

Rotary Club of Wellington North

**Joining the Unreal World:
Education Politics in New Zealand**

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JOINING THE UNREAL WORLD: EDUCATION POLITICS IN NEW ZEALAND

In recent years education has become a priority issue for our organisation, and indeed for many other business organisations in New Zealand. Few people need to be persuaded about the importance of education for achieving national goals of higher productivity and social opportunity, nor about the need to ensure that taxpayers receive value for money on the very large outlays we make on education.

There is a great deal that is good about New Zealand education. But a recent report written for our organisation by Stuart Sexton warned of complacency in respect of education standards. A second study by the Porter team was even more critical: "New Zealand's education system has not adequately prepared many New Zealanders to contribute to their own, and the nation's economic well-being." A third study, the *World Competitiveness Report*, rated us poorly for the extent to which the education system meets the needs of a competitive economy.

In recognition of some of these weaknesses, we have seen some very positive developments. Our organisation's first major education research project, undertaken in 1988 by Professor Richard Blandy of Flinders University on the tertiary sector, highlighted the problems of a centrally controlled system which was performing poorly both in terms of efficiency and equity. Since then there has been significant deregulation and corporatisation of the sector. In the case of the polytechnics in particular, previously the most bureaucratically shackled tertiary institutions, the results have been spectacular. They now have much greater autonomy, they are bulk funded on the basis of enrolments, there is much greater responsiveness to client needs and there has been a burgeoning of innovation in course offerings. To my knowledge few, if any, in the sector would now want to turn the clock back.

At the schools level, the previous government established the Picot committee in response to rising public concerns about education performance. Picot also found that there was an overly high degree of centralisation of school administration, that decision making was slow, and that the system was particularly vulnerable to the influence of pressure group politics. The report made the point that in such a system minority groups, in particular, miss out:

"The more centralised the system, the more important it is to have muscle at the centre...[T]he administrative system remains at best paternalistic to those not well attuned to the prevailing professional and bureaucratic norms."

The Picot report argued for decentralisation of educational decision making within a framework of national objectives. This represented a useful advance. However, a weakness of the report was that it focused excessively on management of schools by parent representatives. Parents should not necessarily have to run schools to obtain superior education for their children. The Picot report did not judge it politically expedient to explore some of the normal ways of satisfying consumer demands - through choice and competition in the market. Moreover, as the Sexton report documents, the Picot reforms were watered down in their implementation in the face of opposition from the education establishment. To its credit the present government has been prepared to confront that opposition and put the reform process back on track.

Claudia Wysocki, a highly successful former principal of Kristin School and one of New Zealand's most respected educationalists, has recently written that:

"Education is a highly protected profession and one which does not take kindly to change and the suggestion of public accountability. The PPTA is strongly outspoken whenever its members' job security appears to be under threat. Strikes by teachers have never been about the quality of education. Rather they have been about job security and conditions of employment."

Members of the Education Forum, comprising leaders from the primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors, the school trustees movement and the business community, were well aware of this minefield of education politics when we decided to establish an informal grouping earlier this year. But we were also aware of the dictum of Edmund Burke, quoted by John Graham in his 1989 attack on trends towards mediocrity and social engineering in New Zealand education, that "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." We were under no illusions that standing up and being counted would win friends in certain educational quarters. However, we believed that there was strong community support for an education system which aims for rigorous standards, which reflects consumer choice and which provides more accessible learning alternatives for all. Both these judgments have been validated in full measure.

I have learned a little about the world of education politics in recent months and I will share with you some of my experiences. I doubt, however, that my discoveries are at an end.

- An early insight into what Claudia Wysocki was talking about was the reaction to the Sexton report. Although it was welcomed by the minister of education and many others both publicly and privately, the reaction from the teacher unions bordered on the hysterical. This from the president of the New Zealand Education Institute, Carol Parker:

"The report makes public the Roundtable's real agenda for education. Having wrecked the New Zealand economy and destroyed most of the private sector, big business is now looking round for new investment areas, including education, to privatise and plunder."

As far as I know, nothing is further from the minds of the New Zealand business sector. Ironically, however, a recent *60 Minutes* documentary may have sent a chill up Ms Parker's spine. It reported on a school in Chicago that had been established by a group of major corporations because they found it cheaper to finance a good education for their future workforce than to spend large amounts putting right the educational deficiencies of employees coming out of inner-city public schools. This is perhaps an extreme example of what happens when producers become detached from consumers' needs.

