

# A FINE SPEECH

We have much pleasure in giving below part of a fighting speech by Commander Pursey, a Greenwich School boy, a Warrant Officer, and by dint of much gallant endeavour a Commander.

We believe this to be the finest speech ever delivered in Parliament on behalf of opening the door of promotion to the brilliant boys of Britain without respect of parentage or money.

As we so often contend in these columns, the right to provide officers for the Services is not the preserve of any one class, it belongs to all.

Owing to the pressure of space the second half of the speech must be held over till June.

On the Navy Estimates, on an Amendment moved by Mr. Goronwy Roberts urging the establishment of a naval recruiting programme:

Commander Pursey (Hull East): I beg to second the Amendment.

The problem of recruitment for the Navy in the postwar period is one of prime importance. The most important factor is that in a national service there should be a full career in commissioned rank, warrant rank or the petty officer grade, for every one who joins, with full opportunity for merit and character to rise from the bottom to the top of the ladder. The House is very fortunate this afternoon because the mover of the Amendment is an authority on education who is able to set this problem of naval recruitment in the proper perspective for the first time, and relate it to the new national education system and the development of the Education Act of 1944.

I also consider myself fortunate in being asked to second this Amendment because, in the long history of this House, and of the Navy, I happen to be the first Naval officer elected to it, who started his life on the lower deck, passed through all the substantive and non-substantive ratings, served as a warrant officer and then as a commissioned officer. So I hope I can claim to have had some experience on this subject from both ends of the ship—the blunt end and the sharp end.

The policy of the Labour Party is democratisation, as has been developed by my hon. Friend the Member for Caernarvonshire (Mr. Roberts), democratisation in all State services—defence and civil—a free field for merit to reach the top, or go as far as ability will carry it, and without any restriction of financial means. Moreover the First Lord of the Admiralty—who, as the House is aware, is away on an important mission

and so is to our regret unable to take part in this Debate—last year in replying to criticism of the Dartmouth scholarship scheme by the hon. and gallant Member for Pollok (Commander Gailbraith) said :

“ If we want to get a Royal Navy which will truly stand in all the difficult circumstances that are coming in the future, I want it based upon the whole of the people. There should be no favouritism of any section over any others.”

Then, after discussing the scholarship scheme, the First Lord remarked :

“ If this is not going to be accepted . . . I will not advocate any entry of officers except from the lower deck and training thereafter provided.”—[Official Report, 7th March, 1945; Vol. 408, c. 2152-3.]

That is the spirit of the age. The Civil Lord of the Admiralty, however, took up a totally different attitude when replying to criticism in our previous Debate on the Navy Estimates on 7th March, and tried—I suggest, not very successfully—to convince us that the early entry of 13-year old cadets was the right scheme in the Navy. This speech has caused much adverse comment in the Service Press, one Journal heading its criticism, “ Oh, Mr. Edwards !”, but it would not be fair to quote it, nor will time permit. In addition, the lower deck has adversely criticised it, and so has the warrant rank. Moreover, I doubt whether the Civil Lord himself really believes in that part of Admiralty policy. In his maiden speech, made only three years ago, he said :

“ I would like to refer to the granting of commissions. . . . This is a very sore point with the lower deck. . . . The Navy is losing good material as a result.”—[Official Report, 3rd March, 1943; Vol. 387, c. 508.]

I hope, therefore, that in spite of his assuming high office at the Admiralty, we can still count on him as a firm supporter of the democratic system which has enabled him to pass from the stoker's mess deck to the Board of Admiralty. The Con-

servative Party, on the other hand, particularly the naval Members, have always opposed democratisation; certainly they have never advocated it, or any expansion of the fields of entry into the officer ranks. Only last year the hon. and gallant Member for Camborne (Commander Agnew)—an old shipmate of mine and one whose views I appreciate, but this year, unfortunately, as a Whip doomed to Trappist silence—said, after advocating compulsory service in peace time and temporary officers after service on the lower deck, an ideal system and good advocacy, which he admitted had been so successful, said:

“I doubt very much whether the system of creating officers from the lower deck permanently ought to continue.”

He may have been making a point there that is not quite clear to me, but I suggest that it savours very much of unnecessary distinction.

Commander Agnew (Camborne): I do not think the hon. and gallant Member, and former shipmate of mine, is doing me justice. In the Debate last year I said:

“I doubt very much whether the system of creating officers from the lower deck permanently ought to continue.”

However, the hon. and gallant Member did not go on to read what I said after that, which was:

“I wonder whether it is not very much better to take them younger, as the First Lord of the Admiralty has begun to do, straight into the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth.”—  
[Official Report, 7th March, 1945, Vol. 408, c. 2172.]

I said that because I believe that one of the best ways of creating officers is to mix, as early as possible, boys from all sections of the life of this country, and then begin to train them together as officers in the Service in which they will all serve afterwards.

