

Unions and socialists have stigmatised private education as a bastion of privilege. But if, as its proponents argue, the state education system is as good as the private system, where does the privilege really lie? Surely with the parents of children at state schools. They get as good an education without paying fees.

The state influences and controls schooling more than it would dare to meddle in other parental responsibilities. Parental guardianship is best for children: few adults would like to have been reared as wards of the state. The reasons are obvious. Children have differing needs, wants, aptitudes and preferences which only parents can know, and nature bonds parents to even the most objectionable brats.

When a government takes over education it tampers with a basic human right. Who will say that 'Freedom of ideas' is not a human right, or say that we hold the right when unfree to choose the ideas we take the trouble to master?

Poor parents who cannot afford to educate their brood and irresponsible, ignorant or misguided parents who either do not instruct their children or instruct them unwisely are said to justify state intervention. They do, just as parents who do not feed their children justify state intervention, but the inability or inadequacy of some is not a reason to substitute state guardianship for that of all parents.

Accepting that there are irresponsible and misguided parents it remains impossible to be certain that any particular parent is choosing his child's instruction wrongly. Ideas are not equal but what authority is to say which ideas are right? - Certainly not the government or its minions. History books are full of people now thought to be among the greatest teachers who held and propagated ideas which secular or ecclesiastic governments opposed. Substituting the preferences of the education industry or the teachers' unions for those of 'the government' has proved to be even worse.

Society's problem is to ensure that children who have inadequate or impecunious parents are not denied access to fundamental ideas, including the techniques of literacy and numeracy, about which we can nearly all agree; and do this in a manner that does not substitute an inferior guardianship for parental guardianship.

Children must receive instruction in at least the 3 R's. That much coercion is necessary if all children are to be protected from their own immaturity and their parents' irresponsibility, wrong-headedness or whatever. But most parents are best placed to choose the instruction.

It is true that educating is a skilled activity but that misses the point - so is doctoring, driving an aeroplane and baking.

Parents choose doctors, airlines and bread quite successfully without understanding gastro-enteritis, altimeters or yeast. They evaluate the end product in competitive markets which offer producers high rewards for superior products. How much more care are parents likely to take over the choice of schools?

The worst education, as one might expect, is to be found in those systems where there is no competition. Under Shirley Williams the English homogenised secondary education.

In all but a few places state selective schools were replaced by large comprehensives with standardised curricula under central control. Things like the loony-left-controlled Inner London Education Authority banning Beatrix Potter's 'Peter Rabbit' because it deals with the adventures of 'middle class rabbits' or 'Robinson Crusoe' because it supports developmental capitalism are among the results.

Poor black parents in London are pinching and scraping to find fees to get their children out of the ILEA system and to private schools like the John Loughborough, which is run by the Seventh-Day Adventists and committed to instilling high standards of moral conduct as well as a good education.

In Britain and Australia, parents who send their children to private schools pay not only fees but also taxes to maintain the public schools. The double burden effectively shuts out most lower-income people from the advantages of private education.

Furthermore, once competition is removed, it is very hard for poor parents to control what is being taught to their children: parents who make sacrifices to give their children the opportunity to enter careers in medicine, engineering, or technical trades - or who may simply want their children to know the 3 R's - find their children are having their time taken up with non-subjects such as so-called peace studies.

In 1977 the British Taylor Report, which provided for increased representation of parents on governing bodies was condemned by the National Union of Teachers as a 'charter for busybodies'.

In Australia a survey by the Interchurch Trade and Industry Mission recently showed about 7% of those surveyed were unable to fill in a job application form. Parents do not need to be geniuses - or busybodies - to know that their children should be getting an ability to communicate effectively in speech and writing before anything else.

Parents who do not see their children getting these things are coming to believe that the state system is full of teachers who go on strike between lengthy holidays and indulge in hobbies or agitprop under the guise of teaching. Whether this perception is fair can only be tested by offering poor parents the opportunity to try another system.

By funding schools rather than children, and those unequally, the state goes beyond protecting children from bad parents. It is substituting state guardianship for that of all parents.