

See below Submission to the [Kingman Committee](#), [House of Lords 1987](#), [House of Lords 1995](#).
See also Pamphlet [1933 Petition to the Government](#) as mentioned below.

[*Spelling Reform Anthology* ed Newell Tune [§7.7](#)]
[*Spelling Progress Bulletin* [Winter 1975](#) Item 6]

Spelling and Parliament, by William J. Reed*

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A paper presented at the First International Conference of the Simplified Spelling Society, at College of All Saints, London.

In Britain we are a parliamentary democracy. We vote at stated intervals to elect a House of Commons of 635 members. From these, the leader of the largest political party is called upon by the Sovereign to choose a Cabinet and form a Government. This Government is the Executive and is the body which has the power and the authority to make all decisions concerning the welfare of the nation.

It is widely believed by many of those who are well qualified to judge that our spelling conventions are at present unsatisfactory and that they should be improved. There is no authority which can improve them except the authority of Parliament. No individual or group of individuals can make any effective changes except through Parliament.

Our present spelling is thought by some to be 'traditional' and will hereinafter be designated 'traditional orthography' or T.O.

It may be objected to what was said in the second paragraph that T.O. itself was not brought about by any Act of Parliament and the objection is reasonable. What we call T.O. was brought about by printers and, to a lesser extent, by writers during the latter part of the 17th century. It was unsatisfactory even then, though not as unsatisfactory then as it has become since. It has become more unsatisfactory because, during the intervening three centuries, it has changed very little, while the language which it is supposed to represent has changed very much. This unsatisfactory spelling has continued to be accepted by the nation because of important reasons, including the following:

(1) Many millions of copies of the Authorised Version of the Bible have been printed and read in something like our present T.O. (2) Shakespeare's plays also have been printed and read, not in Shakespeare's spelling but in T.O. (3) This spelling, with its disadvantages and imperfections, was accorded the imprimature of the formidable Samuel Johnson when he published his Dictionary in 1755 and when he wrote in his preface: *"I have attempted few alterations, and among those few, perhaps the greatest part is from modern to ancient practice." He recommended that people "should not disturb upon narrow views or for minute propriety the orthography of their fathers." By this he probably meant that they should not attempt to change 17th century spelling to match the great changes that had taken place in the language. So 17th century spelling was fastened even more securely on our language.*

A second objection might be that thoroughgoing spelling and alphabet reform were introduced in Turkey, 1928, by the efforts of one man, namely Kemel Ataturk; but the circumstances were quite different because Turkey at that time was not a parliamentary democracy such as we are now. A third possible objection is that important changes were made in American spelling by Noah Webster; but his Elementary Spelling Book of 1783 is said to have sold more than 100 million copies and to have had the approval of no less a person than Benjamin Franklin. Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828, was quickly accepted as the standard for spelling and subsequent editions maintained

this authority. It is difficult to see how that sort of change could be brought about in contemporary Britain by any one man or by any small group of men, however eminent.

When compulsory schooling was introduced by Parliament a century ago, the principal concern of the authority might well have been to give children a good education in their native language and literature: more consistent spelling might have been agreed on and introduced. The attention of the authorities was, however, distracted by other considerations which seemed at that time to be even more urgent. Social and industrial changes were affecting villages and, even more, towns. Families with children were uprooted. Many authorities found that their foremost task was not to provide children with a good education but to get them off the streets. As the historian, G. M. Young, wrote: *"In 1870 the essential was to get the children somehow into some sort of school . . . In Birmingham, forty out of every hundred children were running loose in the streets, while in Manchester the figure was as high as 50 out of every hundred."* [1] Chambers' Encyclopaedia, Vol. 4, page 800, 1973, states that in the eighteen sixties, 2 million children [1] were not attending school: that would have been about 40%. Well might Young say that the essential was to get the children, somehow, into some sort of school.

Children had to be accommodated somewhere while their fathers, and often their mothers too, were hard at work, and they had to be kept occupied for otherwise they would tend to become listless, mischievous and perhaps destructive. 'Education' was a wonderful ideal but the authorities seemed to be chiefly interested in making compulsory the three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic) and thus in making children spend their time and energy struggling with out-of-date and unsuitable spelling units, and with out-of-date and unreasonable units of measurement.

The passing of the R.E. Forster Act of 1870 did not mark a sudden break with the past (at the time, my own school log book did not mention it). Lowe's Revised Code of 1862 had required that all children should be instructed in reading, writing and arithmetic according to a clearly defined syllabus issued by a central authority and that all girls should be instructed in plain needlework. School experiments with reformed alphabet shapes or with reform spelling were not expressly forbidden and it is possible that some bold teachers did try such experiments. We know that Isaac Pitman's Phonotypy had been tried in schools 30 years earlier, in 1832; and there was the testimony of the great Alexander Ellis who wrote regarding *"the importance of employing a phonetic alphabet as a desirable, nay, necessary instrument in national education in that it furnished the only means by which reading, spelling and writing could become general among the great body of English people."* [2]

For hundreds of years, and certainly since the latter part of the 16th century, it had been realised by many of those who had most carefully studied the matter that what we call T.O. is subject to serious objections whether considered from the standpoint of etymology, phonology or, most important of all, teaching. It is the teaching aspects of the matter which has led Parliament, as representing the nation, to consider what reforms are needed and how much reforms might be implemented.

The Simplified Spelling Society had been founded in 1908 by a group of scholars under the chairmanship of Professor Walter Skeat. Some few years later, during the time when Professor Gilbert Murray was president, when Sir George Hunter was Chairman, when William Archer was Secretary and Walter Ripman was Treasurer, a Petition to the Prime Minister was organized by the Society with the aim of directing Parliament's attention to the evidence relating to the need for spelling reform. Responsibility for the Petition and for much of the actual work involved in interviewing people who were prominent in administration and in scholarship were accepted by Sir George himself and by his personal secretary, Mr. Thomas B. Barber. Mr. Barber was Secretary also of the Simplified Spelling Society and remained Secretary for many years afterwards and until his retirement in 1954.