**Commander Pursey:** I am quite happy about that, and I informed the hon. and gallant Gentleman that I would refer to this, so there is no question of any personal attack upon him. I hope that having explained a little of what he said last year it is now clear to the advantage of us all. As it read to me, he was advocating one method for conscripts, and another method for those who want to make the Service their permanent career and that, if it had been his intention, was the point I took up.

**Vice-Admiral Taylor:** Before the hon. and gallant Gentleman leaves that point, may I put this to him? He must be very well aware that the work of training the seamen on the lower deck is not the same as training to be an officer to command a ship on the bridge. It is a very different thing. The man is wasting his time there to a certain extent if he is to be an officer.

**Commander Pursey:** If I may suggest it to the hon. and gallant Gentleman, that point does not arise, because, for over 30 years, we have had a system of promotion from the lower deck to commissioned rank which has carried officers up to flag rank.

**Vice-Admiral Taylor:** But only a very small number.

**Commander Pursey:** I shall give the numbers later and, if the hon. and gallant Gentleman will possess himself, he will then be able to take up the point, though I am quite prepared to accommodate him at any moment.

On 18th March, 1912, 34 years ago, the present Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Woodford (Mr. Churchill), said—and I can picture him saying it with all the zest at his command:

“These are the days when the Navy, which is the great national service, should be opened more broadly to the nation as a whole. The question, as the House knows, is fraught with difficulties.”

That was put in just as appeasement to the Tories at that time—

“We have thought them well over, and we are agreed in believing that there are no difficulties which, in the public interest, cannot be and ought to be overcome.”—[Official Report, 18th March, 1912, Vol. XXXV, c, 1570.]

That was 34 years ago. Admittedly it was in the right hon. Gentleman's less reactionary days, as he was speaking as First Lord of the Admiralty in a Liberal Government. However, he broke down the barrier between the lower deck and the quarter deck, which had existed for a century, and in the following year cut the Gordian knot which restricted naval cadet entry to the age of 13 by instituting the special entry system of recruitment of youths from the public schools at 17 to 18. What has been the result? For over 30 years we have had three sources of supply. Yet in the last seven years, out of 1,708 executive officers, over a half have been early entries, about one-third special entries, and one-eighth from the lower deck. These proportions bear no relation whatever to the fields of entry from which they come, the larger number of officers going to the smallest class and the smallest number to the largest class. In spite of this backward condition, the White Paper on postwar conditions states:

“While there may be some change in the postwar system of entry for officers of the Executive, Engineer and Supply and Secretarial Branches of the Royal Navy, it is not expected that there will be any fundamental alterations.”

This is sheer obstruction, typical of Admiralty resistance to reform.

Commander Noble (Chelsea): I wonder if the hon. and gallant Gentleman can give any figures to show how many men from the lower deck wanted to become officers. How much competition was there?

Commander Pursey: I propose to give figures later. I have been in touch with this matter for the 30 years that the scheme has been in existence. There has never been any lack of candidates. That has been stated by the Admiralty representative in this House on numerous occasions. Right up to 1941, only five years ago, cadet entry to Dartmouth College was limited to children of 13, which made the main system a definite class preserve. The present First Lord then decided to grant 10 scholarships per term, or 30 a year, to grant aided schools. The argument has since been put forward that this sprinkling has democratised the system. That is nonsense, because 75 per cent. of the entries are still restricted to preparatory school entries only. Moreover, 10 scholarships were at that time also allocated to preparatory schools. This fifty-fifty arrangement is quite fantastic. The proportion of grant aided schools to preparatory schools is something over 10 to one, and with an allocation of 20 scholarships on any basis of equity, there should be 18 scholarships going to the grant aided schools and only about two to the preparatory schools. The whole idea of the early entry of children into their life profession at 13 is quite indefensible. There are four tests by which the system can be judged: educational, naval, individual and State.

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Captain Marsden (Chertsey) : Is there not a further test, namely, the success of the scheme ?

Commander Pursey : The success of the scheme does not justify its existence. If the Officers who entered at 13 were capable of being successful, they ought to have been just as capable going in at 17 to 18, from pub-

lic schools, or on the lower deck at 15. That is no argument whatever. On educational grounds, no independent authority today would contend that it was desirable for a child's career to be decided before 13 years of age. But that is what this system means.

Secondly, from the naval point of view, it used to be argued by hon. and gallant Members that naval officers must be caught young and given long training. That goes back to the days of sail, when Dr. Johnson was reported as saying that no one would go to sea who could get into prison. This nonsense was exploded with the special entry scheme as long ago as 1913, when the public school boys were sent direct to a seagoing cruiser and after only 12 months' training to the seagoing fleet.

Thirdly, from the individual's point of view, it is entirely wrong to send a child of 13 to a monastic school dedicated entirely to one Service. In those most formative years, instead of being isolated, he should be rubbing shoulders with future generals, future air marshals, future Members of Parliament, and members of the Civil Service and others with whom he will associate in future life.