- The same episode taught me that there is a symbiotic relationship between the education unions and the education bureaucracy. The chief executive of the Ministry of Education jumped in with inaccurate comments on the Sexton report, and was supported by the head of the now defunct Parent Advocacy Council. Both groups enjoy close ties with very sympathetic education reporters.

- Another part of the club comprises a number of academic educationalists who can be relied upon to chime in with supporting views. Their efforts are often closer to polemic and propaganda than to academic commentary as one of them, Professor Hugh Lauder of Victoria University, acknowledged at a recent conference. Consider this pearl of his:

"the marketisation of education should be seen as of a piece with the reduction in welfare benefits and the Employment Contracts Act, *namely that the aim of this government is to create a low skilled, low morale, workforce, for a low wage economy*" (italics added).

Similarly Professor Ivan Snook has circulated material under a Massey University letterhead urging members of boards of trustees to oppose bulk funding of teacher salaries. He also has had hallucinations about plans to

"... sell (or preferably give) our schools to big business which will run them at a profit by charging high fees."

I sympathise with the policy remit suggested by Lord Beloff in the United Kingdom for the next Conservative party manifesto:

"The government will not put up with further sabotage of its plans for improving education by the educational establishment... The normal road to teacher training will be academic honours followed by training on the job. All departments of education and institutes of education at universities will be closed."

- Opposed to these schools of thought is a less vocal body of diffused opinion, including teachers and ex-teachers as well as parents, which is concerned about the capture of education by professional groups. There was a mountain of correspondence from such quarters when the establishment of the Education Forum was announced. One letter from a former teacher read:

"Until government and business organisations wake up to the fact that the PPTA is, and I speak quite soberly, one of the most dangerous unions in the country, and is the implacable enemy of excellence in education (favouring the Marxist concept of 'equity of outcome' - i.e. down with the bright) then they haven't grasped the real extent of the problem. The PPTA hate organisations such as the Roundtable."

This may be an overstatement; we enjoy some valuable associations with PPTA representatives and one of them has been invited to the next meeting of the Education Forum. However, it received some support in a recent National Business Review editorial which criticised the government for failing to devise a strategy:

"... to expose teacher unions and many principals as the real enemy in achieving value for money in education. Teacher union leaders are still able to posture as educationalists as they fight to preserve incompetent members' jobs and inflated privileges."

- One 'privilege' that I have discovered recently is the very short length of the New Zealand secondary school year. Secondary school days in New Zealand

total 190 a year compared with 200-220 in a number of European countries and 240 in Japan. We may well wonder why Japan is outstripping the world in educational achievement and technology. Despite this short working year some principals have been complaining of stress at having to work 50-60 hours a week. This is about the average working week of a Korean worker. Last time I met the prime minister he had just completed another 100-hour week. Most chief executives of my acquaintance would be delighted to have their working hours reduced to 50-60 a week. There may be a case for increasing rewards for high-performing principals. One recent set of figures suggested New Zealand principals were relatively lowly paid in relation to some overseas counterparts whereas teachers were relatively highly paid.

- I have also been struck by the huge financial resources of the teacher unions. In just the last three months, they have been reported as spending \$15,000 on a special TV broadcast to air their views on the budget, \$87,000 on a principals' conference on bulk funding and \$100,000 on a planned TV campaign against the bulk funding proposals. PPTA president Shona Hearn told a recent conference:

"[T]he CTU's estimated income for 1991-92 is \$1.6 million. If you compare it with PPTA, you'll find that's only about 28% of our income."

On these figures, the PPTA's budget is around \$5.7 million. It is reported as employing 44 staff. By comparison, the Business Roundtable's budget is well below the CTU's and we employ 4 staff. So much for all the nonsense about the power and resources of business organisations.

- Another thing I have learned is that much of what passes for writing about education is sociological mush. Consider this extract from a book published last year, *Towards Successful Schools*, edited by Hugh Lauder and Cathy Wylie of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research:

"There are further reasons for doubting the plausibility of the technological-meritocratic model - these concern the connection between credentials and jobs. See Moore (1986 and 1988) who rejects the implicit rationality attributed to the connection by neo-Marxist correspondence theorists and technological-meritocratic theorists and their counterparts in economics, neo-classical human classical theorists."

