke to me in the street one day and said, "Ay got 'er a babby yet." That was good English from her point of view; it was only a kind inquiry whether my wife had given birth to a baby. How do we deal with that with simplified spelling? What will this committee of inquiry, if it is set up, do about that? How will they solve the problem of dialect?

I know the Birmingham dialect fairly well, although it is not very attractive. I also know the dialect of the Black Country, which although nearby is fundamentally different. In Liverpool, which I know very well, they have got a curious language which is partly Welsh, partly Irish, partly Scotch, and to a minor degree English, and it is very difficult to [column 2470] understand. Travel but a few miles further on to the Lancashire and Yorkshire border and there is yet another and different language. How will the Cockney spell "Daily Mail" when he calls it "Dily Mile." I do not know whether there is a phonetic answer to all these problems, or how they could be completely solved.

Mr. Pannell: They understand Cockney in Yorkshire.

Sir H. Williams: They understand a lot of things in Yorkshire. They understand the desirability of coming to live in London, among other things.

I really do not see how this problem of dialect, which is very real, could be solved. I see hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent here. They have a variety of dialects there. I know Stoke-on-Trent quite well, and the language is quite different from that 30 miles south in the Black Country. They are almost different civilisations. In Stoke-on-Trent they always vote Socialist. Down at the other end they occasionally vote Conservative. That is one of the differences.

Dr. Stross: One of the differences is due to the fact that the folk who originally settled in North Staffordshire were, in the main pure Angles, whereas in the south they were mostly Saxons.

Sir H. Williams: That may be. They of course, climbed up Mow Cop, but they had not got mountains at the other end of the county. After all, Wednesbury is really Wodensburgh, which goes back a long time. They are a strange people in South Staffordshire as well as in the North, but they cannot understand one another. In between there is an agricultural belt where

they speak an entirely different language. I do not see how these problems of dialects can be solved. I hope that when our learned philosophical expert on languages replies he will deal with some of the matters I have raised, I hope not too frivolously, because I am in earnest on this subject, which is one of great complexity.

I make an appeal to the Ministry of Education to do what they can to stop some of the nonsense which is going on in our schools now, as a result of which there are these 30 per cent. of the children who are backward readers, who, when they are called up for National Service, [Column 2471] have to go through a process of re-education by the Army authorities so that they know enough to be able to read the instructions for handling weapons, and so on.

Mr. Ellis Smith: This brings home to me very forcibly many conversations I have had in my own home. My daughter teaches in one of the poorest parts of Manchester. She has 49 six-year-olds in her class. How can she do justice to all of them?

Sir H. Williams: I have heard the complaints about the size of classes, and I deplore very large classes as much as anybody else; but 50 years ago, when classes were larger, we were getting better results.

Mr. Pannell: No.

Sir H. Williams: Certainly we were.

Mr. Pannell: Rubbish.

Sir B. Williams: The standard of those leaving school today is lower.

Mr. Pannell: Broadly speaking, in the old elementary schools up to about the year 1918 there was the "A" stream, because so many children in secondary schools were fee-payers. In effect there was a large element of the "A" stream which went to the factories and foundries. The "A" stream is no longer in the secondary modern school; it has gone on to the technical and grammar schools. The hon. Gentleman, and others like him, will confuse the stream that is left in the secondary modern school with the stream left in the old elementary schools. That is where the difficulty arises. That sort of system sent to this House men like Arthur Henderson, whose son became a Q.C., who then moved into a section of society known as middle-class intellectuals. I say that with great respect, although I do not know whether the change is a good one.

Sir H. Williams: And they finish up editing "Tribune." However, that interruption has no relevance to my argument. I am talking about those who have what I please to call an elementary education, not those who went to secondary schools.

Mr. Pannell: They could not.

Sir H. Williams: Never mind whether they could or could not. I say they left [column 2472] the elementary school, many at the age of 13, because they had the system of the school-leaving certificate. They left at the age of 13 better educated than they leave school now at the age of 15 - that assertion I make. Everyone I speak to tells me so, and now we have the record of military service, which would seem conclusive that there is something utterly wrong with the present method of teaching. I am delighted that this debate has given me an opportunity of unburdening my heart in a way I have wanted to do for a long time.

Mr. Ede (South Shields): This is the worst Bill I have ever seen on a Friday, and that is saying a very great deal.

Mr. R. J. Mellish (Bermondsey): What about the Abortion Bill?

Mr. Ede: I have not seen that yet.

Mr. Pannell: Perhaps my hon. Friend means that this Bill is an abortion.

Mr. Ede: As Fridays go by the Bills get progressively worse. I sincerely hope the House will not give a Second Reading to this one. Like the hon. Member for Croydon, East (Sir H. Williams), I was educated at a Church school, where we were taught reading. Every boy in the school was passed in reading - every boy - until on one of those annual visits of His Majesty's inspector that were paid in those days I gave the whole show away.

It was a very large class drawn up into three lines of the old British square. His Majesty's inspector walked round outside the square like a French cavalryman trying to get through. He was very bald, and as he walked round the three hairs

growing on top of his head waved in the cross-ventilation which never reached us humbler mortals down below. They fascinated me and I watched him as he walked round. This annoyed him, and as he went by me on one of his peregrinations, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You go on."

I had heard the last word that the other boy who had been reading had uttered, and I went on. The inspector looked over my shoulder and said, "You have failed." The headmaster said to him, "You cannot fail that boy, he is the best reader I have." The inspector said, "He is not reading at all, he hasn't got the right page." Then the inspector said [column 2473] to me, "Boy, go on from here," and he opened the book at another page. I went on from there. Not a boy in the class would have been unable to do the same. We had read the whole book continuously for a year, and we all knew it by heart. We were not however, being examined in recitation, but in reading, and the game was to keep a finger running along the line so as to make quite sure that one was, at any rate, on the right page and, if possible, on the right line. This I had failed to do.

Let us be quite frank about it. If people want to get passes in reading they can do it in that way. That does not make me inclined to favour this Bill. Here we are to have a new language which is to be printed and read, but never written. No one is ever to write this language -

Mr. Pitman: They will write some of it.

Mr. Ede: That was not what the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Pitman) said when he opened the debate. He has interrupted everybody, and I have no doubt he will try it on with me. The number of speeches he has made today is about the ration for a whole Parliament.

The hon. Member for Bath put before us the word "telephone" spelt in his way as "t-e-l-e-f-o-e-n." The hon. Member still gets three "e's" into the word. The two which are pronounced are pronounced differently in "telephone." The first "e," I believe, is called "short." The second is called "long," and "f-o-e-n" is not to be called "fo-en" which is what it spells, and which might, I suppose, in some peculiar way be regarded as the old plural of "foe"; that is to be silent, and a child looking at the word will experience the same old confusion without the same reason.

