

ACCESS TO SCHOOL MEALS: THE CONSTRAINTS OF PERMISSIVE LEGISLATION

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School-meals schemes in Ireland were examined to ascertain how and why the schemes came into being, how they were administered in the past and are being administered at present, and what needs they were set up to meet and are meeting today. Basing the schemes on permissive rather than on mandatory legislation clearly has proved a major impediment to their development, since successive government ministers have denied being accountable for their organization or for the quality of the food provided. Thus, the urban-based scheme established in 1914 has remained virtually unaltered and provision for meals in rural areas, introduced in 1930, is severely restricted to specific areas of the Gaeltacht. Entitlement and funding procedures remain separate from those applicable to social assistance services in general. There is a dearth of information as to entitlement procedures or the assessment of means. The absence of a system for the redress of grievances is also noted.

PROVISION FOR SCHOOL MEALS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

School meals were made available in urban areas in Ireland under the Education (Provision of Meals) (Ireland) Act, 1914 (7), which was closely modelled on the British Education (Provision of Meals) Act, 1906 (6). Since the Irish legislation was neither debated in the House of Commons nor the House of Lords, a brief resumé of pertinent British parliamentary proceedings and government reports seems appropriate to assist the delineation of the historical, social and economic climate in which the idea of provision for the meals took root.

The low nutritional intake of many schoolgoing children was a recurrent theme in debate in the British House of Commons towards the close of the nineteenth century (4, p. 137). A heavy burden was placed upon parents by the school fee of two to three pence per week which was payable for each pupil at that period, with the result that food often had

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to take second place in the family budget. Writers such as Marshall (72, p. 41) have noted that some children would have had to forego all semblance of a formal education had not the public rallied to their aid with gifts of food.

Elementary education became free in England under the Elementary Education Act, 1891 (10), yet the London School Board in 1898 received disquieting reports of an estimated 35,000 children being undernourished within that city and recommended that each child should be provided with a school meal either on a contributory basis or free of charge. The scheme was to be similar to that set up by the Paris Conseil Municipal in 1881, whereby copper counters were handed out to 'needy scholars' while others contributed a payment. The meals then were served without distinction as to financial status (13, cols 786-788). In 1903, a Scottish Commission recommended that school boards should set up a contributory scheme for the provision of meals where voluntary bodies had proved unequal to the task* (19). It was noted in parliament that the neighbouring countries of France, Germany and Norway already had introduced the necessary legislation. France had an interesting system of partially funding the meals by collections which were carried out at all public weddings (13, col. 787). But the British government remained reluctant to introduce any measure which would entail an increase in the level of taxation, and, it was only in the wake of the important findings of the *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration*, 1904 (18) that the legislature was galvanized into action. This committee, under the chairmanship of Mr Almeric Fitzroy, had been set up in response to national concern about the alarming rate of rejection of potential recruits for the Boer War 1899-1902 (stated to be 34.6% in 1898). The well known names of Mr C. Booth, Mr S. Rowntree, Mr C. S. Loch, and Dr A. Chalmers were among the sixty-eight witnesses from whom evidence was taken. Dr D. Kelly, Roman Catholic Bishop of Ross, when interviewed about the state of affairs then existing in Ireland, held that many people there only married 'at the onset of physical senile decay'.

* A number of private schemes in London were co-ordinated by the Joint Committee on Underfed Children. Southwark had the Children's Free Meals Fund. Manchester the Free Feeding System and Glasgow the Poor Children's Dinner Table. A scheme in Edinburgh was based on the principle of 'less eligibility' where only such a meal was given as would not compete in any way with that which could be provided in the poorest home.

when they were really getting past the age of reproduction, and the members marvelled at such 'extraordinary powers of continence and self-restraint'. A decline in physical standards was attributed to these late marriages and also to a reduction in the consumption of milk and potatoes, to a disinclination towards breast feeding and an increase in the incidence of tuberculosis. The population loss through emigration was blamed for 'fatal effects upon the physique of the people by the withdrawal of the strongest and best types, thus leaving it to the less able-bodied to reproduce their kind and carry on the race' (18, p. 565).

Despite the recitation of a dismal chronicle of dreariness and deprivation, the committee in its final conclusions, however, did not acknowledge any deterioration in the health of the population of the British Isles as a whole, but lamented the fact that the calling of a soldier had ceased to attract the 'class of men' who formerly had enlisted. The effect which the love of amusement was having on the people, especially amusement in the form of 'cheap excitement', the desire for 'some form of sensation', was considered to be a root cause of the withdrawal from working class budgets of the money which should have been spent on the purchase of food. Nonetheless, the members declared themselves 'not insensible of much that was grave in the state of things disclosed' and stated firmly that the preparation and cooking of school meals should be one of the charges incidental to school management.

The Report evoked a great deal of interest in parliament, especially in relation to the provision of school meals and a bill for their provision in England and Wales was sponsored by the Labour back benches when the party gained strength during the Liberal landslide of 1906.

Mr J. Slack, MP, in enthusiastically espousing the cause, quoted Elizabeth Browning, 'they looked up with their pale and sunken faces and their looks were sad to see', in condemning the cruelty of attempting to enforce instruction on those poor children who were on the verge of starvation. He admonished his colleagues against 'turning a deaf ear to the cry of these hungry little ones', and concluded his speech with a stirring appeal:

The future of the Empire, the triumph in social progress and freedom of the British race depended not so much in the strengthening of the Army as upon fortifying the children of the State for the battle of life (14, col. 78).

Mr C Hay, MP, attacked the school of thought which considered it more important to drive home a sense of responsibility in the parents than to concern oneself with the undernourishment of their children, and, in an advanced idea for his time, found a positive link between the quality of physical nourishment and the level of intellectual attainment. Not every member, however, was converted to the advisability of state incursion into this domain. The President of the Board of Trade declared that the phrase 'the children of the state' grated on his ear. 'The State could not have any children. The mace on the table might as well beguile its ample leisure by the hope of a child' (15, cols 531-532).

Sir G Bartley, MP, had 'kindly feelings' towards the poor and said that he had devoted much of his life to the encouragement of thrift and self reliance among them. In his view, their mental, moral, and social deterioration from gin and horse-racing was of much more concern than was any decline in physical standards and he feared that the foolish concessions of the 'free fooders' would lead to the absolute destruction of the whole social fabric. Sir F Bunbury, MP, thought that the proposed legislation would lead to improvident marriages and warned that this giving in to the feeding of school children, in addition to their already established right to free education, would end up with the taxpayer being obliged even to clothe and shelter them.

Lord Balfour of Burleigh, equating poverty with weak familial bonds, believed that any measures which were designed to assist the children with food would tend to disintegrate family life still further, while Mr H Cox, MP, considered that it would be necessary in extreme cases of drunkenness or other serious vice to remove the children altogether from their homes. Usually, however, it would be sufficient to 'screw up' the parents to a realization of their duty. He believed that

the simplest way of accomplishing that object and certainly the least expensive, would be to placard the doors of the houses of parents who wilfully sent their children to school underfed, with the simple announcement these people send their children to school without feeding them (16, cols 1414-1415).