By July, 1923, there was an impressive list of signatures in support of the Petition. There were names of 15,000 people who were representatives of scholars, writers, administrators and men and women who were prominent in public life and affairs. The list represented, probably, hundreds of thousands of such people inasmuch as, in many cases, the president and secretary signed on behalf of all the members of a society following a resolution passed at a general meeting. The covering letter was signed by forty people *'whose eminence in Scholarship, Science, Letters and Affairs is widely recognised'* as Sir George Hunter commented.

During the next few years, and until shortly before 1933, the teaching staffs and the administrative staffs of universities were generally in favour of asking the government to appoint a representative committee of eminent scholars who should be asked to consider the case for spelling reforms and the means by which such reforms might most conveniently be carried out. 800 of these eminent scholars signed the [Petition](#). [3] It must be remembered in this connexion that the number of universities, and consequently of university staffs, was then smaller than it is now after the great expansion of recent times. So 800 really is a notable figure.

In the Univ. of Birmingham, signatures included those of Sir Charles Grant Robertson, the Vice-Chancellor, C. W. Valentine, the Prof. of Education and of 20 other professors, 19 Lecturers and 4 Readers. In the Univ. of Cambridge, those who signed included Dr. P. Giles, the Master of Emmanuel College, Sir J. J. Thomson, the Master of Trinity College, Dr A. C. Seward, the Master of Downing College, Sir Arthur Quiller Couch, the Prof. of English Literature, Dr. Emery Barnes, the Prof. of Divinity, Dr G. G. Coulton, the famous historian of the middle ages, together with 37 other Professors and Lecturers.

In the Univ. of Oxford, those who signed included W. D. Ross, the Provost of Oriel College, C. H. Sampson, the Principal of Brasenose College, Dr. A. H. Sayce, who was later Prof. of Assyriology, Sir M. E. Sadler, the Master of University College; Prof. Gilbert Murray, who was Regius Prof. of Greek and who succeeded Walter Skeat as President of the Simplified Spelling Society in 1912 and who supervised its policies until his death in 1957; Dr. R. R. Marrett, Rector of Exeter College, Dr. Reg. W. Macan, late Master of University College and an authoritative advocate of spelling reform; Prof. H. C. Wyld, Merton Prof. of English Language and Literature and Editor of the Universal Dictionary of the English Language; F. M. Powicke, Regius Prof. of Modern History; Percy Simpson, Fellow of Oriel College, an authority with A. W. Pollard, W. W. Greg, E. Maunde Thompson, J. Dover Wilson and R. W. Chambers (O.U.P. 1923) on Shakespeare's spelling in the Sir Thomas More play (fragment) and in *Venus & Adonis* and *Lucrece*, which are the only examples we have of how Shakespeare himself actually spelt words: Edmund Blunden, former Prof. of English Literature in the Imperial Univ. of Tokyo, Dr. M. W. Keatinge, Reader in Education and D. H. MacGregor, Prof. of Political Economy: along with 24 other eminent scholars.

In the Univ. of London, there were: Lascelles Abercrombie, the Prof. of English Literature (David Abercrombie, his son, was for some years Chairman of the Simplified Spelling Society, during the time when I was Honorary Secretary); A. Lloyd James, who was later Prof. of Phonetics (he did much of the work involved in producing the fifth edition of *New Spelling* 1940, and wrote the Preface which appears on pages 5 to 7); Sir T. Percy Nunn, Director of the Institute of Education, Sir Cyril Burt, F.B.A., Prof. of Philosophy, together with 40 other distinguished scholars.

In the Univ. of Manchester, those who signed included the Professors of English Language, English Literature, and almost all of the other departments of the University.

There were many signatures from the Universities of Aberdeen, Bristol, Durham, Edinburgh (58 names), Glasgow (41 names), Liverpool (Vice-Chancellor, 25 Professors and 12 others), Reading (Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, 11 Professors and 20 Lecturers), St Andrew's (Vice-Chancellor and 38 others), Sheffield (Sir Henry Hadow, formerly Vice-Chancellor and 16 others), Univ. of Wales (the Principal, 16 Professors and 28 Lecturers), from Univ. of Nottingham there were 16 names.

There were also the names of 125 Members of Parliament, 22 Bishops, including William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, 49 publishers, including Edward Arnold, Jonathan Cape, W. & R. Chambers, 8 authors, including H. G. Wells, J. B. Priestley, Julian Huxley and Sir Norman Angell.

There was support also from many educational associations, including the National Union of Teachers, National Association of Schoolmasters, the Association of Teachers in Technical Institutes, and the Educational Institute of Scotland.

Thus supported and encouraged by the widespread approval of the universities' teaching and administrative staffs, by teachers, writers and publishers, Sir George Hunter in July, 1923 met some of the Simplified Spelling Society's committee and interviewed Sir Charles Trevelyan, who was then President of the Board of Education. He stated the Board's official position thus: *"While difficulties of the present system (of spelling) were admitted, he felt that the appointment of the Commission or Committee could not be expected to result in any scientific solution unless the supporters of Spelling Reform were able as a preliminary to decide upon an agreed and definite scheme."* Lord Irwin later (in 1933) quoted and agreed with this point of view.

Rebuffed by the Board of Education because he had not brought an agreed and definite scheme, Sir George Hunter asked the Society's Committee to reconsider and possibly revise the earlier proposals which had been formulated by William Archer and Walter Ripman. After renewed consideration, the proposers and supporters of English Spelling Reform met on May 3rd, 1933, and unanimously agreed to approve and submit for the proposed Committee's consideration the scheme (New Spelling) approved by the Simplified Spelling Society. Sir George Hunter's covering letter included the following sentence: *"The scheme has been used in a number of elementary schools with benefit to the children; it does not require any new letters or any additions to the printers' fonts of type . . . It is not expected that our spelling can be immediately changed by any arbitrary decree but it is believed that any improvements recommended by the Committee will be voluntarily and gradually adopted."* This meeting, on 3rd May, was attended by Sir George Hunter, Chairman, and by: Mr. A. Lloyd James, Reader in Phonetics at London Univ., Mr. Walter Ripman, Chief Inspector of Schools for London Univ., Prof. W. Emery Barnes, Prof. Daniel Jones, Sir E. Dennison Ross, Mr. A. E. Henshall, ex-President of the National Union of Teachers, Wm. Barkley, Journalist, Oswald Lewis, M.P., W. G. Pearson, M.P., Mr. Gray Jones, representing the Incorporated Association of Assistant Masters, Mr. Gordon and Mr. T. R. Barber, Secretary of the Simplified Spelling Society.