I recollect that when I taught boys to read, where the letter "e" came at the end of a word we called it the "policeman" which made the previous vowel give its right name. "R-o-t" was "rot," but "r-o-t-e," where the policeman came in, was "rote," and the vowel had to pronounce itself properly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Itchen (Mr. Morley) said that yesterday, during the proceedings of a Committee on which we are both serving - and where we have heard many speeches on this subject, both in and out of order, from the hon. Member [column 2474] for Bath - he had heard hon. Members saying "renumeration" when they meant "remuneration." Both those words are actually pronounced as they are spelt. There is no advantage in simplified spelling between "renumeration" and "remuneration" - [Hon. MEMBERS: "No."] - I am bound to say that this is the most amoeboid debate it is possible to have. The minute any one takes up the point made by someone else, they say that there is something else which one ought to have taken into account.

The most remarkable contribution was that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Smethwick (Mr. Gordon Walker), who said that this Bill would give him freedom to spell how he liked. But this is a Bill to make quite sure that every one spells alike. [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Oh, yes it is. It is no use hon. Members shaking their heads when their little games are being shown up. My right hon. Friend said he wanted to be able to spell "programme" how he liked, but this Bill will not give him that power. In fact, this Bill, unlike the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Mr. Follick) a few years ago, does not propose to alter English spelling. This Bill is only to confuse the less intelligent pupils by making them learn two ways to spell -

Mr. Follick: May I interrupt my right hon. Friend?

Mr. Ede: Yes, you can have your turn.

Mr. Follick: This Bill uses a simplified form of reading for pupils who cannot read at all and it will give them the means of learning to read. That is not two systems.

Mr. Ede: I understand that we are to have the final version when the hon. Gentleman replies, which will be in complete contradiction to what was said by the hon. Member for Bath when he opened the debate. What the hon. Member for Bath said was that the children will learn to read in this method of spelling that he proposes should emerge from this inquiry, and that after that has been done they will be able to go on to read books in the ordinary spelling. All I can say is that if we start

off with the assumption that this is a means for the less intelligent, then to give them two problems instead of one before they can learn finally to read is only to add to the difficulties which confront them.

[Column 2475] My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mr. J. Johnson) dealt with the question which has been raised several times of the pamphlet, "Reading Ability." What that said was that most children who left school now at 15 had a reading age of 12. But that is taking only one subject. Many people who leave school at the same age may have the right reading age for 15 but may be rather behind in other subjects - perhaps, arithmetic. I am certain that, although I never recollect having had a mistake in dictation, I find it harder to spell today than I did when I was at school.

Mr. Pannell: We all do.

Mr. Ede: I am glad to know that I am coming back to common humanity at last. I was an ignorant person at free-hand drawing, which had just been introduced into school. My mental age in freehand drawing, and subjects like that, at the age of 16 when I left school to become a pupil teacher, was probably about eight. When, as an undergraduate, I was studying zoology and had to make drawings of the internal arrangements of the animals I was dissecting, my results were always the object of the very greatest scorn on both by the demonstrator and by my fellow students.

To pick out this one subject and to say that because of that, the whole standard of education is low is most regrettable. My hon. Friend the Member for Itchen and I have a mutual friend who writes in the "Schoolmaster" under the name of Peter Quince. I should like to read what that gentleman, who is a teacher of considerable attainment, has to say on this subject in an article, "Come, Come, Dr. Follick" which is spelled, "Kum, Kum, Dokta Folik." I wonder he did not get an "r" into the last word. He says:

"The idea that reading ability is closely connected with spelling of individual words is a throwback to the days when the child's first reading books were made up of absorbing statements like 'It is on an ox' and 'The pig with a wig did a jig in a gig!'"

It was a good way of learning when it was thought that one of the objects of learning was to make a child miserable. I agree with what he said. We are bound to get back to that kind of teaching if we have this new form of spelling, because we will have to have the words that link up together once again used in the same way.

[Column 2476] I was glad to see that this morning the latest issue of the "Schoolmaster" is opposed to the Bill. I could not do better in reinforcement of my argument than to read to the House what it says about a symposium which they conduct in which several teachers of great experience give their views and are unanimously against the proposal. They say:

". . . a study of this symposium . . . reinforces doubts which many of us had felt previously about the educational soundness of the method, and makes it difficult to resist the conclusion that the sponsors of the Bill have failed to enter into the child's world, to understand the processes of his development, or to acquaint themselves with the results of previous research which has been embodied in modern methods of teaching reading. The child's whole process of growth is a reaching out towards the adult world, and as anyone who has taken young children on an outing knows, much of the joy of learning to read comes from the recognition of words in the adult environment - on posters, in shop windows, or wherever the child can practise his new-found ability."

Can there be anything more ridiculous than teaching the child to spell the word "telephone" in the way we were shown today, so that when he goes out into the world he finds that this is all a sham and that if he looks at a telephone box he will see that the word is spelled in a completely different way. If he is to be something more than a little kid he has to unlearn all he has been taught in school. The article continues:

"The attempt to reconcile two different sets of words, and later to transfer from one to the other, can surely only create confusion in the child's mind; and our contributors emphasise that this confusion is likely to be greatest in the case of the backward children whom the scheme is primarily designed to help."

I am thought old-fashioned as a teacher, and I sometimes view with feelings of alarm some of what are called the free disciplinary methods that now have too great a hold on the primary and infant schools, more particularly on the primary schools. But I believe that where the child finds difficulty in reading, where his natural gift is not reading, the proper thing to do is not to invent a new way of teaching him a new language, and to expect him to transfer to another. The proper way is to have him taught intensively in a small group by a skilled and sympathetic teacher. That was the way in which it used to be done in the days to which the hon. Member for Croydon, East alluded and the days in which I myself was educated.

[Column 2477] **Mr. Ellis Smith:** That is right, but how can that be done when there are so many children in a class?

Mr. Ede: The hon. Gentleman must allow me to get on with my own case. I am always grateful to him when he sees two jumps ahead, but I will get there. What is needed is a sympathetic teacher and a well-illustrated book in which the words relate to the pictures. Then one can encourage the child to tackle the task.

In the last school in which I taught we had such a class under a very sympathetic teacher. She was a young woman, uncertificated, but a very skilled practical teacher. The headmaster promised the boys that when he could pass them in reading in their own book they would be able to demand any book in the school and be allowed to see what they could do with it.

So, like Salome with her mother, they privily inquired from the top class which was the hardest book, and when they were passed as being capable to read in this class of backward children they with one consent asked to be put on Lamb's "Tales from Shakespeare." To my mind that is the way to deal with a backward reader. The worst thing to do with a child is to show it the way to dodge difficulties.