Sir H Craik, MP, sounded a solemn warning on the dangers of lighting up 'the fantastic fireworks of socialism', but the eloquence of Dr McNamara, an acknowledged expert in the field who had produced much first hand evidence about the misfortunate home conditions of many working class

children, finally won the day:

Charity fluctuated, it was never certain ... Imperialism began at home ... They were thinking imperially now when they thought of the poor little scraps of humanity on whose rickety shoulders the burden of the Empire would in future rest ... They must not only sing Rule Britannia, but they must weave the chorus into every clause of our social statutes for the betterment of the people (17, col. 1425).

Education (Provision of Meals) Act, 1906 England

Ultimately, a statutory scheme for the provision of school meals came into existence under the Education (Provision of Meals) Act, 1906 (6). This was permissive in character and applied only to England and Wales. Scotland originally had been included but was struck out in the House of Lords on the grounds that there was no necessity for such a measure there. This action was described by the Prime Minister as the strongest case of the inversion of authority on these constitutional matters that they had ever seen, but rather than risk its final defeat the angry MPs decided to save the bill for England and reluctantly voted it into law.

The scheme was remarkably innovative for the period in its extension of the role of government into the area of parental responsibility and in the elimination of any question as to the character of the claimants' families in the requirements for eligibility. Furthermore, the penalty of disfranchisement was not to be incurred by the parents of those children who qualified for eligibility.

Considerable discussion took place as to the most appropriate system for the scheme's administration. Although there was a groundswell of support for relying on the services of a voluntary body on the principle that people might less readily misrepresent their case to such an organization than to public officials, the weight of opinion finally came down in favour of the local education authority. Public expenditure on the scheme was to be limited to a sum which was equal to a halfpenny on the rates and a contribution also could be levied from every parent unless unable by reason of circumstances 'other than his own default' to manage this payment.

To judge by subsequent comment in the House of Commons, the children who were receiving these daily school meals in England and Wales soon showed a remarkable degree of improvement in their state of health.

PROVISION FOR SCHOOL MEALS IN IRELAND

It is not clear why Ireland was omitted from the 1906 Act nor why her members of parliament were markedly silent on such an important social issue. As the irrepressible Tim Healy proclaimed on another occasion, Irish children often had to take second place although 'the Catholic convict, the Catholic pauper, the Catholic soldier and even the Catholic corpse is looked after with extraordinary punctilio by the great Parliament of England (18, col 1530)

It seems possible that a stumbling block was created by the contentious issue of state intrusion into the area of parental responsibility. The evidence of the Bishop of Ross to the Inter Departmental Committee lends some substance to this hypothesis, since he considered that any state measures to remedy the plight of the large number of underfed children in Ireland would weaken the sense of self respect and self reliance of both parent and child (18, pp 409-420)

For a number of years, organizations such as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and the Mansion House Fund had been active in regard to the feeding of poor children and Sir Roger Casement, as a private effort, had initiated a scheme to feed the pupils of schools in the districts around Carraroe, County Mayo (20, p 81). The situation became particularly arduous when the great lock-out strike occurred in 1913. The House of Commons was informed that funds had poured into the charitable committees which charged themselves with the work of feeding school children, but that this interest had dropped at the conclusion of the strike — 'an extremely good illustration of the impossibility of relying altogether upon voluntary effort' (13, col 757). This depressing situation possibly was a factor in bringing matters to a head, for, in the following year, eight years after the passing of the original British Act, a group of Irish members presented a bill to the House of Commons for the inauguration of a school-meals service in their own country. Since this latest legal measure made its appearance at a precarious moment for Great Britain on the brink of the first world war, it is possibly not surprising that it passed through both the upper and lower houses of parliament without any discussion whatever.

Education (Provision of Meals) (Ireland) Act, 1914

The Irish scheme for the provision of meals in national schools in urban areas was limited to a two-year period of operation but was renewed

before this period had expired (8). The legislation was permissive in character and was almost a facsimile of the provisions of the 1906 British Act.

If the scheme existed in a school all of its pupils were entitled to the meals. If not, no pupil was so entitled even where the financial circumstances of his or her family were particularly adverse. The parents of a child in any participating national school were to be charged 'for every meal furnished to that child under this Act such an amount as may be determined by the local authority' (7, s.21). This contribution could be waived in cases of hardship, i.e., for those children who were 'unable by reason of lack of food to take full advantage of the education provided for them' (7, s.3), but responsibility to determine which of the children were too hungry to learn was not vested in any person or organization, nor was any format made available for a declaration of means.

Responsibility for the inauguration of the scheme in any particular national school was vested in the local authority which was defined as an urban district council, including a county borough council. Town Commissioners some years later were included under the Education (Provision of Meals) (Amendment) Act, 1930 (25).

Teachers could not be required as part of their duties 'to supervise, or assist, or to abstain from supervising or assisting in the provision of meals, or in the collection of the cost thereof' (7, s.6). The substance of the meals was not defined.

For the purposes of provision of the meals, local authorities could associate themselves with any committee on which they already were represented. They had power to assist these committees by furnishing 'such building, furniture and apparatus, and such officers and servants as may be necessary for the organisation, preparation and service of such meals ... on days when the school meets and on other days' (7, s.1(b)).

The local authority was to decide what proportion of the money which had been collected from parents would represent the cost of the food furnished by the committee to the child of that parent and was to reimburse the committee to this extent, less a reasonable reduction in respect of the expenses incurred in its collection.

A parent unable by reason of circumstances, 'other than his own

default', to pay the amount could be relieved of the charge or the payment could be recovered as a civil debt. Where funds raised privately proved to be insufficient, the local authority could seek permission from the Local Government Board for Ireland to contribute towards the cost of the service the sum of money which was yielded by one halfpenny per annum raised on the rates.

No mechanism was provided through which a parent could appeal against the failure of any authority to introduce the scheme, nor against the assessment of means.

The Scheme in Operation, 1914-1930

In 1916, the sum of one halfpenny which could be levied on the rates was doubled (8) and, in the following year, a matching fund principle was introduced whereby one half of local authority expenditure would be refunded from the Exchequer (9) – an interesting example of the growing rôle of central authority in the financing of the social services. The scheme was a subject of little discussion in the early years of Dail Éireann. The Minister for Local Government and Public Health, General R. Mulcahy TD, complained in 1927 that only twenty-two out of seventy urban authorities were carrying out the provisions of the legislation, despite having repeatedly had their attention drawn to these enactments (32, col. 1047). In some instances, a service actually had been established but had fallen into abeyance because of the disturbed political times.