Even after this, Lord Irwin wrote on June 30, 1933, saying that the Government could not agree to the appointment by the Government of a Committee "... because its official character would give people the impression that legislation might be possible in the future. There is no justification for the board to go even this far..." Lord Irwin declined to appoint a committee and declined to receive a deputation. The scholarship that had produced several versions of New Spelling and all the work that had resulted in the collection of 15,000 signatures of prominent people were rendered of no avail because of what must have seemed to Sir George very much like obstinacy on the part of Lord Irwin and his advisers.

Sir George was defeated. He died in 1937 and left a large legacy to enable the Society to continue the work for spelling reform which had meant so much to him. Here again, he suffered another defeat. All moneys used for educational purposes are 'charitable' and therefore exempt from paying income tax. The amazing truth is that the Society's income from the Hunter bequest was declared to be not for educational purposes. The money was, therefore, subject to income tax and the Society has lost many thousands of pounds because of this decision.

On 11th March, 1949, Dr. Mont Follick, M.P. for Loughborough, presented his Private Member's Spelling Reform Bill to the House of Commons. Part 1 of the Bill asked for the establishment of a committee to produce a scheme for the simplified and consistent spelling of English. Part 2 required that reformed spelling should be used first in schools, later in government publications and later still should be used generally. The Minister of Education and that time was Rt. Hon. George Tomlinson and he was deeply concerned about the welfare of children. He cautiously expressed the opinion, however, that advocates of reform should secure some reasonable measure of public support and that later there should be an official inquiry into spelling.

On the Second Reading, 11th March, 1949, the Bill was debated for five hours and lost by only three votes, the official figures being 84:87. This was a remarkable achievement by Mont Follick and for spelling reformers. Clearly, even better things were within reach. [\[4\]](#)

In the autumn of 1952, Mont Follick was again successful in the ballot for Private Members' Bills, being drawn No. 5. He again brought in a Bill concerned with spelling reform. It required the Government to institute research into methods of improving the low standard of reading and to investigate, among other things, the use of consistent spelling, even though there might later be a transition to Queen Anne's spelling (T.O.). On Second Reading, 27.2.53, the Bill was carried by 65 votes to 53 after a debate which is reported in 82 columns of Hansard (2425–2507). Mr Ralph Morley, M.P. for Itchen, had said: "*As a class teacher for nearly fifty years, I know it is our ridiculous and illogical spelling which is the chief handicap in teaching children to read.*" I myself have had more than fifty years experience of teaching and agree with what Mr. Morley said. [\[5\]](#)

After Second Reading, the Bill went to Committee where it was again approved in spite of government opposition.

On 7th May, Dr. Follick rose in the House "*To ask the Minister of Education if she will state her policy towards proposals by a competent research organisation to investigate possible improvements in the teaching of reading by means of a system of simplified spelling.*" Miss Florence Horsbrugh replied: "*Any such organisation could rely on my interest and goodwill for their proposals designed to investigate possible improvements in this field of education. There would be no extra grant and the organization concerned would have to secure the willing cooperation of the l.e.a., teachers and parents.*"

The sponsors of the Bill realised that it might still meet powerful opposition and that it might be rejected in the Lords. They agreed to withdraw the Bill, being well pleased with the Minister's assurance that there would be approval for properly controlled research into how the use of simplified spelling would affect the processes of learning to read.

John Downing was appointed to administer the tests to the i.t.a. groups, also to the control groups. The i.t.a. experiments were started in September 1961. After only a few weeks it was clear that children could learn to read in the fairly consistent i.t.a. much more quickly and much better than the control groups could learn to read T.O. It seemed also that reading skill acquired with consistent i.t.a. could be transferred later to reading matter printed in T.O. Subsequent tests confirmed this. The most important

result of the i.t.a. research was to prove that T.O. is a handicap to children when they are learning to read. What happened after the transition was interesting but it did not affect the really important conclusion quoted in the last sentence. These experiments, and later ones, were a consequence of the Follick-Pitman success in the House of Commons, 27 February, 1953, and the Minister's subsequent assurance that there would be approval of, though no government grant for, experiments with simplified spelling in the teaching of reading.

It seems that Mont Follick was more concerned with spelling reform than he was with teaching children to read T.O. It was only with reluctance that he agreed to the withdrawal of his 1953 Bill and he later seems to have regretted having done so. He was a true spelling reformer and remained so until his death, 10.12.1958. His Will required that his fortune should be used to found and endow a professor's chair of Comparative Philology *"in which spelling reform (not merely the teaching of reading) should form a principal part."* Dr. Mont Follick had been the founder and was the Proprietor of the Regent School of Languages. His estate was large. After considerable delay, the money was accepted by the Univ. of Manchester and William Haas was appointed the first Mont Follick Professor. This decision was the crucial decision which must decide to what extent the benefactor's aims are likely to be fulfilled. All this may reasonably and fairly be said to follow from the House of Commons' verdict on 27th February, 1953.