I believe that Pestalozzi, that great natural teacher, was never more right than when he said that we get no education except in the overcoming of difficulties. We are not educated in the subjects that come easy to us. There we are apt to get a quite false sense of our intellectual strength. We are educated when we are helped by our teachers not to dodge the difficulty, but to face it, when we are shown the proper way to deal with it and are then encouraged to surmount the difficulty. After all, the real training of character is to face the difficulty and, with such assistance and inspiration as one can get, to overcome it.

It is because I believe that this Bill is founded on a quite false conception of what education ought to be that I am opposed to it. I do not think it will do any good and may quite well do a great deal of harm. The real thing that we require in our schools today is a recognition that much of the difficulty that confronts teacher and pupil is to be found in the growing size of the classes that teachers are asked to teach. The only [column 2478] real move forward in this and in other matters will be by increasing the number of skilled teachers who will be able to deal with a steadily decreasing number of pupils who can be interested in work, because with a small class the teacher can give more attention than at present to the individual needs of the children.

2.24 p.m.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Education (Mr. Kenneth Pickthorn): Perhaps the House will think that I ought not to put off longer doing what in me lies to indicate the reaction of the Treasury Bench to this Bill. I think it has become almost a convention when a Minister, however minute, intervenes at this sort of point, to say that we have had a very interesting and helpful debate, and, in particular, to praise the oration of whatever gentleman, the hon. or right hon., may have risen from the Front Bench opposite.

I can with complete sincerity say, and I am sure all those who have been present will agree - I have been out of the Chamber for some seven minutes - that we have had a very interesting debate, and I can certainly say, I think, that the right hon. Member for South Shields (Mr. Ede), who has just addressed the House, was very well up to form.

Perhaps the House will forgive me if I begin - I think the right hon. Gentleman's word was "amœbic," and I think I know what he meant - rather amœbically by referring to some things which other speakers have said, with no very continuous logical connection between them, and then I will try, if I may, to make a little more connected argument in the second half of my speech.

It seems to me that there was one fallacy in the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Pitman), which was in some other speeches, too. That was the assumption that this is a matter particularly bad in the English-speaking world. I do not myself speak very many languages, and those I do I speak not at all perfectly, but from the information I have been able to gather by questioning men more learned and practised than myself, I believe we may get an inferiority complex about this. We all think that backward reading is much worse here than elsewhere, when, in fact, there is no evidence to that effect,

[Column 2479] I thought that my hon. Friend the Member for Bath used an argument which really we must not swallow, and which we have heard far too often in this House, the argument that we may spend this much money because we are already spending so much. That is not an argument which any of us would permit in his private affairs, and I do not think we ought to permit it in public affairs. I am bound to add that it brought home to me how very near to the rules of order - I would not have the impertinence to suggest that the Bill is not in order - are at any rate the purposes of the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends, because he came flat out with it that there was no reason why the Minister should not spend this

amount of extra money because we are already spending so very much, and it would only be a drop in the bucket. But when one does not want to upset or to cause a bucket to spill, the argument for putting in another drop when it already contains an awful lot is not really a very good argument.

My hon. Friend mentioned conversations with other people. My opinion is that private conversations between two persons or small groups are never accurately reported by anyone. I am not saying that to criticise my hon. Friend, but it is a fact. My opinion is that the House would be misled if they felt he was absolutely right in saying that my right hon. Friend had told him that all that was between them was this money question. I think I must also say again, without any reflection on his intellectual honesty, that the House would be misled if it took his quotations from the organ of the Association of Education Committees as meaning that that Association is in favour of this Bill. It quite plainly is not.

A great many other speakers rather forgot - I exempt from this accusation, for the most part of his speech, the hon. Member for Itchen (Mr. Morley) what my hon. Friend the Member for Bath carefully remembered, that the object of the Bill was to facilitate the teaching of reading. A great many other Members said it would be a jolly good thing to have simplified spelling because it would help the Kikuyu, but when they could read the "Daily Mail" they would not bother with practices like Mau Mau. They did not put it exactly like that, but hon. [column 2480] Gentlemen present will recognise the argument.

Mr. Mellish: If they read the "Daily Mail" they would get worse.

Mr. Pickthorn: The hon. Member said it, not me. A great many said that simplified spelling would make it easier for our fellow subjects who are not of our race and habits to speak English. I find that extremely doubtful and I do not think it is strictly relevant to this Bill, certainly not to the announced purpose of the Bill. At best I think it extremely doubtful.

I do not know how many hon. Members have read a certain very moving autobiography. Almost everybody here today has given an autobiography of his educational life and I have been longing to do so, but I think in my situation it would not be quite proper. Some hon. Members may have read "The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian," by Chaudhuri. The author gives the whole story of his intellectual formation, his intellectual emotion and relation to English literature and how, through English literature, he came to other literatures and to read Dante, and so on. The whole story is very moving and leaves me very dubious whether he could have acquainted himself with some of these literatures if the spelling in which he read Macaulay and Shakespeare had not been the spelling which takes one half-way to every other European language except Basque and Hungarian.

Perhaps that is as much as I ought to say by way of taking up the several points made in this debate and commenting on them, except that I should like to comment on the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, East (Sir H. Williams) about dialect. Simplified spellers will say, "We have heard that before," but one does not get rid of difficulties by saying that. It is very difficult to imagine how one is going to make this kind of simplified spelling so that one can carry out an experiment in one school in the North-East, another in the North-West, one in Staffordshire and one in Suffolk and so on, in such a way that the spelling is equally phonetic for all the children with their different dialects and habits of speech.

[Column 2481] Now I come, if I may, to what I hope will be the more connected, if not in other ways superior, parts of my speech. I hope that nobody doubts that the Ministers at present at the Ministry of Education or the officials there are as much interested as any champion of simplified spelling in the improvement of reading teaching. I hope I shall be allowed to say this much perhaps as a personal apologia. It is certainly true of my right hon. Friend and myself that from the first day that we went to that office we continually bored each other by asking, "How can we get away from this crisis?" - and there is always some crisis or another in education - because we want to get down to trying to see how the thing really is going and in particular how literary education is going." I am sure that it is true of my predecessors, and it is certainly true of the present holders of these offices, that they have very keenly in their consciousness the sense that that, after all, is what the whole thing is, and Ministers must try from time to time to find out from that point of view how the thing is going.

We have heard a good deal today of the test into reading ability conducted in 1948 and printed in 1950. There was some confusion because some people talked about the 1948 test and some about the 1950 test. There were no agreed definitions in these matters, but illiteracy for the purpose of that test was defined in a particular way. If arithmetic can be applied to these rather undefined or not generally defined words, the best advice that I can get is that it is fair to say that the proportion of illiteracy was round about one per cent. - and it is believed - and this is even less susceptible of statistical proof - that that figure is less than it ever was before and is less than it is in any other country.

