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Mill, John Stuart
speech at the National
Education League meeting.

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SPEECH
BY
JOHN STUART MILL, Esq.,

AT THE
National Education League Meeting,

AT ST. JAMES'S HALL, LONDON, MARCH 25, 1870.

THE Resolution which has been moved relates to a defect which, as the Bill was originally drawn, was its greatest blot: and even after the great concessions—for they are great concessions—which we may now consider to have been made by the Government, enough of evil remains to demand a strong protest. Though there are many other things in the Bill that we wish altered, those other defects are chiefly of the nature of shortcomings: what is done we approve, but [we wish that it were done more thoroughly: the difference between what the Bill gives and what we desire is the difference between good and better, but in the present case it is the difference between good and bad. The Bill does not simply halt and hang back in the path of good, it does positive evil; it introduces a new religious inequality. Even the alterations that are promised leave untouched a great part of the evil for they leave the whole of its principle. Teachers are still to be employed and paid by the entire community to teach the religion of a part. True, this is now to be done out of school hours, and I would by no means depreciate the value of this concession. I should be glad to forget as soon as possible what the Bill would have been without it. Though brought in by a Government which has earned such high distinction as the destroyer of religious inequality in Ireland, a more effectual plan could scarcely have been devised by the strongest champion of ecclesiastical ascendancy for enabling the clergy of the Church of England to educate the children of the greater part of England and Wales in their own religion at the expense of the public. Hitherto instruction has only been given to those who asked for it, but we are now going (at least we hope so) to teach every child; and the Bill gave up to the local bodies, which in the rural districts means the squire and the parson, all the neglected children—the children of all who care little about religion, of all who are dependent, of all who are under obligations for charitable offices, of all who are too timid to risk displeasing their superiors by sending in a solemn refusal in writing to do what they are wanted to do. And because the Nonconformists would

not stand this they were told (but I must do the Government the justice to say, not by them) that their motive could not be religious or political principle, but could only be unworthy sectarian jealousy. By the promised concessions this blot is in great part—I wish I could even now say entirely—taken out of the Bill. But the principle remains of teaching the religion of a part with funds raised by taxation from the whole; and a measure infected by this bad principle cannot be satisfactory to any but persons of the dominant creed, nor to impartial persons of any creed.

It is true we may be told that the Dissenters can teach their own doctrines if they please and in the school-buildings too. They can, if, after deducting the school hours and the extra hours set apart for Church teaching, sufficient time remains; but they must pay the whole expense and their share of the cost of the Church-teaching besides. We may be told too that in places where the Dissenters are the strongest it will be they and not the Church that will be enabled to teach their own doctrines at other peoples' expense. As if an injustice in one place were cured by an injustice in another. But this permission to be unjust in their turn, wherever they are strong enough, the Dissenters are so extremely unreasonable as not to value. It is well known that they do not desire their distinctive doctrines to be taught in schools; and, indeed, there are probably few places in which any one denomination is sufficiently numerous to make this easily practicable. The system deliberately chosen by the Dissenters is that of the British schools, where religious teaching is limited to reading the Bible without note or comment. Besides, we know that the practical strength of the Dissenters is in the large towns, or districts equivalent to towns; where they happen to be in a majority anywhere else, we see by the example of Wales how little it avails them. But in large towns, even where the Dissenters are the strongest, the Church party is sure to be strong enough to reduce them to a compromise and make the Boards either subsidize existing Church schools, or, if they make use of the power the Bill gives them of founding others, to found a Church school by the side of every unsectarian one. So that the Church party will probably in no single instance, be in that position of victims, which it is supposed ought to be so great a consolation to the Dissenters for being victims in three-fourths of the Kingdom. Another thing that is said is that what we complain of as a new grievance exists already: by the national grants in aid of denominational schools we are all of us taxed for teaching religions not our own. Well, perhaps there are some of us who might have a good deal to say against this too as a permanent institution, and who live in hope of its ultimate absorption into something which they can more thoroughly approve. But we are not going now to begin this system; it exists. When it was first introduced nothing better

could have been obtained ; and it still does good, though we may learn—if we do not already know it—from Mr Mundella's speech, how sadly the result falls short of the claims made for it.