During recent years, two Departmental Committees have considered language teaching and, especially, the teaching of reading. Lady Plowden was Chairman of the first. Detailed evidence was submitted by the Simplified Spelling Society but this did not appear in the report, although the name and school of the Honorary Secretary did appear. During 1970 and 1971, useful correspondence passed between the Society and the Departmental Inspector for English, Mr. E. Wilkinson. I met Mr. Wilkinson on 15 November, 1971, and we discussed the Society's Resolution to the Minister. We did not disagree on any of the items included in this Resolution, and we discussed what further progress might be made, such as experiments with *New Spelling* under the auspices of a university. The unexpected and unexplained departures of our President and Chairman from the Annual General Meeting made it difficult for the Society to make further progress at the time with the Departmental Inspector. The final sentence of the Resolution was: *"Members of this Society . . . urge the government to institute an inquiry into the educational, financial and international advantages likely to result from modernizing our out-of-date spelling conventions."*

Another Government Committee was appointed in 1971. There were 19 members and Sir Alan Bullock was appointed Chairman. During 1972 and '73, several of us wrote on behalf of the Simplified Spelling Society and expressed regret because the Society had not been invited to give oral and written evidence. Mr. S. S. Eustace was at that time Hon. Sec. of the Society and wrote several times. Mr. R. Arnold was Sec. of the Bullock Com. and early in 1971, he wrote saying that the Society's representatives would be able to give oral evidence to the Bullock Com. We were invited also to send an agreed 'submission.' Of the dates offered, the first one, Jan. 23rd, was chosen by the Society's Committee at its meeting on Jan. 12th. There was not adequate time in which to prepare an agreed 'submission' but four of us (Messrs. Eustace, Gibbs, O'Halloran and Reed) met in Elizabeth House on Jan. 23rd. We met a Bullock Committee (not the full Committee) under the chairmanship of Prof. J. E. Merritt. Prof. Merritt is, incidentally, a member of the Simplified Spelling Society.

That meeting with the members of the official Bullock Committee was important and promising. Mr. O'Halloran, who has since been elected Honorary Secretary of the Simplified Spelling Society, made a particularly good impression on the Bullock Committee and has since had important correspondence and interviews with some of its members. Progress towards improvement in our spelling conventions will have to be the result of recommendations by a Departmental Committee appointed by, and reporting back to, Parliament.

References

- [1] G. M. Young, *The Victorian Age*, Penguin, p. 116.
[2] Benn Pitman, *Life and Labours of Isaac Pitman*, 1902, quoted by Harrison in, *Instant Reading*, Pitman, 1964, p. 30–34.
[3] *The Case for the Improvement of Spelling*, Simplified Spelling Society, 1933, pp. 16–32.
[4] Hansard, 11 March, 1949.
[5] Hansard, 27 February, 1953.

SIMPLIFIED SPELLING SOCIETY

Founded in 1908 by Professor W.W. Skeat, Lit.D., LL.D., D.C.L., Ph.D.

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TEXT OF RESOLUTION
to The Secretary of State,
Department of Education and Science

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"Whereas many great authorities on English have deplored the inconsistency of its spelling and have advocated reform;

And whereas no reasonable case against spelling reform has ever been made by any considerable scholar;

And whereas experiments in Britain, America and elsewhere have proved our spelling to be wasteful of time and effort;

And whereas a number of other nations have in recent times reformed their spelling conventions with great benefit to themselves and to other users of their languages;

And whereas English is now being learnt as a second language by a large proportion of the human race and is the most widely used international language;

Members of this Society, feeling that it is now incumbent upon native speakers of English to remove unnecessary difficulties in the learning and use of the language, whether by students approaching it as a second language or by English-speaking and other children learning to read it and write it, urged the Government to institute an inquiry into the educational, financial and international advantages likely to result from modernizing our out-of-date spelling conventions."

Passed by subsequent Gen. Meeting, Dec. 12, 1970.

William Reed, Hon. Secretary.

The Kingman Committee

BACKGROUND

In 1986 the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Kenneth Baker, set up a Committee of Inquiry into English Language Teaching, chaired by Sir John Kingman, Vice-Chancellor of Bristol University, which is to report by the end of 1987. Its terms of reference are:

1. *To recommend a model of the English language, whether spoken or written, which would:*
 - (1) *serve as a basis of how teachers are trained to understand how the English language works;*
 - (2) *inform professional discussion of all aspects of English teaching.*
2. *To recommend the principles which should guide teachers on how far and in what ways the model should be made explicit to pupils, to make them conscious of how language is used in a range of contexts.*
3. *To recommend what, in general terms, pupils need to know about how the English language works and in consequence what they should have been taught, and be expected to understand, on this score, at age 7, 11 and 16.*

Despite scepticism among educationists about the terms of reference and the expertise of the committee, the Society nevertheless decided it should take this opportunity to state the case for spelling reform. It accordingly submitted the following document to the Committee, which in its reply said that it would only be able to take oral evidence from a small number of organisations and that the Society would not be among them. Further written evidence was however invited, and readers who wish to make suggestions for this purpose are asked to let the Editor know.

Submission to the COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING from the SIMPLIFIED SPELLING SOCIETY May 1987

I. The submission

The Simplified Spelling Society wishes to make the following submission to the Committee of Inquiry into English Language Teaching. The submission has been compiled by the Editor of the Society's *Journal*, in consultation with its Chairman and other officers:

Editor Christopher Upward, Senior Lecturer, Department of Modern Languages, Aston University.

Chairman Christopher Jolly, marketing consultant.

2 The background of public and political opinion

We think it necessary to preface our submission by describing how the Society's views relate to generally held perceptions of English spelling.

2.1 Variety of perceptions of traditional orthography (t.o.)

Views of t.o. span a wide spectrum, from despair at inability to master it at one extreme, to veneration of its unique richness at the other. Between these extremes we encounter: irritation at how troublesome t.o. is to teach, to learn and to use; impatience that its violation should be so stigmatized; resignation to its waywardness as a fact of life; rejection of the notion that the letters represent the sounds of words; painstaking analysis of the educational difficulties t.o. causes; attempts to make best use of such patterns and regularities as t.o. possesses; unquestioning acceptance of t.o. as a tool of daily world-wide

communication; pride in the status that fluent, accurate command of t.o. gives above those who lack that command; affection for the eccentricities to t.o.; appreciation of t.o. as a vehicle for the continuity of literary culture; scholarly delight in the wealth of historical associations conjured up by the etymology of t.o. In short, t.o. is all things to all people; but above all how it is perceived by the schoolchild is very different from how it is perceived by the well-educated adult manipulating it with supreme but unconscious skill; and how it is perceived by the more scientifically and less classically educated younger generation is very different from how it is perceived by the older generation. How it is perceived by the Simplified Spelling Society has been implicit in the Society's name for the almost 80 years of its existence.