The Department advised the local authorities that the manager of each national school 'should be invited to suggest the nature of the food to be supplied' (54). The meal which was offered by the participating authorities varied between Irish stew and soup, cocoa, currant buns, bread, butter, margarine and jam (58, p. 46). School managers and teachers were said to bear repeated testimony to the beneficial effects of the midday meal in stimulating 'renewed alertness and mental activity' (60, p. 54) and the existence of the service also was believed to have secured 'a more regular attendance on the part of the poorer children who under ordinary circumstances are responsible for the bulk of the absences marked in the school registers' (60, p. 47).

PROVISION FOR SCHOOL MEALS IN GAELTACHT AREAS

The problem of a lack of provision of food for the children in country areas rapidly accelerated in the 1920s because of the considerable extent

of rural unemployment and because of the enforcement of compulsory school attendance. Under the Irish Education Act, 1892, (12) compulsory attendance at school had been introduced for children aged between six and fourteen years on at least seventy-five days in each half-year in all cities and towns; this legislation was permissive for rural areas. The School Attendance Act, 1926 (23), required compulsory attendance on all school days for children aged between six and fourteen years in all parts of the country. It was alleged in Dáil Éireann that some of the parents who could not provide their children with clothing and nourishment were threatened with prosecution for their non-attendance at school and that in a number of homes there were no means whatever of cooking a meal. The Minister for Local Government and Public Health, General R. Mulcahy TD, considered that there was insufficient demand for the extension of the scheme on a country-wide basis, although it was not clear how he expected that those families who required the meals might articulate this need. The government's hand was forced in the matter, however, when the turf yield was almost a total loss in 1924 and 1925, and the potato crop was well below average, with the result that

a large percentage of the crop that had been garnered had rotted in the pits, so that most congests and small holders in the western countries ... had no means of cooking even the meagre supplies which were available (57, p. 61).

An emergency extension of the existing legislation was organized in 1925 for the provision of a hot meal in the national schools of Counties Donegal, Galway, and Kerry, and parts of Mayo and Waterford, at a cost of £7,830. The Department of Local Government and Public Health proudly pointed out the contrast between this provision and the paltry relief measures during the famine of 1879 which had had to be undertaken by voluntary charitable organizations without material aid from the government of the time. These emergency measures were discontinued in 1926, but the campaign to make provision for a statutory school-meals scheme in the rural areas was to receive a very effective boost one year later through the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry into the Preservation of the Gaeltacht.

The Commission had been set up under the chairmanship of General R. Mulcahy* in order to recommend the establishment of a Gaeltacht

* Other members were: P. Ó'Cadhlá, P. Baxter TD, P. Ó'Siocfhradha (An Seabhac), J. Hanly, M. Ó'Tighearnaigh TD, L. Moriarty, An tAthair S. MacCuinnigeain, S. Ó hEochadha (An Fear Mór).

region The areas selected were to be further divided into Fíor Ghaeltacht and Breach-Ghaeltacht districts according to the extent to which Irish was the spoken language of the majority of the population An investigation was carried out by local teachers and clergymen on behalf of the Commission in order to discover the percentage of Irish speakers in each county and these pockets of gaelic proficiency were found very largely to coincide with the congested districts which had been selected in 1891 on the basis of the poverty of the inhabitants (51, p 27) * The Commission recommended that

where 80 per cent or more of the population of a district is Irish speaking the district be regarded as an Irish speaking district, regardless of the extent to which English may have an ascendancy in daily use under the circumstances of today, and that where not less than 25 per cent and not more than 79 per cent of the population of any district is Irish speaking, it can be regarded as a partly Irish speaking district (51, p 6)

In undertaking the task of ascertaining the extent of the area to be known as the Gaeltacht, the Commission also was asked to examine the educational facilities of such districts and to suggest any steps that should be taken to improve the economic condition of the inhabitants The members were much concerned by the discovery that many school children had to travel long distances over bleak country and the hardships thereby suffered, particularly in the winter time, were such as to render them unfit to profit to the fullest extent by the education given As a result, the inauguration of a scheme of daily meals in national schools was recommended where the managers and teachers considered that such provision was necessary The establishment of twenty five secondary schools throughout the Gaeltacht was proposed for the benefit of boys and girls between twelve and sixteen years of age who desired a better literary education or who intended to seek an industrial employment or to pursue advanced studies and the meals were to be made available in these schools also The question of requiring the satisfaction of a means test for the service was firmly rejected

* Purchase of Land (Ireland) Act 1891 (11) whereby the total rateable valuation of each electoral division was divided by the numbers of persons in that division If this resulted in a sum of less than £1 10 0 per individual for more than 10% of the population then the electoral division was defined as a congested district

The commission for the Relief of the Sick and Destitute Poor, including the Insane Poor, which also reported in 1927, drew attention to the merits of school meals as an important preventive health measure and lamented the low take-up rate of the existing scheme (52, p. 78). The combined effect of these key reports on important social issues enkindled sufficient zeal in several deputies to press the government into the enactment of special legislation; this took the form of a school-meals scheme for certain areas of the newly-defined Gaeltacht and provided an opportunity for the first Dáil debate on the subject.

The new legislation was steered through the Dáil and Senate by Mr F. Lynch TD, Minister for Lands and Fisheries, with whose department at that time lay responsibility for the Gaeltacht region. He withstood all entreaties to extend the scope of the legislation over the entire Gaeltacht area, explaining that those parts which had been included had been identified by a committee representing the Departments of Education, Lands and Fisheries, Agriculture, and Local Government and Public Health. The inspectors of each department had been 'going into the poorest districts and into the types of school in which they can judge things for themselves' (33, col. 1049), and had submitted their findings to the Minister. Mr Lynch proposed that a scheme of free school meals should be established in the locations which had been chosen by the inspectors, because the conditions of the people there were so bad, the distances to be travelled to school by the children were longest, and the journeys most exposed.

In view of the low take-up rate of the existing urban scheme, it might have been expected that the government would have felt some reluctance towards a repetition of the earlier permissive legislation, especially when the new scheme was being created to discriminate in favour of such well-delineated areas of need. However, Mr Lynch explained that a conscious decision had been made to encourage local initiative at the outset and to take a more forceful line of action if the result proved to be irresolute. He had no reason at all to fear that the boards of health and the county councils would not co-operate in the matter and concluded that 'if we find that there is a dereliction on the part of the county councils it will then be time enough to come along and introduce a mandatory measure' (33, col. 1064).

