



Speech of Robert Bell

At the international Colloquium on “Home Education” in Rheims

Dr. Robert Bell, United Kingdom, is Vice-president of the *effe*
(European Forum for Freedom in Education).

I'm very glad to be able to represent the European Forum for Freedom in Education at this meeting today.

Our organisation was essentially a product of the collapse of the iron curtain at the beginning of the 1990s. Then a number of educationalists from Germany met with colleagues in Hungary to establish the Forum. Subsequently the movement developed and was eventually able to recruit new members from all over Europe.

Initially the main aim was to help schools in Eastern Europe to adapt to a new situation in which they were no longer subjected to the authoritarian regimes that had controlled their education systems. In particular movements such as Steiner-Waldorf were anxious to spread their ideas in the newly freed systems but eventually they were joined by other educational movements – Montessori, Jena plan, free schools etc. But they also received support from the small schools of Denmark and Sweden, although it would be true to say that the Forum was very school centred and had little interest in home-schooling or de-schooling. This was partly because most of its founders had been Germans and Germany is still a country that largely assumes that children must go to school.

However, as the organisation developed there came to be more emphasis on the basic principles of educational freedom and on the United Nations and Council of Europe declarations on the subject. These tended to emphasise the right of parents to decide what kind of education their children should have and this clearly had a great relevance to the issue of home education. If parents choose to educate their children away from schools then they should be allowed to do so.

This new emphasis also meant that the Forum took a keen interest in the views of minorities – ethnic minorities, linguistic minorities, religious minorities and educational minorities - and the right of parents to choose an education that reflected their own culture. Since becoming Vice-president I have had special responsibility for minority issues. I have, for example had to visit Slovakia where, under the previous extreme nationalist government, the Hungarian minority were subjected to all kinds of educational restrictions in an attempt to wipe out their separate culture. But I also visited a German Gymnasium in Denmark and a Danish Gymnasium in Germany, two examples of greater tolerance. But in my own country I was involved in fighting the attempt of the government to close the famous experimental school Summerhill, founded by A.S. Neill and in a successful attempt to persuade the government to finance Muslim schools in the same way that the many state schools run by the Church of England and Roman Catholic schools are financed.

I mention these examples of the work I have been involved in simply to demonstrate the wide scope of the Forum's work today. It seems to me that we should be equally involved in defending the right of parents to educate their children at home or in conjunction with other parents. This seems a logical result of obeying the various educational declarations of the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Union which our countries have accepted.

The Forum is also a widely recognised NGO with access to governments and international organisations. Lies Feron who will be speaking in a moment is now our representative in Brussels and keeps an eye on the latest discussions and decisions that can affect education.

There is one warning that I must issue, however. We are willing to fight for the rights of parents to be respected as promised in the international documents but we are also aware that other international declarations are concerned also with the rights of the child. Many of the politicians and officials who oppose home education do so on the grounds that not all parents are equally capable of organising their children's education and that many are too lazy or ignorant to do so.. Notoriously many parents simply don't send their children to school and do nothing to provide something else instead. Other officials argue, of course, less convincingly that children must not be deprived of the social experience of school and this has always been a common argument against home education in England.

The point I'm anxious to make is that if you wish us to help defend your case in Germany, France or any where else, you must be prepared to make a positive case for the quality of what you are doing. It is not enough simply to declare your right as a parent to keep your child away from school. You must demonstrate that your policy, far from harming the child, is providing a good education. I know you realise all this but I must simply warn you that there are other people, even liberal-minded people in organisations such as ours who claim to believe in educational freedom but still believe that children must go to school. Indeed there are some in our own organisation who will readily fight for their own freedom and that of people with a different educational philosophy but secretly believe not only that all children should attend schools but that they should attend schools run entirely in accordance with their own ideas.

I think that it is healthy that you should challenge the hegemony of schooling. In England we are now told by the government that children can only be taught to read successfully if they are taught by trained teachers in a certain way My own son and his Finnish cousins taught themselves to read before they started school and are none the worse for it. I don't believe any form of education is absolutely perfect and I believe we can all learn something from each other And if you need our help in dealing with government we are willing to give it.

The person most responsible for putting home schooling on our agenda is Jennifer and we hope that she can recruit more EFFE members in France. We need them urgently.

Our organisation has many lively people, especially in Switzerland and Austria. EFFE Austria, for example is organising a demonstration that will carry a torch of educational freedom from Vienna to Helsinki in time for our colloquium there in June. You will be welcome there to see the torch arrive and if you have problems you can tell us about them then.