2.2 Recent authoritative statements

In addition to the cross-currents of public opinion just described, the Society notes recent statements from more authoritative quarters which might have been in a position to consider the merits of reforming t.o. Thus the Bullock report [\[1\]](#) said:

"Various solutions have been suggested to the problems presented by the irregular system of spelling in English, the most radical of which is its actual reform... The views of the Committee differ on the question... and this difference of opinion is probably a fair reflection of the range and intensity of the views held by teachers and the public at large. However, the majority of us remain unconvinced by the case for national reform... We consider the issues involved too complex and the implications too far-reaching to enable us to stretch our brief to the extent of giving the subject the detailed study it needs. In the circumstances we do not feel able to make a recommendation on it."

And in the debate on The English Language in the House of Lords on 4 March 1987, Baroness Hooper for the Government said: [\[2\]](#)

"Many noble Lords have argued — and I doubt if anyone would disagree with them — that improvement in the standards of communication in English would be a great benefit. The question is how that improvement can be attained. Some believe that what is required is reform of spelling ... so that English can be more easily learned, whether by children or foreigners. We have heard many suggestions as to the types of reform that might be adopted. Gaining agreement to reform and bringing it about — not just in this country but in the whole of the English-speaking world — would be a formidable task.

Changes in language and language-use of course take place all the time in a living language but they do so naturally and gradually. I am not convinced that attempts to regulate or direct that process would achieve the desired results.

Indeed, I am inclined to think that English would not be as universally spoken as it is if it were not that it is already so much more simple and flexible than many other languages. Even if it were possible to wave a wand and reform or simplify English spelling or grammar across the world, would that be desirable? The richness and variety of the English language are matters of which we are rightly proud, and many people would be sorry to see them lost even in the interests of greater simplicity. The Government are therefore concentrating their efforts not on trying to change the English language but on trying to improve the way that it is taught..."

3. Purpose of the Simplified Spelling Society's submission

The Society believes that, for all the caution expressed by the Bullock report and by Baroness Hooper, it has a duty to place those views in a fuller perspective for the present Committee of Inquiry, and to advance some new ideas on the subject. The Society would like to encourage their further exploration, and hopes that they may provide a stimulus for the improved teaching of English, in keeping with the Committee's terms of reference.

4 Spelling Reform in perspective

We would first wish to qualify Baroness Hooper's remark that "changes in language and language-use take place all the time in a living language but they do so naturally and gradually. I am not convinced that attempts to regulate or direct that process would achieve the desired results." We would point out that these observations apply to grammar and pronunciation, but they do not apply to the writing system, which changes not "naturally", but by conscious decision. The decisions that gave rise to t.o. were made chiefly by printers in the seventeenth century, when universal literacy and economic efficiency were not the major criteria they are today. Many such decisions were influenced by the typographical requirements of a technology in its infancy, and conflict with modern perceptions of consistency, pronunciation, etymology, and educational and technological need. The last major decisions of this kind occurred some two hundred years ago with the abandonment of <. > as an alternative form of <s>, and with Noah Webster's improvements in America, few of which have been systematically adopted in the United Kingdom (*program* is a rare, but partial example). Since then only isolated changes of detail have been made, often without regard for consistency: thus <ph> has become <f> in *fantasy*, *freefone*, but not in *phantom*, *telephone*; and the single <l> in *fulness* is creeping in by analogy with *fulsome*, despite its base form which remains *full*. The experience of English shows [3] that a rational, efficient writing system does not necessarily develop "naturally" if the crucial decisions are left to individuals; and the experience of most other languages shows [4] that more efficient writing systems can be introduced if carefully planned by bodies selected for their expertise and wisdom, and equipped with realistic and rational criteria. Since the early 1970's the United Kingdom has by dint of careful planning at official level (after a century of deliberation) modernized its currency and to some extent its system of weights and measures, to the great educational and economic benefit of our society. After over four centuries of deliberation on spelling, a similar attack needs to be made on the much more intricate, entrenched and far-flung problems of our writing system. The Society believes it can demonstrate that, given the will and given a realistic appreciation of what is feasible and what is not, such an attack could be made. The penalty for failing to grasp the nettle is that the spoken language will diverge ever further from its written form, and present problems of illiteracy and waste will grow steadily worse. Sooner or later, like all human systems, written English will have to be modernized, and the burden of its present obsolescence is already so great that a first step would be better taken now than in some future century.

5 Implications for the Committee of Inquiry

The Committee's terms of reference do not explicitly include examination of this question, whose ramifications go beyond education as such, as well as beyond the United Kingdom. Yet since those terms of reference cover the written as well as the spoken language, they cannot properly exclude spelling: no "model" of the written language can ignore the very system by which the language is written down. Defining the model however means applying rational standards, and any attempt to apply such standards to t.o. is immediately lost in a maze of inconsistencies — as five minutes' study of the cover of the Society's Journal (enclosed) will show. If teachers are to be "trained to understand how the English language works", then they must understand the intricacies of the maze of its spelling. Furthermore they must understand these intricacies not so much for their own edification, as for a very practical reason that is central to their work as teachers: in order to teach their pupils to negotiate the maze themselves. The maze, or at least its main features, must "be made explicit to pupils" if the pupils are to achieve functional literacy. But it is on this rock that the whole preceding line of argument founders, since from time

immemorial English spelling has proved just too complex for very large numbers of pupils to master. In the 1960's the i.t.a. experiments [6] showed it conclusively, and even the Bullock report was prepared to admit (§6.20) that "the complexity of English spelling patterns does appear to retard progress". In short, unless some steps are taken to rationalize the writing system itself, training the teachers to understand what it is implied they have failed to understand hitherto will scarcely help them to make the essential techniques of literacy "explicit to pupils" more effectively than in the past.

