

THE PUBLIC SCHOOL QUESTION

By GOLDWIN SMITH

IN addressing the school teachers the other day at the Normal School, Toronto, I disclosed what I fear would be generally regarded as the scandalous fact that I was not a thorough-going believer in the system of State Schools.

I had once an opportunity of hearing this great subject specially well discussed. The British Parliament, having, after some tentative efforts through the agency of the Privy Council, decided to take up in earnest the whole question of national education, a Commission was in 1858 appointed to investigate the subject and to prepare a scheme for the consideration of Parliament. Of that Commission I was a member, being appointed, I believe, specially to deal with the charitable foundations, the report on which was consigned to my hands. The Chairman was the Duke of Newcastle, whose name the Commission commonly bears. The other Commissioners were men who represented sections of opinion. A question cannot be debated better than by such a conclave having a practical object of great importance in view, and unrestrained by the presence of reporters. The result in my mind was a leaning in favour of the parental and Voluntary against the State system. That view was embodied in a paper which was signed by one member of the Commission besides myself, and now slumbers among the archives of the Home Office. Being outvoted, we waived our dissent and concurred with our colleagues in carrying on the investigation and submitting recommendations to Parliament. Being the junior member of the Commission and the only one free from engrossing avoca-

tions elsewhere, I did much of the general work and became pretty well posted in details.

The impression which I then formed in favour of the Voluntary system I have always retained, though the State system was so completely established that I saw no use in saying anything about it or in declining to act under it when called upon. In this spirit I accepted the honour tendered me by the Public School Teachers of this Province of representing them in the Council of Instruction. The Council was abruptly dissolved by the Ontario Government in consequence of a collision between it and the Chief Superintendent arising out of an appointment made by the Council to the headship of a Normal School. The incident was one which seemed to throw a sidelight on the liabilities of the State system in its connection with party government, as does that chronic dispute about the school books from which the Voluntary system would be free.

Natural right and duty may on occasion be superseded by State necessity, as in time of public exigency or peril. But they must always be the general basis of institutions, and always demand recognition. It is apparently the natural duty of every man to educate as well as to feed and clothe the children that he brings into the world; nor has he any natural right to cast this duty on his neighbour or on the community at large. It is not in accordance with natural justice that the man who has prudently deferred marriage till he was able to support a family should pay for the imprudence of the man who has brought into the world a family which he is unable to support. On the other hand,