Another example I encountered was at a PPTA conference on the curriculum held in Christchurch earlier this year. A number of teacher friends warned me that this would be an experience in the unreal world. This was quickly confirmed in an address by Professor Richard Bates of Deakin University, Australia, who talked about the corporate state "subjugating mass society to scientific management". He attacked the "ideological" views that had captured both the left and right in the English-speaking world, the dominance of the views of the Australian Treasury in his country, and the influence of think tanks and people like Stuart Sexton. When he finally came to his alternative philosophy, he advocated a "conception of the curriculum as a form of cultural politics." He added a few words about power relations in society, the exercise of power through truth, shared understandings and

networking. He then apologised for this vision being a little obscure, and reverted to bashing the "shabby, outdated, narrow notions of the New Right".

- There is certainly an antipathy to something called the New Right, which in the education context seems to mean broadly a school of thought which seeks to uphold such ideas as excellence, standards, measurement of performance, equality of opportunity (as opposed to outcomes), choice and competition in education. I find the term meaningless but what is ironic is that much of the push for such ideas around the world is coming from the political left.

Currently one of the best known figures in American education is a black politician, Polly Williams, the architect of the first experiment in education vouchers for low income children. Williams is a Wisconsin Democrat who twice served as Jesse Jackson's state campaign manager. She formed a coalition with her Republican colleagues against her own party and the educational establishment (which did everything it could to stop her) and gained support for a 5-year choice programme to give low income children vouchers of US\$2,500 to be used at private schools. Similarly the most widely discussed book on education to appear in the United States last year, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*, was written by two researchers from the left-leaning Brookings Institution. They recommend an approach to education built around parent-student choice and a competitive school system which, they argue, would promote school autonomy and superior student achievement.

Even in union circles in the United States, there is a growing recognition of the problems of the public education system. Albert Shanker, the president of one of the leading teacher unions, acknowledged in a recent article:

"It's time to admit that public education operates like a planned economy, a bureaucratic system in which everybody's role is spelled out in advance and there are few incentives for innovation and productivity. It's no surprise that our school system doesn't improve. It more resembles the communist economy than our own market economy."

The retreat from old ideologies has not proceeded so far in similar circles in New Zealand. Under a headline 'Menial Jobs for Top Brass in Vision of New Zealand', NZEI general secretary Ros Noonan was recently reported as advocating that:

"... all of the high-powered government advisers spend three months of every year working face to face with the public in a shop, or cleaning, or looking after the young or the old."

I struggled to think where I had heard of that vision before. It dawned on me a few days later, reading of the death of Chairman Mao's widow: China's 1960s Cultural Revolution is still alive and well in New Zealand. The world outside New Zealand education unions and universities seems to think the 'use by' date for such ideas has expired.

- Also very much alive in education politics is the national sport of playing the man rather than the ball. Stuart Sexton's report gets dismissed because he is

a foreigner. The Education Forum is a front for the Business Roundtable (according to Ivan Snook, its other 14 members, including his own Vice-Chancellor, are just "patsies"). The questions in its opinion survey are loaded (anticipating this claim we based several of them on a 1987 Department of Education survey). Such tactics may appeal to the party faithful, but I believe they cut little ice with those who are interested in substance rather than propaganda.

- The last discovery I shall mention is perhaps the saddest. There is an extraordinarily low level of courtesy and tolerance of differing views at many educational gatherings. This seems to me an indictment of a profession which we think of as devoted to learning, the pursuit of knowledge and the extension of the life of the mind at the frontiers of understanding. At the PPTA curriculum conference the address of the minister of education was punctuated by hisses and groans. He was subjected at the end of it to a grandstanding speech by a former PPTA president which passed for a vote of thanks. Teachers would rightly decry such boorish behaviour in their classrooms. I was interested to read in the comments section of the conference proceedings that I was not alone in my reactions. As one participant wrote:

"I was frustrated by the handling of the minister's speech and the symposium which attempted to look at the national Curriculum Guidelines afterwards. The atmosphere which built up beforehand meant that many of the things the minister said which I view positively got overlooked. I expect that most teachers will also view the proposal favourably when they get a chance to read the documents and find out that they contain things they have been pushing for since the Curriculum Review."