6. Some misconceptions about English spelling

Yet this simple truth, namely that the traditional writing system is as much an educational obstacle as the traditional currency and weights and measures formerly were, is not widely grasped. An underlying, but largely unconscious reason for this may well be despair that English spelling can be treated rationally. We would pick out two manifestations of this tendency. The first is the influence of the Chomskys, and most famously Noam Chomsky's description of English spelling as "optimal, [6] which despite effective refutations [7] is still widely accepted. The second is the adoption of look-and-say methods of teaching beginners to read, which we see as an irrational and defeatist response to an irrational and intractable orthography: because t.o. is so resistant to phonic analysis, many educationists resort to even less precise techniques such as gestalt recognition as an alternative. If English spelling were consistently phonographic, the idea that such a method (which might seem appropriate for Chinese, though we doubt even that [8] could be superior to the phonic method would scarcely have gained credence, any more than mathematicians would advocate guesswork as a substitute for calculation.

7. More promising approaches to teaching English spelling

Until the mid-1980's, the most successful new development in teaching children to read and write in English appears to have been the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.), designed by the Society's former President, the late Sir James Pitman [9] on the basis of the Society's earlier phonographic spelling system New Spelling. [10]. Although the Bullock report (§7.29) was judiciously non-committal on the subject, the study [5] conducted by the Society's present President, Professor John Downing, into the results of first teaching by the i.t.a. predictably showed that children learn a more consistent spelling system faster and more effectively than t.o. The world-wide use of the i.t.a. (in the U.S.A., Canada and Australia as well as in the United Kingdom) shows that spelling-reform need not be just "national", as the Bullock report put it, but can be (indeed, in the Society's view, should be) international. Underlying the greater educational effectiveness of the i.t.a. is the "cognitive confusion" engendered by t.o., an idea first put forward by Professor Magdelene Vernon; indeed research has suggested that t.o. is not merely in itself difficult for beginners to master, but prejudices children's long-term intellectual development more generally. [11] The great disadvantage of i.t.a., which perhaps more than any other factor prevented its universal and permanent acceptance, is that it augmented the conventional roman alphabet with a significant number of unfamiliar extra symbols. It is to overcome this disadvantage that John Henry Martin [12] and Edward Rondthaler [13] in the U.S.A. have now developed new systems of reformed spelling for initial teaching purposes: apart from Martin's macrons for the five 'long' vowels, they confine themselves to our conventional roman alphabet. The work is being sponsored by I.B.M., and Martin's scheme is already being used in schools by over 300,000 children. The Society would urge the Committee to examine these developments carefully, with a view to recommending such a scheme in the United Kingdom.

8. A non-disruptive spelling reform for schools

The above spelling systems radically transform t.o. for the limited purpose of teaching the first stages of literacy; they are not designed to reform written English as used in the adult world. The Society recognizes that it is unrealistic to advocate any reform that would entail an overnight upheaval of English spelling, since that would be a recipe for chaos. As Baroness Hooper said, change must be gradual. The Society's view of a realistic reform strategy is that small, relatively uncontroversial and inconspicuous changes should be first introduced to the youngest schoolchildren. It would be possible, for instance, for the Committee to recommend that in future pupils should learn such forms as (in descending order of frequency, down to 400 occurrences per million words): hav, ar, wer, wil, mor, som, befor, wel, peple, stil, thru, com, corse, smal, evry, yung, something, askd, giv, hed, scool, eys. Another possibility would be to teach American spellings, most of which are more economical and consistent than their British equivalents: thus *mold, molt, ax, adz, worshiped, woolen, wagon, labor, esthetic, maneuver, catalog, program, plow, draft, sulfur, milage, mustache, analyze, check* (for cheque); but the adoption of American forms would have less impact on the teaching of beginners than would the simplification of the very common words. Such simplification, entailing little more than the omission of redundant letters, not merely increases the regularity of sound-symbol correspondence, and so makes learning easier, but by shortening words it also makes the physical task of writing less laborious and time-consuming; and, most importantly, children would still be able to read t.o. without extra tuition, since the t.o. forms would merely differ by an additional letter or two. These simplified spellings (unlike the i.t.a. forms) would be the normal forms to be used by the next generation for the rest of their lives, and since they would also save adults time and publishers money, there would be a strong incentive to their rapid adoption outside the educational system, and indeed world-wide. Such changes are conceived as part of a broader reform-strategy known as Cut Spelling, which is outlined in the enclosed explanatory leaflet. But it should finally be pointed out that, unlike a reform that substituted letters in words, reform by the omission of redundant letters would scarcely detract from the richness of the language as feared by many opponents of reform, indeed in many words it would restore historical spellings which were distorted by the early printers.

9. What should teachers and pupils know about t.o.?

Whether or not the Committee feels able to recommend such improvements to the English writing system, its terms of reference require it to recommend what teachers and pupils should know about that writing system. In our view, what they should know ought to increase understanding of the need and potential for the spelling-reform which eventually will have to be introduced (in other words, we think the Committee should actively foster a climate of opinion favourable to future reform). We would suggest that the following items should be borne in mind:

1) We believe that it should be part of the intellectual and cultural equipment of all teachers of reading and writing to know something about how t.o. evolved (D G Scragg's brief *A history of English spelling* [3] provides an excellent and vivid outline, and at least the 80-odd pages dealing with post-Norman conquest developments should be prescribed reading). At present there is almost total public ignorance on the subject; indeed we would say that this ignorance has been largely responsible for the general unwillingness to contemplate systematic improvements to the writing system in the last two centuries. Most people have no more understanding of the writing system they use (however skilfully) than they understand the chemical composition of the air they breathe. But it is no more possible to combat orthographic pollution without understanding the orthography than to combat air-pollution without understanding the chemistry; orthographic pollution may be less lethal, but it represents a quite unnecessary burden to a literate society, and by quite simple steps (*pace* Bullock) it could easily be reduced.

2) Teachers involved in teaching beginners to read and write should understand something of the morphological and phonemic structure of English, and the patterns for its written representation. They would not of course directly pass on such theoretical or analytical insights to their youngest pupils, but the ability of teachers to point out recurrent patterns would help all learners grapple with inconsistencies.

