

and noblest of all purposes—that of instructing the great mass of the people, and raising them up to the position to which they have a right to aspire, and which God intends them to occupy. Up to thirty years ago, we had no pretence even to a system of general education. The voluntary system, as it is called, because it had no organization, was shewn to have entirely failed. There were many persons who thought it needless or dangerous to educate the working classes. Less than a hundred years ago, Dr. Johnson said something of this kind—that it was a very difficult thing to say how far the education of the masses of the people might be carried with a view to their own advantage, and to the safety of those above them. There was a general impression that some things which men consider venerable, I suppose because they are old, might not be safe if the people were so far instructed as to be able fairly to examine them, and particularly to look at their foundations. But thirty years ago an effort was made—a small and feeble effort. It was small and feeble to a great extent because the party to which we are opposed resisted the attempt. But an attempt was made by the distribution of funds voted by Parliament to establish or encourage the establishment of schools in many parts of the country. The system had one great source of weakness. It proposed only to give money to districts where money was already raised; and, therefore, in those districts which are poorest, in which there are no rich and benevolent men willing to give—to those districts the hand of the Government did not reach; and the poorest of all, the most needy of all, were left unprovided for in this system of Government education. I put it to the heart and head of every man here, whether, during the last thirty years, far less has not been done than should have been done, and whether much more does not remain to be done than has ever yet been attempted. Shall I be mistaken in the prediction, that within three years after the extension of the franchise we should have some attempt to establish a grand system of education throughout the kingdom?

“Cannot we apply to the ignorance of the people some scheme of great reform, which all men shall think worth attempting and accepting, and which all men shall feel will, if established and adopted, change the whole face and the whole character of large portions of the population, within another or a succeeding generation? What do people do in other countries? I will not go into the particulars of some of the German States, or what is done in Prussia, or what is done in Switzerland. But I might say what was done in some of the Australian colonies, and what has been done for generations in the New England States. I will suppose that our counties are too irregular in size and population,—too extensive, many of them,—to form anything like a well-working municipality for purposes of education. Our parishes are so irregular also, in extent and population, that they probably would not be a good division of the country for this purpose. But we have Poor-law unions, which probably might afford a basis for the establishment of such a system as I would recommend. Every ratepayer now in a burgh has a vote; every ratepayer in a poor-law union has, or might have, a vote. What should prevent the passing of a law to enable the ratepayers of every poor law union to elect a certain number of their residents as a school committee, for the purpose of undertaking the great work of establishing in the local district the general system of education to which we are approaching? If a committee were appointed, I presume it would be chosen from the intelligent and earnest men of the district. They could easily have a map of the union. The population is known. Every school now existing might be marked upon this map, and it would easily be seen where there is a deficiency of schools. Then there comes the question of funds. It would be possible for the Act of Parliament to give the school committee so elected power to borrow a sufficient sum of money, within a reasonable time, to put up sufficient buildings for schoolhouses, and to levy from all the property of the district a sufficient rate to repay in time the money borrowed, and at the same time to support the schools. But I shall be asked what I would do with the present schools.

I would leave them at present as they are. They would work on, doing their meritorious work, and without interfering with any of the new schools which would be created. But the new system would fill up every gap, would supply every want, would fill up every system which is now meagre and poor to the last degree; and the schools established by this new law would be able to furnish the other schools with all the implements of instruction, such as books and maps, in a manner so complete and so admirable, and the schools thus established would be in all points so good, that gradually all disinclination on the part of friends of the present schools would vanish; and I look to the time,—and not at a remote period,—when all the existing schools,—I am speaking now of schools more for the working classes than for the richer people,—would be given up to the new and general system, until at last the whole education of the country would be placed under the general, broad system of district or municipal management. Every man who paid would have the greatest interest in the school being well managed, and every working man whose children attended the school would look upon it as the very saviour of his family from so many disasters which now happen; and I believe it would be impossible to devise anything which would be of greater and more permanent value to the whole population of the kingdom. I recollect, some years ago, speaking to the American Minister, who was the son and the grandson of Presidents of the United States, and he received his education in their common schools. The material by which their education is conveyed,—their books, and so on,—very far exceed anything we know of. The best school books we have are those prepared by the National Board of Education in Ireland, but the educational school books of New England, which I have examined are, on the whole, superior to them. I do not underrate the difficulty of doing in this country all that we want for education. There is always difficulty in great achievements; there is great difficulty in every great step which the nation makes forward; but, though there be a difficulty, is it one that we cannot surmount? And if you look forward and behold all the population, brought up two, or three, or four years in good schools of this kind, let me ask you, fathers of families,—and if your wives were here I would ask them, mothers of your families,—whether a better system of instruction for your children would not be of incalculable advantage to them and even to you? I may be told that the great difficulty is called the religious difficulty. Perhaps it is. But that is a difficulty which every day is lessening. (1)

“Possibly some persons may think that there are rates enough, and to add a school rate would be only to add burden to burden. But let me remind you that, as the school rate would rise if it were well employed, the poor rate and the criminal rate would fall. Every man in the kingdom knows perfectly well that the want of instruction is the cause of a very large amount of the intemperance, the profligacy, the idleness, the poverty, and the crime by which our country is disfigured. Besides, we all know that those who have property would always feel not only that their property was more secure, but that it was more valuable, in the midst of an instructed population. We should not so often hear from judges and from associations established for the purpose of promoting education, with regard to the crime and suffering which are found in our towns. We are a great people now, but how much greater should we be then! We are a people of great wealth, but how much greater would our wealth, be then! For every instructed man is twice the instrument for the production of wealth that an uninstructed man is, and the enormous waste which is caused in this country by the recklessness and idleness, and the intemperance of the uninstructed is incalculable. I take this opportunity to make this statement because I feel, I think, a greater responsibility with regard to the course taken by the great constituencies probably than most other men in this country. I am told by my friends that I

(1) Mr. Bright of course refers to England.