So these continual arguments that, however good we may be, our children are much worse than our grandfathers, or these continual assumptions that English education in this matter is much inferior to French or German, or what not have really no weight behind them. They remain to be proved.

But there was at that time - there is now - anxiety about standards of reading and what is called backward reading. About the term "backward reading" I am a little stupid. I have had explained [column 2482] to me over and over again the calculus by which one arrives at its value. I may be backward one year and four months and the right hon. Gentleman the Member for South Shields may be backward one year and two months, and so on. I have never quite understood it; and I cannot see how at the end we can hope that there will not be some backward reading. The norm of reading is bound to grow with educational improvement. There may be and there must always be 10, 20 or 30 per cent. who are so far behind what the fashion of a given generation regards as the norm that it would be reasonable to describe them as backward.

The teachers are conscious of this. They have done well, but they are conscious that they wish to do better, and they are trying hard to do better, to make inquiries and to confer with each other. All that is quite true, but it is also true, as the right hon. Gentleman the Member for South Shields said, that spelling is a smaller part of reading than has generally been assumed this afternoon. Reading is in a sense the most universal, almost, of all intellectual activities. We almost all do it more or less, yet in the end it is almost the most personal.

We do not know how the other chap does it inside his head, what rate he does it at, how conscious he is of that rate and of the desirability of changing it for different kinds of books, and whether he reads with his mind's ear as well as his mind's eye. These are matters on which we must know far more than we now do before we can guess the probable use of this suggestion; and I do not think that it is a reflection on the learned to say, that at present we know nothing at all.

I think it is true probably that in some senses English teaching has been worse in England - and English teaching affects those right at the bottom just as much as the person who gains a tripos. I think that it is true that English has not been the central theme of English education in the sense that French is of French education or the language is of those countries who have an inferiority complex or the excitement of novelty about being a nationality at all. All that is quite true, and all that tends to disturb the comparison of the teaching of reading at the ages of seven, eight or even 15.

It is also true, so far as the best advice that I can obtain goes, that the early [column 2483] learning of reading, which this Bill is all about, has less to do with what one can do when one is 11, 13 or 15 than is generally supposed. It is not always the child who learns very quickly in the first two or three years who cares about reading later on. Leaving out all political prejudices as to what was or will be financially possible, or what proportion of the working population one can employ in teaching - and that is a matter which in fact nobody has ever looked into, and it is obvious that there is a ceiling to it - everyone will agree, leaving out those controversial things and not making politics of them this afternoon, that the more and better the teachers, the better the teaching, and the better the teachers will become. We all agree about all that.

Next after that, I think the Bill very much under-estimates the importance of interest. Some of the arguments showed that very much. The illogical argument about nags and hags showed that people were leaving out of their heads the fact that more important than teaching a child of six to read is to teach a child of six that it is a jolly good thing to be able to read. That is the big and most important thing to do. We do not believe that there is any obvious probability in the view that one kind of spelling for the earlier stages and a different kind for the later stages is the best way to do that. The Minister and the Ministry are deeply conscious about this and have never stopped thinking and talking about it for the last 18 months. *(Laughter.)* That is perfectly true. My hon. Friend may laugh if he pleases, but let me tell him that derision is a two-way argument.

Mr. Pitman: It was not the thinking and talking that I was laughing at; it was the absence of action.

Mr. Pickthorn: The present régime at the Ministry has not been there very long, and even the régime before it had a great many things to do. Resources have to be directed where they are most urgently needed, and need largely depends on what the public think is needed and what this House thinks. I was about to tell the House what we had done and are doing. The first thing to do is to think and talk about it. I see nothing wrong in the fact that the thinking and talking [column 2484] have lasted for the past 18 months, nor if they should last another 18 months.

Last year, as a domestic affair, without bringing in outside people, we arranged for Her Majesty's inspectors to follow up the 1948 investigation by carrying out another investigation on similar lines for school children aged between 11 and 15. These later findings suggest that there has been some slight improvement since 1948. It is not nearly enough for us to be happy about, but it is something, and leads us to believe that we are on the right lines. We have held and shall continue to hold, through Her Majesty's inspectors and otherwise, teachers' courses designed either wholly to deal with the problem or very much to emphasise it. We have in a late stage of preparation a pamphlet which we believe will be of great guidance and assistance.

Above all, we think that not enough is known about other linguistic parts of this problem to make the question which the

Bill proposes to put really a question worth putting immediately. We are trying to find out more about those things - about word recognition, sentence recognition, the relation of the visual to the phonic method, about the processes which govern the understanding of prose and poetry. There are men who do understand a good deal about these things - very few, but there are some, some English and some foreign - and who understand about these things in terms of more than one language.

Our belief is that before we embark upon expenditure for the purpose desired by the Bill, it would be wise to get all the best advice that can be got from the persons whom we regard as the best people to consult on these subjects. That we were already proposing to do before we heard of this Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Bath may be prepared to laugh again.

I have spoken almost long enough already, and I do not think it necessary for me to go into what I meant to be the second part of my argument - that is, the general argument whether simplified spelling is a good thing and how we could approach those whom we mean to teach in a peculiar way in order to show them that it is the best way, and have to prevent them from learning in a quite different way.

I am a practised [column 2485] teacher but not with infants, except in so far as bringing up five infants may help me.

My strong conviction is that if you tell your infant that you are going to teach him to spell in a new and better way, your infant child will go out and, with the help of some other and no doubt inferior infant child from next door and the help of the posters and in one way and another, he will learn the old method a good deal quicker than the child next door. I do not think we need go a great length into all that, because all that has been dealt with by earlier speakers.

There are one or two other things which perhaps could not be said except from my position. One is that the late Mr. Tomlinson was approached with suggestions of this sort; he did not approve but he acquiesced - I say that because he made special stipulations that it was not to be said that it had the approval or that it was at his suggestion - in an experiment of this sort being tried. What happened? Nothing at all. Nothing at all happened because it is not merely like first catching your hare; having caught your hare, you have got to catch the school, and the school has to catch the parents. It is not easy to find the bodies and the minds upon which the experiment is to be conducted.

There are other objections, too. I think that the ones that matter most at this stage are these, if I may put them as shortly as I can. It is new to have an imposed spelling, and it seems to me very new to have an imposed spelling in the interests of liberty, which is what two speakers told us we were to have. I say to hon. Members: You can spell as you like. I will not interfere with you, nor will anyone else. You can run a co-operative printing establishment and you can spell backwards, inside out and any way you choose.

It is new that there should be a Government-imposed method of spelling. In my view, it is undesirable. At any rate, it is new and the onus of proof is upon it. It would be new to impose a particular kind of research as a task upon the Foundation. Always hitherto the Minister and others have each made a grant to the Foundation for that research, [column 2486] but not a grant tied to doing a particular kind of research. That again is new; the onus of proof is upon it, and I have seen no attempt to discharge it.