I believe other aspects of the conduct of the education unions have contributed to marginalising their influence. David Lange recently wrote that he found it easy to deal to secondary school teachers who thought that bad manners substituted for argument. The strike action over the Employment Contracts Bill was extremely disruptive for thousands of parents and children. The recent proposals of the NZEI for organising the teaching of children with disabilities were described as "reprehensible" by a representative of the IHC. The plan to blacklist schools that adopt bulk funding is more in keeping with the tactics of the boilermakers' union than a professional group. It was hardly surprising to hear the president-elect of the PPTA state at the curriculum conference that "No one out there is listening to us." This is a sorry state of affairs: there is a role for education unions, and there is certainly a need for a respected education profession.

No serious participant in the education debate has any interest in slagging New Zealand education or New Zealand teachers. The debate is about how we run our education enterprise. Too many good teachers have become frustrated with the system, its politics and its under-performance, and have opted out. The real interest should be in how teaching and learning can be made more rewarding for those involved in it, and how we can improve our education performance.

In recent months there has been a rather futile debate over New Zealand educational achievement. Defenders of the system usually point to the results of the comparative

IEA studies. Regrettably, these are nowhere near robust enough to draw any general conclusions. The data are extremely sparse and often dated. About all they indicate is that we seemed in the past to fare relatively well in reading and literature and relatively poorly in mathematics. For those who are concerned with trends in the last 10 years they tell us almost nothing. There have been no studies of science since 1970, and none in history, geography, economics or foreign languages other than French. Our knowledge of primary school performance is even more flimsy. There is simply no basis for arguing that we are doing well overall, and there is evidence ranging from the statistics on Maori education to the Porter report which raises concerns. A recent Massey University study also found that social engineering tendencies in education have devalued hard work, excellence and competition - so much so that many young people hide their abilities. According to the president of the Auckland Primary Principals Association, the 1989 NZEI annual meeting agreed that there was little objective evidence on a national scale to judge educational standards. Professor Warwick Elley, an authority in the field of measurement, has also stated that "there is a clear case for more systematic regular assessments of a wide range of curricular objectives." In order to know how well we are doing and to measure improvements, we must have more facts.

It is therefore pleasing that the government is planning to step up national monitoring and diagnostic testing to help students with their learning and give us better information on overall performance. This should be done without allowing the curriculum to be dominated by assessment and without neglecting such things as creative thinking, listening and oral communication, interpersonal skills and skills in learning to learn. The concerns expressed about these dimensions of education have validity. At the same time it is pleasing that the government is reversing some of the directions education policy has taken over the last decade or so. Principals report that parents have had enough of fashionable trends: no exams, no competition, and no discipline. As John Graham has put it:

"New Zealand should and must retain its emphasis on the traditional disciplines, the basic "hard" subjects - English, mathematics, science, languages... To deny our young people the right to study [these] subjects is denying them their heritage and, in fact, discriminates against the very students those who would dilute the curriculum are looking to protect. The socially and economically deprived can only climb out of their position if they are given the opportunity to study international, real subjects."

There is no doubt that such a reorientation of education policies is in line with general public opinion. A 1987 opinion survey undertaken for the Department of Education found that:

"The basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic are rated by far as the most important aspects that should be taught in New Zealand schools today."

It also found clear indications of support for the role of private schools, the abolition of zoning and performance assessment of teachers.

When the Education Forum was formed, it was therefore very confident that its broad philosophy was, as the chairman put it, in line with that of "middle New Zealand." This provoked an outraged letter of disbelief from the principal of a Wellington secondary school telling him to "get off the grass." Accordingly, it was decided to commission another public opinion survey focusing on a similar range of

education issues. The results amply confirmed our beliefs. Among the more interesting findings were substantial support for the government paying fees to private schools up to the equivalent cost of sending a child to a state school; for the use of external examinations; for the government's moves to enable schools to employ non-registered teachers; and for student contributions to tertiary fees. There was strong support for self-management of schools and significant minority support (28 percent) for the concept of bulk funding of teacher salaries. Once again the fierce opposition of education providers to trials of bulk funding (supported by only 10 out of 1167 schools, or fewer than 1 percent, according to a Primary Principals' Federation survey), is out of line with community opinion.

The survey shows clearly that the public believes there is scope for improvement in New Zealand education. Improvement always requires change, and change is always threatening to some interests. That is what the debate about the Picot reforms was all about and what we are now seeing with the current government's education initiatives. None of the purported arguments against bulk funding - a system which distributes funding far more fairly between schools according to pupil enrolments and allows better management of overall resources - stands up to scrutiny. We recently had an insight into what is really going on in the reported comments of a Dargaville principal. He acknowledged the benefits of bulk funding for children at his school but went on to say:

"I'm a branch president of the New Zealand Educational Institute, and I'm the industrial officer. I have to follow the dictates of my union and vote against it."