3) This basic knowledge would help primary school teachers to put across the grammatical concepts it was thought their pupils should learn, and give pupils a basis of 'language-awareness' which would be useful to them later in foreign-language study.

4) Possibly at primary, but particularly at secondary level, knowledge of common roots (especially Latin and Ancient Greek) would help expand pupils' vocabulary both in English and in other languages. Such knowledge would also help understanding of such spelling difficulties as why *innocent* has two <n>s, but *inoculate* does not, and erratic two <r>s but *erotic* only one. (However a much better solution to that difficulty would be to simplify all such troubled consonants in English, as Spanish generally does — *acomodación* — and other languages spasmodically do — *une adresse, eine Adresse*.)

5) It may also be pointed out that since the decline of traditional grammar-teaching in English there has been a lack of understanding between English and foreign-language teachers. Greater linguistic understanding on the part of English teachers would both help overcome that lack of understanding, and help English-language teachers to appreciate the learning problems of non-native speakers.

10. Conclusion: an opportunity for the Committee

A reform of English spelling in the interests of literacy and to make the written language a less cumbersome, more efficient medium of communication would be of world-wide benefit. The English-speaking countries stand to gain particularly, not only from the consequent educational improvements at home, but from the increased ability of other countries to use the English language. (In economic terms one would even expect long-term benefits for British trade to arise from the improved ability of non-English-speakers to communicate in English.) The United Kingdom, as the home of the English language, enjoys a unique authority which it could use to initiate such a development. The Simplified Spelling Society believes it has a practical proposal to offer which could be implemented either on a very modest experimental scale initially, or far more sweepingly, to much greater effect. Baroness Hooper accepted that languages change gradually, and we propose that schools should gradually teach children not to write those letters in t.o. whose only present effect is to distort the alphabetic consistency of English Spelling and clutter it with unnecessary characters. The gradualness of such a reform would be such that only after a whole generation had passed would everyone use the new forms — an essential reassurance for those who fear the imposition of strange spellings. We would urge the Committee to take up this question, as similar bodies have done this century for Dutch, French, German, Greek, Spanish and other languages, and make a historic mark for the progress of English by recommending a rigorous examination of the practicality of the Society's suggestions.

11. Enclosures

We enclose the following documents as background information:

6 copies of a leaflet on Cut Spelling.

2 copies of a leaflet on the Society's forthcoming conference.

2 copies each of the Society's Journal, 1987 No. 1 and No. 2.

More copies of these documents can be supplied on request.

12. Request for a meeting with the Committee

The Society hopes that the Committee will wish to explore the ideas put forward in this submission by meeting representatives of the Society, both because these ideas have merely been outlined here and can be further elucidated in discussion, and because the Society would value the opportunity to learn directly of the Committee's response to the questions raised.

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- [2] Hansard, *HOUSE OF LORDS, Official Report*, Vol.485 No.50, 4.3.1987, London: H.M.S.O., pp.683–84.
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- [5] John Downing, *Evaluating the Initial Teaching Alphabet*, London: Cassell, 1967.
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- [7] John Downing & Che Kan Leong, *Psychology of Reading*, New York: Macmillan, 1982, p.67 ff.
- [8] Geoffrey Sampson, *Writing Systems*, London: Hutchinson, 1985.
- [9] Sir James Pitman & John St John, *Alphabets & Reading*, Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd., 1969.
- [10] Walter Ripman & William Archer, [*New Spelling*](#), London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd., 1948, 6th edition revised by Daniel Jones & Harold Orton.
- [11] John Downing, 'The Transfer of Skill in Language Functions' in *Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society*, [1987 No.2](#), §4.3.
- [12] John Henry Martin & Ardy Friedberg, *Writing to Read*, New York: Warner Books Inc., 1986, reviewed in *Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society*, [1987 No. 1](#). §8
- [13] Edward Rondthaler, *Dictionary of American Spelling*, New York: The American Language Academy, 1986, reviewed in *Simplified Spelling Society Newsletter*, ISSN 0268-5655, [Summer 1986](#), §2.

The House of Lords on English Spelling

On 4 March 1987 the House of Lords debated The English Language for nearly two and a half hours. We here give relevant extracts from those speeches that had some bearing on spelling, as printed in Hansard pp.656–687.

The debate was opened by *Lord Simon of Glaisdale*, who had previously had a meeting with the Society's Chairman, Chris Jolly. He noted the large number of members of the House who had put down their names to speak. His address then included these remarks:

"The other day there were some alarming references to illiteracy — even in this country after 100 years of universal education... We obviously owe a duty to those children in respect of the English language.

We also owe a duty to those who honour and benefit us by learning English as a second language. When considering an improvement, we must do nothing, I venture to suggest, that may cause the break-up of the English language, as Latin, a world language, broke up into French and the other Roman languages...

My third object is to identify, if possible, the means by which any desirable improvement can be brought about easily, painlessly and economically... the main difficulty in learning English is the divergence between spelling and pronunciation. The examples are numerous. I intend to mention only one or two of the most notorious. The most quoted points the way to ease of improvement. It is, 'OUGH', as in *bough*, *brought*, *cough*, *plough*, *though*, *through*, *thorough* and many others. The Americans spell *plough* *plow*. We have no difficulty with that. That saves two-thirds, does it not? We could spell *though* as it was spelt in the 18th century — *tho*. That is a saving of 50 per cent...

How do we improve matters? The Americans have again showed the way. Theodore Roosevelt directed that all government writing should be in the new, improved and easier manner. That could be done right away by the government. The Department of Education and Science and its predecessors have been pretty obstructive in the past in this respect. However, the new Minister seems to have come along with a stick of ginger. I hope that the noble Baroness will tell us something about Professor Kingman's new committee which... has to report in 12 months.

The final method I would suggest is that we have a language commission like the Law Commission... A language commission could well carry out wide consultations, circulate green papers, and then put forward recommendations for making our language easier to learn."

Lord Ardwick, as second speaker:

"...I wondered whether he" (Lord Simon of Glaisdale) "meant making English itself easier to learn or simply making it simpler to learn the English language. Did he want to change the language or the learning situation? Was he wanting to impose on us that monstrous spelling reform which was Bernard Shaw's terminal sick joke? This I always regarded as being as dangerous as it is ugly."