It is new to impose content, curriculum and method of teaching upon our schools. That, I should have thought, was a great matter, even if spelling is thought to be as small thing in itself, even if it is thought that only a few schools are going to be interfered with, and however much it is said "We guarantee the children against mental disturbance and confusion." I am bound to say that when I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Bath I was very conscious of mental disturbance, and rather nervous that I might also be falling into mental confusion. It is extremely difficult to guarantee people against these things.

Mr. Morley: Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that there is no intention in the Bill of imposing any method upon local authorities or teachers, but that it is only suggesting?

Mr. Pickthorn: With respect, that is not the effect of the Bill as I read it. The effect of the Bill is that the method is to be imposed - not necessarily a method recommended after an inquiry. If the inquiry recommends a method, either that method or some other is to have this experimental run, and, the financial arrangements being what they are, I think it fair to say that there will be a degree of compulsion upon the Foundation to see that it gets its experimental run.

I would not adopt the words of the newspaper "Education", which was prayed in aid by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath about the compulsion contained in Clause 3 by the withholding of the grant; but there is no doubt that the authorised professional spokesmen of the Association of Local Education Committees regarded this as involving a measure of compulsion also at their end. These innovations, in respect of which no proof has been put forward, seem to me to be

reasons for not passing the Bill.

I come with very great diffidence to what seems to be by far the most important objection. Except in cases where the question is whether So-and-so should have office or should resign from the House, the House is not very much [column 2487] concerned with questions of procedure and constitutional or quasi-constitutional cases. That is quite correct, and I should be the last to complain of that or to pose as a pundit in these matters; but I ask the House to consider from that point of view whether this Bill should be passed, even if simpler spelling be thought to be the best way to improve teaching or be thought in itself to be the greatest of all immediate goods.

This Bill is an innovation in Parliamentary method which should be resisted. It is an attempt to legislate - in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Bath - in order to impose financial implications and specific assurances about administrative decisions. In my very humble submission, that is not the method by which Parliamentary Government has ever been conducted, except in one or two very short and disastrous periods as, for example, at the end of the Civil War. The method of conducting administration by Parliament is that Parliament should give support to or withhold support from a Minister and the Minister should, within the general law, administer. But this is an attempt to compel a Minister to make administrative decisions which it is plain she regards as irrelevant or inapposite and to spend a considerable sum of money, perhaps £10,000, because she is told to do so by a Private Member's Bill and not because she has put it on her Estimate and it has been through the ordinary financial machinery, and so on.

I say without any fear of contradiction that anyone who has ever been or hopes to be a Minister, or has ever supported or hopes to support a Minister, whatever he thinks about simplified spelling and this particular method of teaching it - and anyone who cares about relations between the House of Commons and the Government, must think that that way of using the legislative power to control immediate administrative decisions and the expenditure of money, to put it at its lowest, is extremely questionable. There has been no attempt to expound the proposition or to show why it is necessary and proper. For all those reasons, I must advise the House that, in the opinion of Her Majesty's present advisers, it is not desirable that this Bill should receive a Second Reading.

[Column 2488] 2.54 p.m.

Mr. M. Follick (Loughborough): As the lucky person who was able to bring forward this Bill, I chose to wind up the debate and to leave the honour of introducing the Bill to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Pitman), who has not only a tremendous experience but an hereditary one in this matter, which goes back for over a century; his family experience in the teaching of this sort of thing is probably one of the greatest.

I recommend the House to accept the advice of the hon. Member. The opposition to this Bill has been a veritable travesty. Hon. Members have twisted the meaning of the Bill to suit their own purposes, and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mr. Ede) is the biggest sinner of all, because the truth of the matter is that he told me he was not interested in the Bill but wanted to get up and speak long enough to prevent the discussion of the other Bills.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Follick: He told me that himself. I am sorry if I am out of order.

Mr. Speaker: There is no breach of order, but it is a commonly accepted custom of the House that hon. Members, in the course of debates, should not refer to private conversations.

Mr. Ede: I want to make it quite clear that one may have many reasons for adopting a certain course of action - and one reason should not be selected as the only one.

Mr. Follick: I was speaking about the lack of interest in the Bill. The Minister said that this question of non-readability is being treated with great solicitude. Why was it not treated with great solicitude yesterday, when two Questions were put down, one by the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough, East (Mr. Marquand) and the other by the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. J. Rodgers)? The Minister brushed the Questions aside as if she did not want to answer them or to be bothered with answering them. Here they are, for anybody to read in the OFFICIAL REPORT, together with her futile replies.

There is a great link between the inability to read and adolescent delinquency. I am speaking not only of the Bentley and Craig trial. [Column 2489] That was one of the most dramatic cases, but since then there have been two more cases of adolescent delinquency. One was referred to in "The Times" of 18th February and the other in the "Evening Standard" of

24th February, this very week, where the father put up the plea - because his son of 17 years of age could not even read the oath "How do you expect him to know any better when he cannot read? He does not know the difference between right and wrong."

In addition, in the "Observer" of 24th December last, Professor Schollen - an authority on this matter - stated that more than 60 per cent. of the delinquency among adolescents is due to illiteracy. This is not their fault. This is the fault of the Ministry of Education for not tackling this question and giving some sort of overall reply. The Parliamentary Secretary himself has been stepping on the Bill but has never gone into the Bill.

The person who can read when relatively young has a world of joy and excitement open to him. Up to the time when I was 14 I remember quite well reading some of Henty's books and some of Rider Haggard's, and I remember the pleasure I had in the travel and in the adventure of those stories, something which conditioned my future life. The same thing applies in our schools, but one-third of the possible educational output of our schools is denied this enjoyment and excitement, and they turn from the excitement of these tales to other objects. But what does the Ministry of Education do about it? The Ministry of Education say, "We are looking at it with solicitude." In other words they are condemning one-third of the scholastic output of this country to become derelict outcasts, and that is what this Bill is trying to avoid.

This Bill is an instrument to try to wipe out the disgrace of the inability to read. We say it can be done, and so do people of great experience in this matter. If we can bring to these people the ability to read and the enjoyment to be derived from reading, then they will get excitement and pleasure from it.

We are spending somewhere in the neighbourhood of £355 million a year on education. If a third of our young people have not been educated to the extent of the ability to read then one-third of that money is being wasted. What we [column 2490] are proposing to do is to help the Ministry of Education to save some of that money and to put it to good use by making these people read. A lot of nonsense has been talked about the two systems. We are attacking this cancer in the national life from every possible angle, among which is to make the young people who cannot read at all try to read by alphabetic reading. Then when they get interested in reading they themselves will transfer to the other system because they will want to do so. Once they have overcome the dislike of learning to read by the alphabetic method they will be eager to go on reading and absorbing our literature and gaining greater knowledge.