What we are actually witnessing, as with the Picot reforms, is a debate about power - about whether providers of education should continue to call the shots in a world where a "teachers know best" and "one best system" philosophy applies, or whether, as in other parts of the economy, consumers should be sovereign and allowed to exercise their diverse preferences.

The naked self-interest of some in the teacher union movement and the contempt of trade union bosses for the rights of parents and trustees to choose how their school is managed was perfectly illustrated by the reaction to the decision by Westlake Girls High School, one of the country's top secondary schools in achievement and reputation, to trial bulk funding. The message to Westlake from a PPTA branch was:

"Nga Tapuwae PPTA branch condemns your school Board of Trustees and Principal for deciding to become part of the government's anti-teacher bulk funding trial ... Bulk funding will mean the end of a national 'Award' for teachers' pay and conditions. We will be competing for jobs against each other ... [W]e must oppose bulk funding in the strongest possible way to defend our rights and conditions ... Nga Tapuwae PPTA will do all in its power to enhance the PPTA black ban on applying for jobs at Westlake Girls until bulk funding is dropped."

No document could bear out more accurately the assessment of the National Business Review in an editorial last week that:

"Bulk funding was ... resisted as a way to prevent the organised teachers movement from losing any of the considerable powers they wield over the schools that employ them. No business or other outside-funded organisation

would allow a trade union to dictate how they should be run. Schools are no different."

The clash between provider and consumer interests is not new. We have seen it before in many contexts, such as the debate over industry protection. Many New Zealand businesses used to think that producer interests came first, and consumers should accept what they chose to offer them - often shoddy and over-priced goods. New Zealand business has come to recognise that its only role and basis for social acceptance is to compete to serve consumer interests. That debate is now over. Likewise I suspect bulk funding is an idea that is doomed to succeed.

While some protected interests may be affected, I believe the standing of competent teachers can only increase in a more competitive, consumer-driven education system. Teachers should enjoy high esteem in our community. The recent Heylen survey was no more than moderately encouraging on that score, with only a little over half the population holding them in high regard. As a society I believe we should celebrate the achievements of good teachers. I have found the contact in the Education Forum with outstanding educators like Alison Gernhoefer, Pat Lynch, Neil Waters and John Hinchcliff enormously stimulating. But we should also know about the achievements of top classroom teachers, the sort that can really make a difference between whether school is a dispiriting and under-achieving experience for children or an entree to life's chances.

We have such teachers. I met some when I spent half a day at Porirua College recently. It is a myth that good teachers and good schools can't succeed even in the toughest environment; too many excuses are made in this regard. If you don't believe me, go to your local video store and borrow a copy of *Stand and Deliver*, recently described in a Wall Street Journal editorial as one of the most inspiring movies ever made about education.

The film's teacher-hero is Jaime Escalante, a Bolivian immigrant who since 1979 has helped an astounding 576 under-achieving, largely Hispanic, students from one of the worst areas of Los Angeles to pass the College Board's rigorous Advanced Placement test.

Stand and Deliver tells how in 1982 Mr Escalante got his first 18 students to pass the test. College Board officials were suspicious that inner-city students at a school on the verge of losing its academic accreditation could do so well. They accused the students of cheating and invalidated the test results. Twelve of the students decided to retake the test and all passed with high scores.

The success of Mr Escalante has reinvigorated the school. Its seniors rank among the best in all subjects in the huge Los Angeles school system. Tough administrators have broken the back of gang influence among students. Many of Mr Escalante's students have gone on to become doctors or engineers.

Mr Escalante insists that he isn't unique. "Lots of teachers can do what I do," he told the Wall Street Journal. "They just have to care about teaching more than they care about the system." He also believes that the local teachers union spends too much time protecting time-servers.

The clear message of *Stand and Deliver* is that a combination of discipline, hard work, inspiration and concern can take students who have been given up for lost by the system and help them succeed. The Wall Street Journal concluded that:

"The best way to break up the rigid bureaucracies that discourage more innovative teaching is to support a programme of competitive choice in education that will allow more teachers like Jaime Escalante to thrive."

There might be a message here for New Zealand.