Unfortunately, a formal administrative procedure for the carrying out of a systematic review of the scheme was not instituted, nor did the

Minister define the degree of under utilization which could be termed an 'act of dereliction' on the part of the local authorities

Although there was to be no onus on the teachers to assist in the serving of the meals, the Minister was optimistic that they would 'do this service not as part of their duty to the State but as a voluntary act' (33, col 1065) and he expressed it to be his conviction that assistance given by the teachers in the way of voluntary work in a matter of this kind was likely to be more valuable than if given as part of their official duties

There was concern on the part of certain deputies that some authorities might not introduce the provisions of the legislation and that the eligibility of the different schools would be based upon a decision taken at remote control from the target group. The Minister was sanguine, however, that individual need would easily be detected and that no poor child would be unjustly treated

School Meals (Gaeltacht) Act, 1930

The Act had much in common with its urban predecessor. Both statutes were permissive in character. Responsibility for the inauguration of each scheme was vested in the local authority and each was founded on a committee system of administration (24)

Entitlement to the service operated automatically according to the existence or non-existence of the scheme in each national school in the eligible areas. Once a school implemented the scheme, all of the pupils could receive the free meals, if the scheme was not implemented, no pupil could benefit

In contrast with the urban scheme which was partially contributory and partially means tested, the Gaeltacht scheme was to be non-contributory for all children attending a national school in a designated area

Every board of health whose county health district was wholly or partly situated in the Gaeltacht was entitled under the Act to provide meals for children attending national schools in a scheduled area* and could supply accommodation, apparatus, equipment, service, and food

* Gaeltacht hours of school attendance were normally from 10 am to 3 pm (33 col 1041)

for the purpose. The organization of the service was left to the local authorities although it was suggested that domestic instructors who were already employed in the Gaeltacht areas should be involved in the preparation of the meals in association with cookery classes in the schools. Their assistance already had been enlisted in some instances in the urban scheme 'to ensure a varied and beneficial dietary and an efficient preparation of the food' (58, p. 55). The local authority was empowered to appoint committees which would assist in the preparation and distribution of the food; these committees could consist exclusively of persons who were members of such boards of health or could include non-members.

A state grant of £10,000 was to be allocated annually for the service regardless of the amount which would be required. The matching-fund principle was to operate through which the boards of health were to be repaid from the Exchequer a proportion of their expenditure up to maximum annual recoupment of 50 percent. The procedure for compiling this reimbursable sum of money was as follows: the sum was not to exceed

whichever of the following amounts is the less towards the expenses incurred by such board of health in such year in providing food under this Act, that is to say: (a) one half of such expenses, and (b) a sum which bears to the sum of £10,000 (ten thousand pounds) the same proportion as the number of children certified by the Minister for Education under this section to have attended national schools in the scheduled area of such board of health during the prescribed period for such years bears to the number of children certified by the said Minister to have attended national schools in the Gaeltacht during the said period (25, s.9(1)).

The complicated procedure was explained in a circular which was issued in 1930 by the Department of Local Government and Public Health (55). The total sum was to be

allocated amongst the schools in the Scheduled area in the proportion of the average attendance at each school to the total of the average attendances at all the schools in the Scheduled area (55).

No procedure was laid down which might enable parents seek the implementation of the scheme in the school where their child was enrolled as a pupil, nor was there any appeal against the assessment of means.

Subsequent regulations made an attempt to introduce some form of quality control in declaring that a board of health proposing to exclude one or more of the national schools in their scheduled area from provision of meals must forward to the Minister a statement of any special circumstances, which, in their opinion, justified such exclusion. Because, however, there was no mandatory penalty for excluding a school without just cause, this condition was unlikely to prove of any use and soon appears to have lapsed.

THE OPERATION OF SCHOOL-MEAL SCHEMES 1930-1946

Throughout the 1930s, parliamentary questions in Dail Éireann regarding the school meals service usually were concerned with the rigidity of the limited geographical boundaries within which the schemes were operating. The steady drift of the population towards the towns and cities was changing the old demographic patterns. The accommodation requirements of this influx of people could not be met within the existing urban perimeters and new housing estates soon proliferated in hitherto rural environs in order to satisfy their needs. In the wake of this residential development came the provision of additional educational facilities, but the children who were attending some of these new schools automatically could be denied access to the school-meals services, regardless of the location of their houses, they never could become eligible for the scheme if the school was situated outside the city boundary. In the Gaeltacht region, the priority area policy also was deemed to operate unjustly and several deputies complained about the omission from the scheme of electoral divisions where many families were living in very straitened circumstances. It seemed unfair that the catchment area for the service should have been based on an ability to speak Irish which had been assessed some years previously and was not open to readjustment in the light of changing patterns of income and language. Mr T. O'Reilly TD, commented on this inequitable situation in his own constituency:

For instance in Kerry, Caragh is omitted. Carragh is one of the electoral divisions in the congested areas where the valuation per head is less than £1 1s. Killorglin is another that is omitted. Cromane as the Minister knows is as poor a district as there is in Ireland. Other poor areas excluded from the bill are Boolteens, Keelgarrylander, Castlecove (34, cols 35-36)

But the Department of Education refuted these criticisms in reporting

that a total of ninety children had recently been inspected, weighed, and measured over a period of four months with results which

appeared to indicate that, in the areas to which the Act was being applied, the physical condition of the children was under par as compared with the physical condition of children in other parts of the Gaeltacht (57, p. 50).

In any case, the government was disinclined to extend the scope of the two schemes because the money which was being allocated for their financing was not being fully absorbed. By 1932, forty-one urban authorities from an estimated number of seventy (62, p. 71) had introduced the urban scheme in a number of national schools in their areas, but total annual expenditure only called for a refund of £8,018 (62, p. 72) from the Exchequer although the yearly estimate had amounted to £20,000. Considerable disparity existed in the amount of money which was being expended by these different authorities; for example, Kilkenny received a recoupment of £228 from the central fund, whereas Wexford required only £89 (62, p. 220).

All of the eligible boards of health had introduced the Gaeltacht scheme by 1932 and 310 schools from a potential total of 336 were providing the meals (62, p. 72). Again, annual expenditure fell beneath expectations with only £5,169 being paid out from the state grant of £10,000 in reimbursing the boards with a proportion of their outlay (62, p. 72). The amount which was being expended on the scheme differed widely between these boards of health with Galway receiving £2,072 and Cork only £87.* The Department of Local Government and Public Health subsequently issued a number of circulars to the local authorities to encourage the implementation of the school-meals schemes and, in 1936, the Department of Education increased the mid-day recreation period to one hour in order to facilitate the serving of the food.

Dr F. Ward TD, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government and Public Health, believed that the reluctance of some authorities to raise sufficient funds from the rates was militating against the success of the school-meals scheme in the Gaeltacht and that

* The breakdown of reimbursement from the grant was as follows: Cork £87, Donegal £1,026, Galway £2,072, Kerry £1,511, Mayo £473.

in some areas the school managers had not encouraged the adoption of the free school meals in the Gaeltacht. They even had on occasion actually opposed their extension on the grounds that the people in these areas would prefer to maintain their independence and purchase their own food (35, col 1066)

He also believed that the provision of meals in some schools throughout the entire school year instead of their confinement to winter months was a factor in the disparity of expenditure between the different areas. An interesting strategy which might be described as a Robin Hood principle was introduced by the government in 1933 (26) in an effort to combat this problem of uneven expenditure. This provided that any funds which were being under utilized in one county could be transferred to another one which had exceeded its official allocation.