A great deal has been said, especially from my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields, about the impossibility of transferring from alphabetic reading to orthodox reading. That is utter nonsense. I have done it for years. I have taught not only myself but have trained teacher and tens of thousands of students, and in teaching English to foreigners a start is always made with the phonetic method. When a certain standard is reached they transfer to the normal reading system. At first they get a shock, but then they fall into it quite easily.

I have brought with me a book on the subject which I myself wrote and of which 50,000 copies have been sold in Spain and South America. It is concerned with this basis of teaching by the phonetic method, and then going over to the normal English afterwards. The proof of that is that every English dictionary gives a figurative pronunciation to each word. That is not found in any other language except English. Unless hon. Members have gone into this matter, have understood it and have attempted to solve it, they cannot appreciate the problem or the difficulties.

Unless we solve it, we shall have a permanent increase of inability to read and shall multiply that type of person throughout the country until it becomes so big that we shall not be able to overcome the problem afterwards. The thing to do is to get the Ministry of Education to study the matter now. If they will not do it without legislation, then I ask the House to give them the legislation to wipe out this cancer, this disgrace to Britain.

[Column 2491] The Minister is wrong when he says that this condition exists not only in England. It exists only in English-speaking countries. I know much more about this than the Minister does. A Spanish child who has learnt to read always reads easily, and the same is true in France, Germany and Italy. I will tell the Minister that he cannot give me a single word in any of those languages that I have not seen before that I cannot pronounce. There is the proof.

Let us give this same facility to our children. Give them something to wipe away this despair. Let us not talk like the Minister and like my right hon. Friend the Member for South Shields, who say: "Make it more difficult for them," because by so doing we shall make things more difficult for our own country. Let us encourage our children to read and to learn how to read so that they will get the enjoyment of reading and, being encouraged, will make more efforts to overcome their own difficulties.

I leave it to the House to decide now by a vote whether they will listen to inexperienced people on this question or to people

who have had 45 years' experience on this very matter. I ask the House to accept the Bill and to vote in the Lobby for the Second Reading. It is only an experiment, and nothing but an experiment. If it succeeds, Britain will gain by it. If it fails, Britain will lose a few thousand pounds, and what are a few thousand pounds in a budget of £355 millions?

Mr. Ellis Smith: Before my hon. Friend sits down, can he say what English-speaking people say in other parts of the world with regard to this proposal?

Mr. Follick: I can only tell my hon. Friend this: The Columbia Broadcasting Company took a statement from me on Wednesday and broadcast it throughout the United States on Thursday. This morning I have been getting mail in from all parts of America asking me to go on with this thing. One telegram says:

"Go on with Theodore Roosevelt's plan."

The present system is obsolete and ruinous for the English-speaking world.

I want to wind up my speech by quoting what well-known persons say [column 2492] about the difficulties of our English spelling. Sinclair Lewis says:

"English is easy in everything except the co-ordination of spelling and pronunciation. That makes it the most difficult language in the world to learn."

Daphne du Maurier says:

"I never write any of my texts without being corrected."

If this is difficult for those people with a wide knowledge of letters, think how much more difficult it must be for those poor youngsters who, through no fault of their own but through the fault of the Ministry of Education, are consigned to be derelicts amongst their neighbours.

Finally, let me warn this House not to take too much notice of the pundits. I quote now from the "Scotsman," a well-known, honest, straightforward paper, but even that paper talks rubbish:

"The day we feel that spelling and grammar and syntax are completely under control down to the last, we shall quit writing."

Anybody who knows anything of grammar understands that English syntax is completely under control, fixed, rigid and inflexible. One cannot depart from the fixed form of English syntax, and yet this well-known English paper says it is as chaotic as our spelling - [HON. MEMBERS: "Scottish."] Yes, Scottish, but an honest one. If their principal correspondent on education makes such stupid errors about English syntax, of which any child is aware, we must be Christian and excuse the right hon. Gentleman the Member for South Shields.

Mr. C. Pannell: And the Parliamentary Secretary.

Mr. Follick: With those words, I beg this House now to divide on this question and decide the answer. Let us hope for the best for these children, that large number of our poor brothers who suffering from the inability to read.

3.12 p.m.

Mr. Harold Davies (Leek): Having been away from the House for a month or more because of illness, I came here today to take part in this debate. I have heard more rubbish this afternoon about the teaching profession than at any other time. We come here and have the audacity to tell the teaching profession how they should do this and how they should do that because there has been a 30 per. cent. increase in [column 2493] illiteracy over the last few years. Because there has been an increase in carcinoma of the lung, would hon. Members dare to tell the medical profession how to tackle that problem? Yet the House is telling the teaching profession how to tackle the problem of spelling and why it makes for delinquency.

Let us look at a few of the practical Problems. [HON. MEMBERS: "Divide."] I cannot help it if people want to gag me. I believe that a defence of the greatest profession in our civilisation should be made in this House. The increase mentioned in the 1948 report of 30 per cent. is due to the fact that for about seven years during the war our children were living in society like rabbits. School teachers were putting them in and out of air-raid shelters and they were only working in schools half-time. They were moved from one side of Britain to the other and they were taught in classes of 60 or 70. As a result there

was bound to be an increase in the amount of illiteracy, because we lost control of the children during the most impressionable age, namely, between five and 11 during the war.

If there is any increase in juvenile delinquency and in illiteracy in society today, the fault does not lie with the child but with the way in which we are working this society and the educational system within which we live. A few weeks ago I put a Question to the Minister of Education about the number of classes with 30, 40 or 50 children which the overworked elementary teacher has to teach - and let us use this honest-to-God word "elementary." Yet we have a sophisticated House of Commons talking about investigating the spelling problem and giving people the right to spell phonetically if they like, while throughout Britain over-worked and under-paid teachers are teaching in dreadful conditions. They are working in London schools in which racehorse owners would not put their prize horses.

Mr. Follick: The Bill wants to put that right.

Mr. Davies: I am not antagonising my hon. Friend but simply trying to put him right about the greatest profession in civilisation.

Mr. Osborne *rose-*

[Column 2494] **Mr. Davies:** The hon. Members who introduced the Bill want it to get a Second Reading. I intend to speak briefly and I hope not to be interrupted, because if I am interrupted I shall take longer.

Let me tell the House something about spelling - and I have been in every branch of education, from the elementary school to university work. For 17 years I acted as a tutor for the Workers' Educational Association. I remember very vividly taking a class of so-called farm labourers for three years in a country village. I used to trudge with enthusiasm to the village to lecture once a week to a group of about 12 or 15 farm workers and a few others. Incidentally, I do not know what will happen to the grant for this work following the miserable and mean cut which the Government have made in the grant for adult education.

