

Passing the Buck on Aid to Schools

The first bit of wisdom a novice learns in Washington is the ancient art of legislative buck-passing.

The Senate or the House will pass a bill known to be doomed in the other house. Or both houses will pass a bill to put the President "on the spot" and which, after a veto, cannot be passed.

The legislators thus serve their political interests. They do not vote their convictions, and they betray their trust to the people who elected them.

One of the worst examples of this in recent years was the Senate's passing of a bill for aid to school construction and teachers' salaries. Everyone in the Senate knew that the House would not accept such a bill and that, if it did, a Presidential veto was certain.

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In fact, a House committee has already prepared a bill for submission which greatly reduces the Senate figure for school construction. House leaders are unalterably opposed to the Senate plan to supplement teachers' salaries.

Fifty-four senators participated in this hypocrisy, and 35 voted their convictions.

Both the school construction and the teachers' salary aspects of the bill can be proved to be wholly unnecessary. But since it will be a long time before the issue is resolved in the House and, if anything is passed, a long time before the President would act, I shall refer here only to a few of the valid arguments against generalized federal aid for school construction.

Any ordinary mortal reading the debates on "classroom shortages" in connection with the bill passed by the Senate will end in a welter of confusion.

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Ever since President Truman called for a "school facilities survey" in 1951 this numbers game has been going on with the most fantastic variations.

The Truman survey virtually asked school authorities in the states to put their needs as high as possible, and they certainly responded with energy. By the time the "survey" was available the Eisenhower administration was in office and the confusion began.

Commissioner of Education Brownell said in October, 1954, that the "shortage" was 370,000 classrooms. Sen. Lister Hill upped this three months later to 600,000. President Eisenhower in February said "over 300,000." Then, after the utter unreliability of the "survey" was demonstrated, the embarrassed administration decided on its own survey and came up with lower figures.

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The annual reports of "shortages" from the states show how unreliable they are. Alabama, Sen. Hill's state, in 1954 reported 19,750 rooms in use. In 1956 it reported only 13,240 available. Its report in 1959 showed 22,000 in use and a great reduction of the shortage.

Projections of future needs have proved equally absurd in the light of years. In 1955 the secretary of the California Teachers' Assn. testified before a House committee that California would need "something over a billion dollars" in school building by 1960 and that the state could not afford that much.

But the records show that between 1955 and 1960 the state has spent \$2.1 billion on public school construction. This does not take into account the sums spent on private and parochial schools.

Upon this sort of guesswork the Senate has made the great gesture of an intent to spend \$1.8 billion in two years. Such irresponsible voting of taxpayers' money deserves stronger words of condemnation than any family newspaper would print.

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One of the reasons why certain usually sound Republican senators voted for the monstrous bill and why Republican leaders in the House feel that some bill for school construction must be passed is that statements by Secretary Flemming and reports from his U.S. Office of Education have indicated a difference between those reports and the President's new proposal.

They have been embarrassed on the floor by citations of these differences by the proponents of school aid. It would seem to be time for the President to get some of his official family into a White House classroom and establish some discipline.