

Reforming Education

John Hyde

The NSW state education system serves the interests of teachers before pupils and it needs reforming. Nevertheless, even if the Education Minister, Dr Metherell, is wise enough to identify the necessary reforms and strong enough to impose them, the Teachers Federation will outlast him. Given the way he is going about reform, he will ultimately fail. His alternative is to give parents a real choice of schools. Then, eventually, most kids would be well educated, because competition would have encouraged the educators to reform themselves. This principle applies to the reform of all self-serving interests who face less than fair competition.

There is widespread public concern that the education systems are serving our children poorly. Education featured sufficiently at the last NSW election for the government now to claim a mandate for reform. But it faces student demonstrations, and a recalcitrant Upper House. A phone-in poll showed two-to-one opposition to its proposed reforms. What went wrong?

The Greiner government's position on education, as on some other things, may be characterised as conservative---a preference for preservation with reform. Like Thatcher, Greiner is trying to make the public sector school system produce 'educated' children by imposing core subjects and objective assessment upon it from the centre. As a result Mr Greiner is opposed from two sides.

The attack from one side is led by the NSW Teachers Federation. Except that it demands more taxpayer money, it doesn't want the system changed. It is a reactionary defender of a fatter *status quo*.

The argument from the other side comes from some radical liberals who don't want Dr Metherell to waste his time, political influence, and public resources trying to reform a badly-corrupted union-dominated system. They believe he would be more effective if he were to relieve the children of the necessity of attending it. They say, in effect, let the NSW Teachers Federation run any system it chooses, but allow parents to take their children out of it without thereby suffering financial disadvantage.

Do you mind
Non school

The Federation's argument has been vituperative and children have been used as pawns: intoxicated students at Penrith carried placards describing Dr Metherell in excremental terms and teachers and students spat at Dr Metherell at Armadale. Is this the modern 'Civics'?

Facts also have been given scant respect. Those who have listened mainly to the Federation will be surprised to learn that the Greiner Government has actually increased the money available for education. The government is, however, redirecting existing resources. In particular, it is 'cashing out' 2000 teacher positions to provide additional funds for deferred building and equipment maintenance, remedial teaching, computers, and school text books.

Many parents might also be surprised to learn that an article by Hilmer in *Australian Quarterly* says that Australia spends about as much as comparable countries on public sector education. Hilmer points out that our spending on the secondary sector is comparatively high and the tertiary sector, low.

The radical liberals point out that Dr Metherell is unlikely to be able to reform the public sector system quickly and that parents want to take their children out of schools in which teachers encourage their students to use class time to 'demonstrate', now. The conservative rejoinder is that even with a voucher system which gave parents complete freedom to choose their children's schooling, it would be many years before there would be enough places outside the present school system.

The truth is that Dr Metherell is not Hercules and his Augean stables will neither be cleansed nor replaced this year. Sadly, many children must yet pass through a school system that has avoided evaluation for so long that it knows neither its own strengths nor weaknesses. Dr Geoffrey Partington, in *AIPP Policy Paper No. 12*, stressed that objective assessment of even literacy and numeracy has been consistently and successfully opposed by teachers' unions.

The educational problem goes beyond the 3 'Rs'. Modern Australian public-sector education claims to be non-judgemental. In fact, individual teachers do take positions on issues with moral content---on racialism, promiscuity and sexism for instance. Many parents find the teachers' attitudes anathema, but they cannot remove their children without paying both fees and taxes.

The radical liberals point out to Dr Metherell that, no matter how successful he may be now, he cannot ensure that the bureaucratic centre will not later fall into the hands of the sort of people who substitute spitting for argument. In the long run, parent power---the ability to take the child to a school where writing is taught but rioting is not---is a better guarantee of 'standards' than is the best bureaucratic reform.

The general lesson to be learned is that it is almost impossible, when faced with an entrenched vested interest such as the teachers, to impose good rules. The vested interest can usually out-gun the reformer politically. Dr Metherell has accused the Teachers Federation of telling 'lies, and yet more lies'. I am sure he is right, but what does he do about thousands of teachers----some of them none too bright----who are misinformed by their union and who pass the misinformation to parents? He cannot match the Federation's disinformation; nor should he use public monies trying.

His best option is to open education up to competition, trusting ordinary people to choose wisely. In the end, deregulated education will be better than the best regulated system. To those teachers who think they know better than parents I say: people who are smart enough to elect their governments and choose their doctors are also smart enough to choose their children's schools. You will find that parents tend to choose those schools which, among other things, seek objective evaluation and you will come to advertise your individual skills with pride.

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