The food which was being provided through the urban scheme for school meals still consisted of combinations of meat, bread, butter or margarine, and various beverages. The evidence as to the geographic disposition of these different items is rather conflicting, however, as 'substantial meals' sometimes were said to be supplied in many towns and at other times were attributed only to Dublin County Borough (63, p 61, p 69, p 81, p 100). The Gaeltacht meals in general followed the form which had been suggested by the Minister in 1930, i.e., milk or cocoa and bread with butter or jam, but Mayo board of health added cheese and vegetables or salad in season, and we are told that 'this meal was readily appreciated by the school children' (66, p 61). Periodic inspections were carried out by a government inspector and the expert advice of the department was always available to help improve the quality of the food. The county medical officer of health was expected to undertake responsibility for the supervision of the schemes and 'to ensure that the arrangements for the provision of the meals are generally satisfactory' (65, p 93). The importance of a daily ration of milk for the children was constantly reiterated and this was to be of the highest quality with great care being taken to serve it in conditions of hygiene. * Local authorities were advised to avail as much as possible of the Combined Purchasing System in order

* A prolonged altercation took place in the Dail when Mr J. Dillon TD alleged that Donegal board of health had demonstrated favouritism in the placing of a contract for the supply of milk under the scheme. The matter also was raised on the Adjournment.

to help minimize the financial outlay on the food.* Normally the meal was eaten on the school premises and we are informed that

in some of the larger schools in Dublin very efficient arrangements exist for the supply of the meals. Dining-rooms have been established and the most modern apparatus provided for the preparation and cooking of the food (59, p. 42). †

A difficulty in the delivery of supplies of food to the Blasket Islands off the coast of Kerry emerged in government reports of the 1930s and a shortage of milk there also was noted; the problem was circumvented by a regular delivery of food and of condensed milk. Also in Kerry, the help of the Garda Síochána was enlisted to ensure the correct weight and quality of the food for school meals and 'a light weighing instrument' was supplied to assist them in this task. In Galway city, the provision of galvanized bins was stated to be a great improvement on the old method of storing bread. Both of the schemes were administered by committees which were 'usually composed of representatives of the councils, the managers or teachers of the participating schools and other persons interested in the work,' and this system was gratifying to the Department of Local Government and Public Health because it meant that 'the cost of administration is negligible' (58, p. 55).

No change was made in the schemes during the years of the second world war, but the quality of the food became a focus of criticism. Mr P.J. Rutledge TD, who was Minister for Local Government and Public Health at that period, mentioned that the school managers in all cases were responsible for deciding the substance of the meal and gave an indication of his department's attitude as to its form.

In view of the time available for the distribution and consumption of a school meal, the meal should be of as simple a character as possible

* The combined purchasing of commodities had been introduced in 1921 to enable public bodies and institutions obtain their stocks on the wholesale market. The system was legalized by the Local Authorities (Combined Purchasing) Act, 1925, (22).

† At the Committee stage of the 1914 Act, the use of ordinary school rooms for the consumption of the meal had not been favoured but the Act did not preclude their use because of possible hardship in a small country town. In one instance, the food was consumed in a nearby shop and in Dublin a depot was manned by the Bon Secours Sisters at Holles Street 'where a daily meal was provided at 3 pm for children attending three schools in the vicinity' (62, p. 43).

consistent with adequate nutrition being afforded (35, col 1421)

It is interesting to note that a separate state scheme for the provision of food came into being in 1941(27) to meet the possibility of the dislocation of essential supplies. This new emergency scheme empowered county borough corporations (specifically Cork, Dublin and Limerick) to establish food centres either directly or in association with a voluntary organization. (Similar powers were later given to the sanitary authorities of the boroughs of Dun Laoghaire and Drogheda and the urban district of Dundalk.) Although the subsidy for financing the new scheme was to be borne entirely by the local authorities, the sanction of the Minister for Local Government and Public Health was necessary before the scheme could be operated. Some of the food centres which had been set up under this scheme were wound up when the war had ended, while others continued in existence. This led Deputy P.J. Burke TD, to remark many years later that 'nobody needs to go without a meal in this city, due to the wonderful charitable organizations' (39, col 50), a comment which drew the retort from Mr J. Blowick TD, that he could not help reflecting if the social services were adequate where lay the need for the charitable organizations, and Mr T. Lynch TD, was grateful

that there were still enough people in this country, thank God, who have pride and who would die from hunger before they would become supplicants of any charitable organizations, with all due respect to the charitable organizations (40, col 1252)

= THE OPERATION OF SCHOOL MEAL SCHEMES 1947-1985

When the newly established Department of Social Welfare took over the direction of the school meals service in 1947 (28), the take up rate of the urban scheme had further increased, with sixty-two local authorities implementing the measure in 1949 (68, p 46), as opposed to forty one in 1932. A sum of £65,787 was refunded to these authorities from the Central Exchequer to defray their expenditure in the year 1949 (68, p 211), but a wide disparity still existed in the amount which was being paid out by each authority. * In the Gaeltacht, 305 schools in 1949 (68, p 213)

* For example in the year 1948/49 Athlone had expended £46 Balbriggan £104, Galway £123, Kilkenny £275, Newcastlewest £4, Sligo £766. The town of Thurles had discontinued its scheme in 1935 because of the increased employment which the establishment of a sugar factory had generated. It was restored however, in 1943 (63, p 111)

were offering the service as opposed to 310 schools in 1932. This drop is explained by the decrease in the total number of schools in the designated areas from 336 in 1932 to 307 by 1949 (68, p. 213). A sum of £9,459 (68, p. 213) was refunded to the boards of health from the Central Exchequer in the same year and its allocation again varied widely between the different boards. The content of the meals in both of the schemes remained unchanged.

In practice, the contributory aspect of the urban scheme had proved impossible to enforce 'because of the difficulty of determining the means of parents and of collecting contributions' (68, p. 47). Thus, it evolved over the years into an almost fully universalist scheme within limited geographic areas. In the 1950s doubts began to arise as to whether the local authorities had ever had the power to operate the non-contributory section of the Act or to provide for the cost of preparing the food. It also was realised that they never had been entitled to defray the expense of purchasing the food for children in the contributory sector of the scheme. The matter was referred to the Committee of Public Accounts, which confirmed the existence of legal defects 'a warning to private members of the dangers of drafting legislation' (37, col. 594). The Social Welfare (Miscellaneous) Provisions Act, 1957 (29), remedied these defects in placing beyond doubt the right of the local authorities to continue to operate and to finance the non-contributory urban scheme; an amendment also was introduced to regularize previous expenditure in this area. Only a very brief discussion accompanied these changes, and Mr W. Sheldon TD, regretted their inclusion in an omnibus Act which, in his view, would effectively muzzle any comprehensive examination of the service.

In introducing the relevant section of the legislation, Mr M. Kennedy TD, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Social Welfare, availed of the opportunity to declare his allegiance to a laissez-faire approach in the provision of social care.