One week I asked for an essay on the problems of civilisation. One man came to me and said, "I cannot spell very well but I will give you an essay." He wrote me 30 pages of foolscap, with three words out of every 10 mis-spelled. The punctuation was all awry, but the knowledge and the verve and vivid manner in which that man wrote were second to nothing I have read in my life.

The House is missing the point. Spelling is not the important thing; it is comprehension of the language which we speak that is the important factor. I agree that there should be both comprehension and good spelling, but comprehension should come first. Every practising teacher knows that and uses the phonetic method before moving to the other teaching methods adopted at present. In infant classes, the teachers create all kinds of systems to try to teach children how to move from the phonetic to the visual.

I will sum up this argument and I will make up my mind in a moment whether I support the Bill or not. *[Laughter.]* Well, I can either talk myself in or talk myself out, but, whichever way it is, I shall not be like hon. Members opposite; I shall not do it from expediency. If the hon. Member for Billericay (Mr. Braine) loves the English language I recommend him to read Russell Lowell's "The Biglow Papers," where he will find,

"A marcifful Providunce fashioned us holler,
So that a good statesman could his principles swaller."

[Column 2495] **Mr. Bernard Braine** (Billericay): I am trying to follow the hon. Gentleman's argument, but since he does not yet know whether to vote for the Bill or against it, I find it extraordinarily difficult to follow him. Will he give the House the benefit of his advice and tell us whether to vote for the Bill or not?

Mr. Davies: If the hon. Member was listening he would know that I tried to catch your eye, Mr. Speaker, because the pomposity with which this House deals with the teaching profession and tells the profession how to do its job has sickened me. I thought that in defence of the profession a few things should be said against putting on to the shoulders of the teacher all this alleged delinquency and so-called mis-spelling. There has been talk about Her Majesty's inspectors. Too often they come from the university or public school to a hard-working unsophisticated teacher in an infants' class and tell her how to run that class, whereas, without any letters to her name, she may be able to tell them how to run the class. Many of them have written books about advice they have had from these humble women. It is time that those who discuss this problem went to the fountain head to get a little advice about it.

I come to the conclusion that there is a case for looking into the problems of literacy in English schools today, but if we look into the matter we must be honest. Are we going to afford the price of one bomber in order to reduce the size of classes? Are we prepared to look at the entire appointment of Her Majesty's inspectors in elementary schools from a different angle and to give those working with the chalk and duster at the blackboard a chance of getting to the higher administrative jobs in the inspectorate rather than using the old-fashioned method of recruiting people from universities and public schools who have never put their feet in an elementary class-room for six months of their lives?

For the pleasure of hon. Members opposite, I will say that while I think there is something in this Bill, I think the sponsors are claiming much more for the Bill than it contains. Through you, Mr. Speaker, I beg of the House before making a fool of itself by uttering absolute rubbish about the teaching profession to see that some of its Members [column 2496] take the trouble to visit more often the elementary schools in their own divisions.

3.22 p.m.

Dr. Horace King (Southampton, Test): I do not want to prevent the next bill, the Pharmacy Bill, from having an opportunity of getting the approval of the House on Second Reading, but I want to refer to one or two things briefly. I hope the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Mr. Follick) will get a Second Reading inasmuch as it asks that we should investigate the problem of the backward reader and whether we should tackle the problem by a process of learning to read by two stages. These objects are in the Bill and that is why I shall vote for it.

But the Bill contains many defects. I have not time to mention all of them, but the most serious is that which asks the Minister of Education to seek, by Statutory Instrument, to impose a method of teaching on the schools of this country. It would be the first time that has been done in the history of our country, and I do not think it would be a very good thing, but that kind of defect can be taken out of the Bill if it is sent upstairs to Committee.

The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Pitman) recently, and in this debate, has been over-playing his hand and over-stating his case. Based on the Ministerial Report, "Reading Ability" we have had some terrifying accounts of the state of literacy among the children of the country. I would remind the House that the Report was published in 1950, that it dealt with children who had been examined in 1948 and that most of its information was based on observations of children whose education had been taking place during the worst time of the war and in the upsetting post-war period.

We have heard a lot about 50 per cent. of backward readers in rural areas and 30 per cent. average for the country. I am afraid lest the country should get an idea that it means that some 50 per cent of our children are illiterate. What are the facts? First of all, the Report says:

"He is illiterate who is not so literate as someone else thinks he might be."

It is simply a question of where we pitched the standard. Some 38 rural schools were examined, and among the 15-year-olds the [column 2497] Ministry experts found 43 per cent. backward, 8½ per cent. semi-literate and 2 per cent. illiterate. The most significant thing about the Report is that, while those figures were given about the 15-year-olds, examination of children at the age of 11 showed that those percentages had already been considerably reduced. In other words, the decline in the reading ability of our children caused by the war was already being rapidly arrested in our schools, even as early as 1948, in the years which followed the war. The position has steadily improved since then.

Backward readers, we are told by the Report, are children who cannot read better than the average child of 11 ought to read. We are also told that after the age of 15 people go on improving in their reading. It would therefore be wrong to imagine that even the so-called backward readers, since they go on developing in the years after school, live in society unable to read. The Report itself admits that the tests are not absolute; that their main value is that they have established a norm which can be used for measuring the future reading ability of children.

The chief value is that they are able to show that the drop in the reading ability of our children during the war was not so great as one might have expected it to be, due largely to the work done by teachers under extraordinarily difficult circumstances; that the backward readers do go on improving their reading after school; that the tests themselves measure only one kind of reading; that reading itself is only one fraction of all we know of as education; and, above all, that the problem about which we are concerned, serious as it may be, has already shown signs of receding.

I do not seek to minimise the problem, but I think that some people are inclined to exaggerate it. I am amazed at the patience and technical skill of our infant teachers grappling with the problem of teaching children of all kinds of ability with a highly artificial and highly illogical system of spelling. I am even more amazed and more troubled to think that many of

them are at present teaching in classes of, not only over 40 but over 50.

In supporting this Bill, I say quite seriously that it is a trivial Bill; that we should be doing ourselves and the country a very great wrong if we think that by [column 2498. 2 R*] a mere manipulation of the alphabet we can absolve ourselves from our real duty. The real educational reform we need is to get children into classes small enough to enable backward children and problem children to be recognised and diagnosed so that we can really get down to the problem of teaching them.

From my own experience wandering up and down the county of Hampshire and in the town of Southampton, I know that the teachers are aware of this problem. I have seen some remarkable work being done in schools, where enthusiastic teachers, given facilities and small enough groups to deal with, are preventing children who might have left the schools illiterate from doing so. One of my own joys is that when I first came to the House I received a letter of congratulation from a 15-year-old boy who three years before had been completely unable to read or write.

