

CONTEMPORARY OPINION ON EDUCATIONAL TOPICS.

WHAT IS POSSIBLE AND IMPOSSIBLE IN SPELLING REFORM.

The recent Conference on Spelling Reform brought out several suggestions that were reasonable and useful, and some that were as wild as the most disordered dreams. Let us try and discriminate what is possible and desirable from what is neither. In the first place, it is clearly possible and desirable for a competent body of men—which should consist of linguists or lexicographers—to make recommendations as to the best of the two alternatives of spelling words which custom spells in one of several ways. A list of words with two or more spellings, accompanied by advice as to which to prefer, and where it might be possible, the reason of such advice, would be a very important service rendered to the public,—though why it should be rendered by a Royal Commission, and not rather by a voluntary association of men, we cannot understand. A Royal Commission is not usually appointed without at least the intention of legislative or administrative reform. Nobody would think of appointing a Royal Commission to decide on the most economical sort of stove, or the best proportion between animal and vegetable food. What is wanted is, we suppose, that the mode of spelling authorized by the tribunal shall be subsequently enforced at all the Government primary schools, but then that might be just as well effected without a Royal Commission. The Inspectors of schools are really the final authorities in this matter, and they would follow, of course, the instructions laid down for them in the Department. All that is needed is that the Department should be guided by a reasonable amount of evidence as to the rule of spelling-orthodoxy they should prefer where various modes of spelling were in question, and we doubt exceedingly whether any Royal Commission nominated by the Government would do the work half as well

as a small Committee of lexicographers, appointed with reasonable judgment, and paid for their literary labours by a judicious publisher,—who would be well reimbursed in his turn by the large sale which a well-drawn-up report on the best mode of spelling words now habitually spelt in more than one way, would certainly secure from schools and teachers. The next suggestion which seems to us perfectly reasonable was that adopted by Sir Charles Reed, in his speech at Tuesday's evening meeting, that for the purpose of teaching children to spell, books should be used in which the unpronounced letters are printed differently, so that the child learns at once both that they are not sounded, and that they are to be found in the written language. For instance, in such words as "reign" and "deign," "resign," "assign," etc., the *g* would be printed in the peculiar type assigned to unpronounced letters. There may be many other suggestions as to the special books used for the teaching of spelling which would be equally useful, and equally mark at once the true pronunciation and the true mode of writing the word.

But what bewilders us in this Conference is, first, Sir Charles Reed's suggestion that "legislation" is to follow; and next Mr. Lowe's astounding proposal, insisting that fifteen new letters (a number reduced by a subsequent speaker to fourteen) should be somehow or other added to the English language, in order that every distinct sound might have a distinct letter to itself. As for Sir Charles Reed's suggestion, to what legislation does he point? Of course he means something beyond a mere Minute of the Education Department, or he would not speak of legislation. Does he want every newspaper which spells "honour" with or without a *u*,—it does not matter which,—after the authority appointed has decided for the opposite spelling, to be summoned before a Court of summary jurisdiction, and fined a shilling and costs? Or does he want to issue