I do not subscribe to the welfare state at all and the more we can avoid it, the better. People stand on their own feet in this country. They supply their children with meals and take pride in supplying them with substantial meals. Subject to the approval of the Minister, while I am in this position, there will not be any extension of the scheme to other parts of Ireland (37, col. 501).

Mr Kennedy alleged that much wastage of foodstuffs occurred, particu-

larly in Dublin where 'bread and food were pegged about'(37, col 115) and, in contrast to the early years of Irish government when authorities constantly had been exhorted to expand their usage of the scheme, he promised to effect a considerable saving in this aspect of public expenditure. In this avowal he was as good as his word for he was able to announce a reduction of £1,500 in the estimate for the following year, 'resulting largely from economies in administration by the local authorities providing the meals' (37, col 139). Despite this decrease in the cost of the scheme, Mr Kennedy still was concerned about the squandering of food in 1962, holding that the finest of bread and the best of meat 'were thrown around the yard and being kicked around' (42, cols 936-937), but the suggestion that a government investigation should be carried out to discuss whether the money was being spent to best advantage does not appear to have been adopted.

The menu which was on offer in the eligible schools does not seem to have altered over the years although there still was conflicting evidence as to the scale on which full dinners were being supplied. Between 1965 and 1973, when the practice of publishing a description of the meal was discontinued, the Department of Social Welfare's annual publication on the details of social security described the fare as usually consisting of

milk or cocoa and bread and butter or buns. In Dublin city, children get milk and a bun or a sandwich with butter and meat, cheese or jam (70)

In answer to a parliamentary question in 1966, the Minister for Social Welfare explained that

The average meal consists of one third of a pint of milk with a sandwich or a fruit bun. In a few schools milk only is served while in some others cooked meals consisting of soup, stew or sometimes milk pudding are served on four days of the week (45, col 1482)

Mr D. Gallagher TD, did not have a high opinion of the operation of the scheme in county areas when he commented on the subject in 1974

Bread is delivered to the school twice per week. In many instances there is no storage for it. There are no cooking facilities in the school and there is no room in which the meals can be properly served to the children. The Parliamentary Secretary should take a look at this

problem, and if the service cannot be improved it should be scrapped entirely (48, col 1515).

O'Brien and MacAirt, who had carried out research into the quality of the food, also stated in 1974 that the menu normally consisted of 'milk or cocoa with buns, bread or butter or jam, or sandwiches and in rarer cases, of soup or stew with potatoes or bread' (74, p. 64). A newspaper report of 1975 gave an indication of the situation in a country town.

An effort by Enniscorthy Urban Council to provide more substantial school meals for children attending town schools has failed because school managers pointed out that they have not the accommodation, facilities or personnel to improve the present scheme. Members of the Council had complained of the inadequacy of cold milk for children as a mid-day meal and sought to improve the position. The Christian Brothers Schools and Presentation Convent School replied that they had not the facilities (76).

In common with the approach which had been adopted by its predecessors, the Department of Social Welfare evidently regarded the school-meal requirement as the serving merely of a light repast which was not intended 'to replace the ordinary meals which should be provided for the children in their homes' (67, p. 46). The Minister for Social Welfare, Mr K. Boland TD, reiterated this viewpoint in 1962.

School meals are intended to restore the energy of children at a period of the day when their energy is likely to flag and were never contemplated as being a substitute for ordinary home meals (42, col. 455).

When Mr Boland was asked to reconsider the type of meal being provided under the scheme in view of the new definition of a substantial meal in the Intoxicating Liquor Act 1962, he firmly replied

It is not supposed to be a substantial meal, it is supposed to be a lunch ... The question of necessitousness is dealt with under the other social welfare schemes. This is an additional scheme that applies in the county boroughs. Necessitous children are given this light meal, in addition to what is provided under the other schemes administered by my Department (42, col 1475).

Organizations such as *Saor an Leanbh* were quick to point out that

'plenty of children in Dublin today suffer from the chronic hunger of the child fed mainly on tea and bread' (cited in 43, col 1475) A study group which reported to the Minister for Health in 1969 favoured the provision of the meals as part of integrated schemes to improve the nutritional standards of mothers and children (77) and O'Brien considered it to be an important objective that the food should be of sufficiently high a standard 'to compensate for particular nutritional deficiencies among certain social group, or groups, in specific geographical areas' (73, p 74) Mr M Mullen TD, spoke of the waste in giving a diet of a bottle of cold milk and sandwiches so repetitively to the children 'that they would know the day of the week by it' (47, col 986)

Although the Department of Social Welfare was prepared to be specific about the lightweight nature of the meal, it did not take a lead role in relation to the schemes' extension or to an improvement in the quality of the food Mr K Boland TD, who was Minister for Social Welfare in the early 1960s, explained that 'the Acts do not empower the Minister to direct what type of meal should be supplied' (45, col 730) and he considered the question of quality to be primarily a matter for the local authorities His successor, Mr J Brennan TD, stated in 1968 that he had 'no control at the moment' (46, col 1482) in relation to an extension of the scheme to areas of County Dublin, but Mr B Lenihan TD, Minister for Education, earlier had announced that a comprehensive scheme for the whole country would have very substantial financial implications and was being costed at that moment (41, cols 1335 1336)

The local authorities in turn appeared to suffer from some limitation of their function in regard to school meals because of the permissive element in the legislation and to rely upon the school managers for the initiation of the schemes The official handbook for Dublin Corporation stated in 1975 that

meals are provided at a National School on the application in the first instance of the school manager, indicating the daily number of meals he considers necessary (2, p 49)

Mr M Kennedy TD, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Social Welfare in 1960, also saw the managers as having the right to exercise discretion in this domain (40, col 1253)

A number of Dail deputies were incensed by the injustice of a situation

in which the children in one school could receive this facility in kind, while those in a neighbouring school were denied the opportunity just because the manager was 'too proud to ask', or because the managers and teachers 'would not handle the bottles of milk or buns'. Mr F. Sherwin TD, was particularly alarmed that such power could be wielded by any individual and feared that the conflict which could be engendered in the school manager by his concern for the welfare of the child on the one hand and his responsibility as a ratepayer on the other could present him with a dilemma of irresolvable proportion.

One man can decide. As the Minister is aware, ratepayers have at all times opposed the allocation of money by the local authority for the provision of school meals. If a school manager happened to be a ratepayer and a member of a local authority, he would, in that capacity, oppose the allocation of moneys for school meals (40, col. 1253).