Lord Kilbracken said:

"As a former sub-editor... I know the perennial problems that arise in writing English. Hyphenation, the use of capital initials and italicisation are always difficult problems. Is a word ending in the suffix '-ise', spelt I-S-E or I-Z-E?... there are often no hard and fast rules and an ad hoc decision must be made for each publication..."

Lord Elwyn-Jones referred to the Bullock Report:

"The report looked, among other things, at the difficulties of spelling... It concluded that English shares with French the disadvantage of being among the most complex in its spelling pattern. The majority of the committee remain unconvinced — by the case for national reform of the system of spelling for English. They thought the issues too complex and made no recommendations."

Baroness Hooper, for the Government:

"Changes in language and language use take place all the time in a living language but they do so naturally and gradually. I am not convinced that attempts to regulate or direct that process would achieve the desired results. Indeed, I am inclined to think that English would not be as universally spoken as it is if it were not that it is already much more simple and flexible than many other languages.

Even if it were possible to wave a wand and reform or simplify English spelling or grammar across the world, would that be desirable? The richness and variety of the English language are matters of which we are rightly proud, and many people would be sorry to see them lost even in the interests of greater simplicity.

The Government are therefore concentrating their efforts not on trying to change the English language but on trying to improve the way that it is taught...

... the Secretary of State... also regards that as a priority and that is why he has recently established the high level independent committee of inquiry... to advise on what pupils should know about the English language. The committee is chaired by Sir John Kingman, Vice-Chancellor of Bristol University, and has a distinguished membership drawn from education, industry and the arts.

The committee has already invited evidence from anyone with views on how English should be taught in schools, and in particular on the needs of society in present day England as they relate to an individual's ability to communicate in speech and in writing; to the skills of literacy and communications generally needed in a rapidly changing world; and to the training, both initial and in-service, of the country's teachers in relation to those needs.

... adult illiteracy cannot easily be quantified and consequently the available evidence is not always consistent. The National Child Development Study survey of 1981 found that 10 per cent. of 23 year-olds asked said that they had had reading problems since leaving school. Of those, 3 per cent. said that those problems had made things more difficult for them in everyday life. A recent MORI survey of a sample of the population of Rochdale found that 10 per cent. of teenagers asked said that they had some problems with reading and 13 per cent. had some problems with spelling. The findings of the Department of Education and Science's Performance Assessment Unit suggest that only a small minority of pupils aged 15 have great difficulty with reading or writing.

House of Lords, 10 May 1995

SSS Vice-President Lord Simon of Glaisdale was recently involved in exchanges on literacy matters in the House of Lords, as reported in Hansard. We are grateful to Lord Simon for making this material available to us.

Marie Clay Reading Recovery Programme

10 May 1995, questions about the Marie Clay Reading Recovery Programme, supplementary oral question from Lord Simon, with ministerial reply from Lord Lucas:

Lord Simon of Glaisdale: My Lords, would not the reading ability in primary and other schools be greatly improved if we removed some of the more gross anomalies of English spelling? I refer to the 10 different ways of pronouncing "o-u-g-h" and the six different ways of spelling the sound in the word "see". Would not that be of commercial advantage also in removing discouragement to foreign traders learning English?

Lord Lucas: My Lords, I am disappointed that such an elegant and frequent exponent of good English should take that attitude to our wonderful language. I celebrate the complexity of English: I celebrate its enormous variety of words and phrases and means of expressing oneself. It is one of the great strengths of our language. If the noble Lord wants an international commercial language, he may care to learn Esperanto.

16 May 1995, consequential question for written answer and ministerial reply.

Lord Simon of Glaisdale asked Her Majesty's Government:

In the light of the Answer of Lord Lucas on 10th May ("I celebrate the complexity of English" — H.L. Deb. col. 61), whether they consider that the anomalies of English spelling tend on balance to facilitate or hamper the acquisition of reading ability by (a) English schoolchildren and (b) foreign traders.

Lord Lucas: How easily people learn to read English depends on a range of factors. The relative importance of the nature of English spelling would be difficult to ascertain.

English: International Commercial Use

Lord Simon of Glaisdale asked Her Majesty's Government:

In light of the Answer of Lord Lucas on 10th May ("If the noble Lord wants an international commercial language, he may care to learn Esperanto" — H.L. Deb. col. 61), whether it is their view that it is to the advantage of the United Kingdom that English should increasingly develop as an international commercial language, or that Esperanto should be adopted as an acceptable alternative.

Lord Lucas: The increasing use of English for international commerce is likely to benefit the United Kingdom and its people to a greater extent than any increase in the use of Esperanto.

Lord Simon writes:

The above calls for some explanation of Parliamentary practice. At the commencement of business in the House of Lords Members may ask four oral questions in total. These questions are printed in advance. The Government Department concerned drafts a reply for the Minister. It also drafts '*Notes for Supplementaries*' to prepare the Minister for supplementary oral questions which may arise out of the original exchange. But a particular supplementary question may not be foreseen, in which case the Minister has to do his best without departmental guidance. Lord Simon's question was obviously unexpected; and Lord Lucas gave his own opinion.

In addition to oral questions members may table questions for written answer; the answers are drafted by the Department, though tabled in the name of the Minister. Lord Simon took an immediate opportunity to question the oral answers he had received. The Department was obviously embarrassed by the questions; and was unusually prompt in answering them, thus removing them from the order paper as soon as possible.

The answer to the second question was a retraction of Lord Lucas' oral answer. The answer to the first is a characteristic piece of disingenuousness of the Department for Education (which should really be called "the Department for Illiteracy"). The reason why we are ignorant of the degree to which the anomalies of English spelling conduce to difficulties in learning to read is because the DfE have prevented our knowledge of it. The terms of reference of the Bullock and Kingman Committees were carefully drawn to preclude their examining the matter. And, extraordinarily, the Department, while expressing concern about bad spelling, have not even bothered to find out what words are commonly misspelt: that might provide material for the SSS.