I hope that, while we accept the main lines of this Bill, we shall pull out of it in Committee any objectionable features it has, and that we shall remember that this is only one very, very small factor of the great problem we have to solve by giving really generous treatment to educational finance.

3.30 p.m.

Mr. Stephen McAdden (Southend, East): It was not my intention to intervene in this debate, but having listened to some of the arguments, I feel constrained to put forward one or two points.

As I understand, it is seriously suggested by the promoters that one of the major reasons for a Bill of this kind is that it is a necessary step towards reducing juvenile delinquency. That would not seem to be a very substantial argument. It is popular to blame everybody else for whatever is wrong rather than to give the real reason, which is a lack of parental training and discipline.

There are some who believe that the whole of education derives from the teaching received at school. I do not believe that is so. I believe that the foundations of character are laid, not in church or school, but in the homes of the people, and I am sure that there are few hon. Members of this House who did not first learn their spelling at home. If there is a failure on the part of a substantial proportion of the population to [column 2499] spell and write correctly, a large measure of blame should be laid, not on the teaching profession, but on the home-life of the children.

If I were convinced that this were a step forward to reduce juvenile delinquency, I should support the Bill, but I am not so convinced by any argument which has been advanced today. I hope the House will remember that for a good many years before the war we succeeded in instructing children attending elementary schools to read to a better degree than seems to be the case today. There is great force in the argument that one must take into account the effect of war years when dealing with the present high rate of illiteracy. During those years many children were separated, not only from their normal educational training, but also from their homes. Undoubtedly that has played a substantial part and is one of the major reasons for the high rate of illiteracy today.

[Column 2500] It is perfectly true, and has been testified by the biographical experiences of a number of right hon. and hon. Members, that before the war the educational training in our elementary schools did succeed in enabling our children to read very much better than is the case today. In common with many hon. Members, I went to an elementary school. From the teaching I received there, supplemented, indeed initiated, by the training I received from my parents, I found no insuperable difficulty in succeeding to spell and read in English.

I do not think it necessary or desirable that we should alter our system of teaching so as to place the additional burden on the teaching profession of having to teach with two forms of spelling. I believe that would further complicate the issue and I hope, therefore, that the House will reject this Bill.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes, 65; Noes, 53.

Division No. 111.] AYES [3:34 p.m

Bellinger, Rt. Hon. F. J.
Beswick, F.
Bowles, F. G.

Braine, B. R.
Braithwaite, Sir Albert (Harrow, W.)
Brockway, A. F.

Campbell, Sir David
Corbet, Mrs. Frieda
Cuthbert, W. N.
Davies, Harold (Leek)
Deer, G.
Delargy, H. J.
Evans, Edward (Lowestoft)
Follick, M.
Fraser, Hon. Hugh (Stone.)
Fraser, Sir Ian (Morecambe & Lonsdale)
Gordon Walker, Rt. Hon. P. C.
Griffiths, Rt. Hon. James (Llanelly)
Grimond, J.
Hall, John (Wycombe)
Harris, Reader, (Heston)
Harvey, Ian (Harrow, E.)
Hastings, S.
Holman, P.
Houghton, Douglas
Howard, Gerald (Cambridgeshire)
Hudson, James (Ealing, N)
Hutchinson, Sir Geoffrey (Ilford, N.)
Johnson, Eric (Blackley)
King, Dr. H. M.
Lindsay, Martin
Linstead, H. N.
Lipton, Lt.-Col. M.
Lucas, Sir Joselyn (Portsmouth, S.)
McCorquodale, Rt. Hon. M. S.
Mallalieu, J. P. W. (Huddersfield, E.)

TELLERS FOR THE AYES:

Mr. Morley and M. Osborne.

NOES

Baxter, A. B
Black, C. W.
Boyd-Carpenter, J. A.
Brooke, Henry (Hampstead)
Buchan-Hepburn, Rt. Hon. P. G. T.
Bullock, Capt. M
Channon, H.
Crookshank, Capt. Rt. Hon. H. F. C.
Crosthwaite-Eyre, Col. O. E.
Crowder, Sir John (Finchley)
Donaldson, Cmdr. C. E. McA.
Drewe, C.
Driberg, T. E. N.
Dugdale, Maj. Rt. Hon. Sir T. (Richmond)
Ede, Rt. Hon. J. C.
Edelman, M.
Evans, Albert (Islington, S.W.)
Fletcher, Eric (Islington, E.)
Fort, R.
Heath, Edward
Holmes, Sir Stanley (Harwich)
Hornsby-Smith, Miss M. P.

Mellish, R. J.
Mikardo, Ian
Morgan, Dr. H. B. W.
Mulley, F. W.
Nabarro, G. D. N.
Pannell, Charles
Parker J.
Pearl, T. F.
Pilkington, Capt. R. A.
Pitman. I. J.
Proctor, W. T.
Reeves, J.
Reid, William (Camlachie)
Robens, Rt. Hon. A
Robson-Brown, W.
Rodgers, John (Sevenoaks)
Ross, William
Ryder, Capt. R. E. D.
Savory, Prof. Sir Douglas
Smith, Ellis (Stoke, S.)
Snow, J. W
Sorenson, R. W
Stewart, Michael (Fulham, E.)
Viant, S. P.
Ward, Miss I. (Tynemouth)
Weitzman, D.
Wilcock, Group Capt. C. A. B.
Winterbottom, Ian (Nottingham, C.)
Yates, V. F.

Hudson, Sir Austin (Lewisham, N.)
Jeger, Dr. Santo (St. Pancras, S.)
Johnson, James (Rugby)
Jones, A. (Hall Green)
Kabarry, D.
Lloyd, Rt. Hon. Selwyn (Wirral)
Lucas, P. S. (Brentford)
Lucas-Tooth, Sir Hugh
Lyttelton, Rt. Hon. O.
Manningham-Buller Sir R. E.
Marples, A. E.
Maudling, R.
Molson, A. H. E.
Nicolson, Nigel (Bournemouth E.)
Nugent, G. R. H.
Pickthorn, K. W. M
Plummer, Sir Leslie
Redmayne, M.
Robinson, Kenneth (St Pancras, N.)
Smith, Norman (Nottingham, S.)
Smithers, Sir Waldron (Orpington)
Smyth, Brig. J. G. (Norwood)

Stewart, Henderson (Fife, E.)
Strauss, Henry (Norwich, S.)
Stross, Dr. Barnett
Taylor, John (West Lothian)
Thompson, Lt.-Cmdr. R. (Croydon, W.)
Wallace, H. W.

Watkinson, H. A.
Williams, Sir Herbert (Croydon, E.)
Wills, O.

TELLERS FOR THE NOES:
Dr. Broughton and Mr. McAdden.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and committed to a Standing Committee.