The Social Welfare Act, 1975, (30) took cognisance of the plight of those children who were resident in urban authority houses, but were enrolled as pupils in schools which were geographically excluded from the scheme; it provided that where

not less than one half of the children attending a national school situated outside the authority's functional area reside either in that area or outside that area but in dwellings owned or provided by the authority, the local authority may determine that the Education (Provision of Meals) Acts 1914 to 1930 shall apply to that national school as if it were situated in the authority's functional area (30, s. 18).*

This amendment in the school meals' legislation was the first change for forty-seven years in the statutes which governed the urban scheme. Unfortunately, it was incorporated into an omnibus Act relating to a score of other social-welfare services and was allowed to slip through the Dáil and Senate without the opportunity to evaluate the scheme in its entirety being grasped.

Mr C. Haughey TD, Minister for Social Welfare in 1978, mentioned that only 49 out of 89 urban authorities were availing of the scheme and that

* An example of this situation was Ballyfermot, Dublin, where 2,000 new houses were situated in the county area, and 4,500 children were attending national schools just outside the city boundary.

only 27 of these 49 authorities were using milk. He had established a committee to 'look into the school meals scheme' and was awaiting their findings, (49, cols 905 906) but the Information Office of the Department had been unable to trace any report from this committee.

THE OPERATION OF SCHOOL MEALS SCHEMES 1986

Under the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act, 1981, (31) school meals are available to children in national schools which are situated in designated areas. Both the urban and Gaeltacht schemes are based on permissive legislation and come under the general direction and control of the Minister for Social Welfare. County borough councils, urban district councils, and town commissioners are empowered to provide the urban service. National schools on the periphery of urban areas may provide school meals under certain conditions to children residing in local authority housing. Cork, Donegal, Galway, Kerry, and Mayo county councils are empowered to provide the meals in certain parts of the Gaeltacht, these parts being defined in the Act.

Responsibility for the implementation of the schemes rests with local authorities, but this task has usually been undertaken in the past by school managers, now superseded by management committees. Under the urban scheme, meals may be served 'on days when the schools meet and on other days' (31, s 277).

Any child who is enrolled as a pupil in a school which has entered either of the schemes is entitled to school meals. The parents of a pupil in any participating urban national school are to be charged for each meal an amount determined by the local authority. If they are unable by reason of circumstances other than their own default to defray the charge it may then be waived. The Gaeltacht scheme is non contributory.

The local authorities may operate the schemes through the agency of local committees and may furnish such buildings, furniture, apparatus, officers, and servants as may be necessary to organize, prepare, and serve the meals. School teachers cannot be required to participate in the serving of the food but may be involved on a voluntary basis.

The cost of the schemes is covered by the rates and by the Central Exchequer. There is a ceiling of £10,000 on the amount which may be expended annually by central government in relation to the Gaeltacht

scheme and surplus money which has been underspent in this case by one authority can be transferred to another authority which has exceeded its allocation.

Information on expenditure and on number of schools participating, is contained in Tables 1 and 2, and has been compiled from several sources because of inconsistencies in the indices of parliamentary reports and statistical abstracts. The information was found to appear under a variety of headings such as Education, Social Welfare, schools, and free school

TABLE 1
THE URBAN SCHOOL MEALS SCHEME

Year	No. of Schools Participating in Scheme	Expenditure from Central Exchequer			Average Cost of Meal, in Pence
		£.	s.	d.	
1926 ¹	96	4,963.	9.	10	Not available
1931 ²	185	8,253.	4.	2	1.13 OP
1941	267	17,073.	9.	2	1.40 OP
1951	359	68,412.	9.	7	3.12 OP
1961 ³	373	79,424.	0.	0	3.54 OP
1971	390	104,196.	0.	0	2 NP
1981	378	518,954.	0.	0	7.02 NP
1985	376 ⁴	585,642.	0.	0	4.7 NP

Source: 32-50, 56-66, 68, 69.

Statistics cover the financial year from 1 April to 31 March until 1974, from which date they cover the year from 1 January to 31 December (under the Exchequer and Local Financial Years Act 1974). The majority of the years listed above were census years.

¹ Because of the political situation at that time full statistics are not available for the years 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924 and 1925.

² In June 1926, sixty-seven Christian Brother primary schools were recognised as national schools by the Department of Education: twenty-five of these schools became eligible for the school meals scheme and will have contributed to the increase in the number of participating schools in 1931.

³ It emerges from Dáil Reports that efforts were made in the 1950s to tighten up expenditure on the scheme. The saving which resulted from this policy is probably illustrated in the proportionately low rise in expenditure between 1951 and 1961.

⁴ Provisional

TABLE 2
THE GAELTACHT SCHOOL MEALS SCHEME

Year	No. of Schools Participating in Scheme	Expenditure from Central Exchequer			Average Cost of Meal, in Pence
		£	s	d	
1931	160	5,000	0	0	Not available
1941	309	9,402	0	0	1 8 OP
1951	301	9,794	0	0	2 27 OP
1961	291	9 518	0	0	2 4 OP
1971	181	4 429	0	0	1 11 NP
1981	81	10 000	0	0	6 NP
1985	N/A	9 890	0	0	N/A

Source 32 50 56-66 68, 69

Statistics cover the financial year from 1 April to 31 March until 1974, from which date they cover the year from 1 January to 31 December (under the Exchequer and Local Financial Years Act 1974). The majority of the years listed above were census years.

meals. On occasion, it was found to have been entirely omitted or only to have come to light during question time in parliament.

There is no statutory appeals procedure against the lack of provision of the schemes in any eligible school, nor against the assessment of means.

DISCUSSION

The Irish school meals service was closely modelled on the format of a British statute of 1906, which had as its objective the provision of food for hungry school children who were living in the heavily industrialized areas of England and Wales. During the debate which preceded the enactment of the original legislation, conflicting views were expressed about the advisability of vesting responsibility for the implementation of the service in the poor law guardians or in the local education authority. The consensus of opinion decided in favour of the latter and a similar framework was adopted eight years later by the Irish MPs, who drafted a bill for their own country. Thus was set in train an administrative system which still remains separate and distinct from those which operate for other schemes of social welfare.

The wisdom of limiting the service to the children of urban dwellers in Ireland was not debated in parliament despite the predominantly agricultural nature of the Irish economy and little attempt has been made over the past seventy-two years to re-shape its provisions in response to the changing demographic, social, and economic features of the country. For example, the urban scheme which was inaugurated in 1914 has remained confined within the original administrative areas of the county borough councils, urban district councils, and town commissioners, apart from a temporary expansion in 1924 and a recent minor adjustment in the eligibility conditions of a number of schools on the periphery of the cities and towns. The Gaeltacht scheme, which was introduced in 1930, is available still only to the pupils of those schools which are situated in the areas originally selected.