But we do not desire to destroy what we have got until we have replaced it by something better. The worst feature of the system, the bigotted refusal of aid to secular schools is to be abandoned ; and the Bill provides that if the Boards, instead of founding new schools, elect to subsidize the old, they must subsidize all denominations impartially, secular schools, I hope, included. For this the framers of the Bill are entitled to our cordial thanks. But it is puzzling to find such opposite principles acted on in different parts of the same Bill, and such different measure meted out to the old schools and to the new. It looks like the result of a compromise between two parties in the Government, on the plan of giving something to each, the sort of thing in short which makes our legislation the jumble of inconsistencies that it is.

Some have the face to tell us that the ratepayer after all is not taxed for the religious instruction, for the rate is so limited by the Bill that he in reality only pays for the secular teaching. Indeed ! Then who does pay for the religious teaching ? Do the Church party intend to raise the money by voluntary subscription. The *Times* of last Monday throws out a suggestion of the kind : if one could hope that it would be adopted I should not have another word to say ; except indeed, that since, after Mr Gladstone's concessions the religious is no longer to be mixed up with the secular teaching, it may as well be given by a different person altogether, when the impartiality would be complete. But if the expense is not paid by subscription it must be paid by the Privy Council, that is by the taxpayer. And do not Dissenters pay taxes ? Is there a conscience clause for the tax gatherer ?

One more thing is said which might well amaze any one who is not past being astonished at any of the tricks that are played with words. We are told that in our care for the conscience of the minority, we violate that of the majority who conscientiously disapprove of schools in which religion is not taught. Now, if what their conscience objects to is sending their own children to such schools, there is no compulsion, they are free to found schools of their own. It is necessary to say this, for the principal supporters of the Bill in the House of Commons did not appear to be aware of it ; they seemed never to have heard of such an idea ; they charged us with expelling religion from the schools as if there were no schools to be had but those supported by rates ; as if we were proposing to prohibit all schools except secular ones, or to throw some great obstacle in their way ; while all we demand is, that those who make use of the religious teaching shall pay for it

themselves instead of taxing others to do it. So that the conscientious scruple which we are accused of violating is a scruple not against going without the religious instruction but against paying for it, and their conscience requires them to get it paid for by other people. Is not this a singular spectacle of the richest and most powerful part of the nation, who with two thirds of their expenses sure to be paid by the Privy Council or the School Rate, cannot bear to do what the smallest denomination of Dissenters cheerfully does—pay for their own religious teaching? But is not this precisely *because* they are the rich and powerful? The poor and weak never dream of throwing their personal pecuniary obligations upon the public. It is a privilege only sought by those who do not need it, but who think they have a right to it because they have always had the power to exact it. But it seems some of these people have a conscience so extremely delicate that it is wounded, not if their own children, but if any other people's children, attend schools in which religion is not taught. The bare existence of a secular school within the country, at least with aid from the State, is a burden on their consciences, as the existence of heretics was on the conscience of the Grand Inquisitor. And we, because we decline to defer to this remarkable conscientious scruple, disregard the rights of conscience! But the rights of conscience do not extend to imposing our own conscience as a rule upon somebody else. I daresay we should be told, if it were anyone's interest to affirm it, that we are no lovers of liberty because we do not permit kings to take the liberty of hanging or guillotining people at their pleasure. But the liberty we stand up for is the equal liberty of all, and not the greatest possible liberty of one, and slavery of all the rest. There ought to be room in the world for more than one man's liberty; and there ought to be room in the world for more than one conscience. Let all parties have what religious teaching their conscience approves and they are willing to pay for. But when a man tells me his conscience requires that other people shall have religious teaching whether they like it or not, and shall have it in schools though they would prefer having it elsewhere, and shall not be helped like other people with their secular teaching unless they consent to accept religious teaching along with it, I tell him that he is not asserting his own freedom of conscience but trampling on that of other people. If this is a right of conscience it was bigotry and prejudice to complain of the persecutions of the Vaudois and of the Protestants. The case is less flagrant but the principle is the same.



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