Captain Marsden : Would the hon. and gallant Gentleman also advocate a co-educational college ?

Commander Pursey : If the hon. and gallant Gentleman would like to advocate that he will have an opportunity of doing so later in the Debate. I am prepared to give way to any hon. Member opposite on this subject. But they should not ask questions about subjects I am not debating. They will have an opportunity at a later stage.



Fourthly, it is not the duty of the State to provide a special secondary school for one State service only, when there is ample opportunity in the schools of the country. Moreover, it is entirely wrong that in a national Service, compulsory or voluntary, the main stream of officers should short-circuit the ordinary entry into the Service, and so debar recruits from any chance of getting any of the greater number of the commissions which are obtained by these early entries. If this system did not exist today, there is no reason why it should be instituted, and without question, it ought to be abolished, lock, stock and barrel, at the earliest moment.

The second method of entry is from public schools between 17 and 18 by Civil Service Commission examination in the same way as all the other State Services. It should have been the normal scheme for the last quarter of a century.

Professor Gruffydd (University of Wales) : Does the hon. and gallant Member mean, not public schools, but the common schools of the country?

Commander Pursey : I am using the term "public schools" as it has always been used in this House in naval Debates, meaning schools from which a type of individual comes to the Navy at the age of 17. If one analyses the list, one finds a very small proportion of the schools of the country included, but I would not cross swords with the hon. Member for the University of Wales on the definition of a public school. This policy means largely a closed preserve. The numbers are small owing to the large number of cadets entered by the

early entry scheme. Nevertheless, in 33 years, it has produced 135 commanders, 38 captains, one admiral and at least two hon. Members of this House on the Opposition Benches. So there is no question of its success. At present it provides some of the executive officers, all the engineer officers, paymasters and Royal Marines, and it could provide the remainder of the executive officers. Even this system, however, will not now satisfy the genuine demand for democratisation of the last national Service whether under compulsory service or under voluntary service, as it should be in peacetime. In the Army, and the Royal Air Force, a period of "other rank" service will be necessary before entry into colleges, when cadets will be enlisted soldiers and airmen and no fees will be charged.

It is against this background that the question of the future officers for the Navy must be considered. Whatever other arguments were previously used for the retention of the early entry system by which a number got in by paying fees, are blown sky high by the latest Army and Royal Air Force decisions. Preparatory schoolboys, however, will not be excluded, if they can pass the later age tests, which, in many cases, is doubtful, and this is one of the reasons why diehard naval officers want to retain this scheme, although, naturally they will not say so. Dartmouth College would then become the university of the Navy instead of the public school, where all officers, other than the university entrants, such as doctors, should be trained together. Before the war, marine officers were trained at Greenwich, and special entry executive officers and paymasters in a ship, because they were too old to mix with the little boys at Dartmouth. They ought to have been trained all together. That system was quite fantastic. There is ample room at Dartmouth to train all those officers for a shorter period, instead of a smaller number of officers being trained for a longer period.

I pass to the problem of lower deck promotion to commissioned rank, under what is known as the upper-yard-man scheme, with the inception of which I had something to do. The complaint is that the numbers promoted are not sufficient. In fact, the average yearly number promoted during the last war, as the hon. Member who moved the Amendment has said, was only half that in the 1914-18 war. In the last seven years they have only averaged 30. Nevertheless, the progress of the scheme has been such—and here I give the hon. and gallant Member for South Paddington (Vice Admiral Taylor) some figures—as to have resulted in 26 ex-blue-jackets being promoted to commander, seven to captain and one to rear-admiral with another on the the rear-admirals' retired list. In the engineering branch the figures are : 76 artificers promoted to commander, ten to captain and one to rear-admiral, so there is no question at all that, given the opportunity, these officers make good.

The White Paper states that there are also to be substantial opportunities for young men entered as ratings to obtain commissions in their early years. This means about the age of 21, and this should be the normal method of entry for all officers. It cannot be claimed that there is a lack of candidates—here I take the point of the hon and gallant Member for Chelsea (Commander Noble)—because in 1944, 66 seamen ratings were selected for training, but only 25 were awarded commissions and last year, with two more candidates, there were three fewer commissions. The trouble is that the standard for these candidates for commissions, upper-yard-men, as they are termed, is set too high, higher, in a number of cases, than for cadets. There is too much concern at the Selection Boards about the boy's father, and his father's bank balance, the school he comes from, his accent, etc., instead of with the main test of qualities of leadership and intelligence. There is no black magic

in a naval officer's job. Let us be quite clear about that. After 30 years, the Admiralty ought to have produced a successful scheme which will provide far higher numbers in the four branches in which promotions from the ranks to officer is possible, that is, executive, engineer, paymaster, and Royal Marine. What is wanted is an improved scheme and good will from the Admiralty, and the officers who have to work it. I beg the Admiralty to "get cracking" with this important task.