Both the urban and Gaeltacht school-meals schemes could be said to operate upon a priority area model of welfare where limited financial resources are focussed upon localities of greatest need. In this respect, they have proved remarkably interesting in pioneering in Ireland the model of a social service based on the needs of a particular group of people in limited territorial areas, rather than based upon an individual test of means, a model which has received considerable attention in recent years from writers such as Titmuss (78) and Donnison (1). The validity and finality of the definition of the original localities is open to question, however, and inevitably must deny the service to many children who are living in poverty. The urban scheme never was geared to the needs of the Irish population and the Gaeltacht scheme was restricted to the members of a target group who were selected as much on the basis of an ability to speak Irish as on the severity of the material deprivations which they had to endure. In recent years, there has been much evidence in Dáil Reports of the hardship which this curtailment of the service is having upon the children of the excluded families. The drift of the population from the land combined with the policy in the 1970s of rationalizing the primary and secondary-school systems into fewer units of larger size has resulted in an increase in the daily travel distances which are required of the children in rural areas. This entails consequent longer absences from home and a need for some form of sustenance. The spread of towns and cities beyond their legally defined boundaries has created an anomalous situation in the urban scheme where the children of one neighbourhood may differ in their right of access to the service by virtue of the geographical location of the schools which they attend. Successive Ministers for Social Welfare, however, have stated their inability to extend

the schemes beyond the present limits, although this course of action was successfully undertaken for two years in the emergency situation of the 1920s

The fact that the school meals service is based on permissive rather than mandatory legislation has given rise to some shortcomings in its effectiveness as a measure of preventive care. This has been particularly evident in the Gaeltacht scheme where the children, by definition, were in need of the meals because their home conditions were impoverished and they had long and exposed journeys to undertake in order to attend school.

Although the meals may be offered free of charge to all children who are attending schools in the designated areas, the permissive nature of the legislation again diminishes the impact of the scheme by introducing the possibility of a selectivist element at the point of delivery. The Acts did not give any indication as to how the existence of a need for the meals might be ascertained and no machinery was constructed to assist in the accomplishment of the notoriously difficult task of assessing the relative merits of the different schools. It must be well nigh impossible for a school to obtain detailed knowledge of the home conditions of each pupil, particularly in urban areas. There is, therefore, a real danger that judgments as to the eligibility of the children could be formed upon hearsay evidence or upon such superficial criteria as the cleanliness of their appearance or the standard of their clothing.

Where the majority of the pupils appear to come from a background of reasonable material prosperity it seems likely that a negative decision will be taken about the introduction of the service to this particular school. There also may be an understandable reluctance on the part of the teachers to undertake the additional labour and inconvenience which is involved in the serving of the food. But the service may well be denied to those children who most require it. Discrimination may exist between the children who live in neighbouring houses or even between members of the same family who attend different schools, a situation which certainly shakes the foundations of the priority area strategy in social policy.

In the event of a negative decision with regard to the eligibility of a school, the parents of the rejected pupil may not even be aware of this development. Even if so aware, it would take much courage and persistence for any child or its parents to proclaim their need without feelings of

embarrassment or stigma. These feelings would be aggravated where no other child in the school was seeking such a service and the prospect of challenging the decision must be particularly daunting in the absence of any official procedure for the hearing of appeals.

The Acts do not require that the parents of the eligible children should be informed of the existence of a school-meals service and it is difficult to discover any rights in this regard. From 1922 onwards, it was the practice to print a précis of the provisions of the schemes in official departmental reports which were published approximately biennially, but this practice was discontinued in 1949 after the publication of the *First Report of the Department of Social Welfare* (68). The annual publication *Summary of Social Insurance and Assistance Services* (70) gives a brief description of the service (e.g., 71, p.85), similar to that of the booklet *Guide to the social services* (67), last published in 1974. Both of these sources advise that further particulars may be obtained from the local authorities, but the author of this article did not receive a reply to letters which were written to the information offices of Dublin and Kerry local authorities, seeking details about the provisions of the schemes in each of these areas. The important OECD report, *Investment in education* (21, p. 101, p. 102, p. 252), only mentions the schemes in questioning their claim to be included in a list of items of educational expenditure, while the publication *All our children* (53), which was issued by the Department of Education in 1969 expressly to inform parents about the basic facts of education, does not mention them at all. This difficulty of access to information must have bewildered parents in the past and must have hampered an analysis of the schemes and the organization of any lobby for their re-structuring.

In early years, the Department of Local Government and Public Health regularly issued circulars to encourage local authorities to implement the schemes and to improve the nutritional standard of the meals in their areas. Since the service came under the general direction and control of the Department of Social Welfare in 1947, however, several Ministers have stated their inability to seek any improvement in the standard of the food. It is not clear, therefore, where ultimate responsibility in this case can be laid and whether the nutritional quality of the food and its appeal to the children ever can be improved on a national scale within the restrictions of the existing legislation. This situation is particularly serious because of disquieting allegations that the food which is served in some areas is almost too unpalatable for consumption. Undernourishment is increasingly being

identified as a factor which affects the performance of all children (79), and Margaret Wynn (80) has repeatedly drawn attention to the importance of this factor in the prevention of mental handicap. O'Brien has suggested that school meals also could have an educative function in introducing children to a knowledge of nutrition, dietetics and the principles of budgeting and in broadening 'their culinary horizons' (73, p. 71). The National Dairy Council's Information Centre on Nutrition and Health published a leaflet in 1983 recommending certain important lunch requirements if a child's concentration and productivity is to be optimal at school*. But successive Ministers for Social Welfare have stated that school meals never were expected to be more than the equivalent of a light repast. Reports of the Department of Local Government and Public Health also made this statement, as did Farley (3, p. 112), but there is no basis for this attitude in the actual legislation.

The history of the evolution of the Irish school meals service provides an illustration of a social strategy, the policy and objectives of which were not clearly worked out in advance of the framing of the legislation. Although the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government and Public Health promised that the Gaeltacht school meals scheme would be closely monitored and subsequently amended if this proved necessary, in fifty six years it has remained unaltered and has never been the subject of a comprehensive discussion in either House of the Oireachtas. The method of financing the service also requires a re-appraisal. Despite the drop in the number of eligible schools, it seems surprising that the Gaeltacht grant has remained at as low a constant annual figure as £10,000, regardless of inflation and of increases in the cost of living.

It has several times been stated in Dail Éireann that the cost of the free school meals is a very worthwhile investment in view of the heavy charge of education and pleas have been made that the service should be extended throughout the country in recognition of its importance as a source of well being in the community. Should the selectivist approach prevail in future planning, it will be necessary to devise procedures which will avoid the unfortunate development of apartheid systems in the serving of the food. The Child Poverty Action Group in Britain has complained about

* This followed publication of disquieting information on the nutrient content of lunches consumed in 25 primary schools situated in Dublin City and County (5).

schools where the children who were receiving free meals were obliged to sit at separate tables, stand in different queues, and have different coloured meal tickets to those children whose parents were paying for the facility (75, p. 17). This seems to be a sad regression from the equitable system which was operated by Le Conseil Municipal in Paris in 1881.

The lack of a clearly delineated focal point of responsibility is the problem which most obviously springs to mind in this review of the operation of the Irish school-meals service. The service is now out of date and it is necessary to identify which children need school meals and to devise a system which will deliver them in an efficient, equitable, and non-discriminatory way.

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