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Rural Times

Education

John Hyde

By the time my wife, Helen, and I had finished paying the fees for four children to attend five years each of boarding school, we were convinced of the unfairness of an education system that taxed us to pay for the state education we were not using. We did not mind paying the freight and other imposts that make the cost of living higher in the country than the city. After all we chose to live in the bush, we loved it, and there are some big advantages to bringing up kids there. But, the boarding school fees kept us short of money and we objected to paying for their education twice. Of course, we envied those of our city friends who had access to the better state high-schools and did not have to pay boarding fees.

The situation was, however, much worse for those children whose parents could not afford to pay twice. They were stuck with whatever the state school a particular small town, at a particular time, offered them---and small schools vary greatly in the quality of their instruction. One little boy, whom I knew well, badly needed remedial teaching, but he did not get it.

I admit that the theme can be varied: a man who would have liked a family once told me that he would welcome the opportunity to pay his own children's education expenses, twice or even three times. However he objected to paying taxes to educate my children. I could not answer him.

Education benefits the child: it is thus, by definition, a private benefit. When governments use taxpayers' money to give private benefits to selected citizens---even when they do not involve themselves in WA Inc. type scandals---some degree of, unfairness, i.e. "inequity", is inevitable. Free compulsory education is no different.

Our governments, nonetheless, grant many private benefits. The reasons why they do so are sometimes good and often bad, but the reasons for a government-backed guarantee that every child shall have access to education are among the best. It does not follow, however, that the government should provide the education itself or that there are not more equitable ways of giving the guarantee.

The most widely recognised way of making the provision of education equitable---although it does not help the childless taxpayer---is to give parents a voucher for the education of each child that they must present at a school of their choice. This idea is an old one, but only in a few places has it ever got off the ground. This is primarily because teachers' unions are opposed to it. From their own point of view, the unions oppose vouchers for a good reason: namely, they know that parents might exercise their sovereignty in ways that do not suit the union or its members. Parents might even reject sloppy teaching.

I was, therefore, amazed to discover this passage in *The Economist*: "It is a measure of the extent to which educational policies have moved away from the comfortable orthodoxies of the 1960s that the [British] Trade Union Congress now prefers vouchers, although it prefers to call them training credits. Indeed the politics of education in the 1980s could largely be written in terms of the rise of free-market solutions to social problems."

I doubt whether all teachers' unions in Britain agree with the TUC, but the TUC attitude is, nevertheless, refreshingly different from the ACTU attitude in Australia. British unions are not wimps but they are, it seems, questioning socialism. Perhaps the proximity of Eastern Europe taught them to question the virtues of the public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Perhaps, after decades of defending their own privileges, they have rediscovered egalitarian principles. Anyway, they now want working-class children to have access to the best possible education, even if that means giving parents pieces of paper that let the parents choose the educational institutions their children attend.

Isn't it time we depoliticised education in Australia; allowed all schools and school systems to compete on equal financial terms; trusted parents to choose their own children's education as they choose their children's doctor; were fair to parents who prefer a religious education; were fair to country people?

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