Parents’ Choice in Education

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E. G. WEST attacks the fashionable notion that education needs increasing state financing and state control. He gives reasons for thinking the opposite: that it would be more progressive, more efficient, and more healthy if it were taken as far as possible from the state and the influence of parents were increased in a system of competing private education.

Those who exert themselves most in pointing to supposed economic failures in our society usually get themselves particularly excited when they get round to education. For here they know that they are always assured of a willing and expectant audience. All men are equally wise about the need for a good education; to assert that we need more of it is to be a good chap in any company. It is only when the more independent persist with the question of how education should grow that the irritations begin. Thus Mr John Vaizey in Encounter, July 1963, answered his own question of why a trebling of expenditure between 1938 and 1963 had still not begun to transform British society by pointing to the crucial need for more places in higher education, in other words more public expenditure on it. No doubt when this gap is filled such critics will point to deficiencies in other parts of the system. Meanwhile, increased public expenditure on education can always be relied upon to produce at least the discovery of the need for still more public expenditure.

The real failure of our system stems from the very success of these critics in persuading us that the only way to assuage our guilt feelings on education is constantly to resort to the public purse until the proportion of our national income devoted to it places us high in some international league table. The Ministry of Education is triumphant that education’s share of the national income is now about

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4.9 per cent compared with 3.1 per cent in 1951. But when should we relax? When it is 5 per cent? 10 per cent? 25 per cent? Within the private sector any announcement that total costs have increased meets with the immediate suspicion that inefficiency has probably crept in. It is time we considered this possibility too in state education. For nobody has yet proved that it is impossible to get more education from constant or even declining expenditure. If we rely upon dispersed decision-making in the private sector to keep a downward pressure on costs and an upward pressure on quality, there seems to be no good reason why we should not also attempt to incorporate it where possible in the public sector. That there are, for instance, far more parents than state education administrators suggests the need for a serious investigation into the possibility of reducing the strong predominance of the paid official.

Do officials know better than parents?

It is natural that officials think they always know best. It would be unnatural if education officials ever claimed that the system of instruction they administered was so successful as to turn out people who could judge at least as well as they could. Thus at present it is irritating to them, for instance, that too many of us want schools that are 'streamed' instead of 'unstreamed', or exercise discipline instead of 'free discipline', or are traditional instead of comprehensive. They still insist on over-ruling us even when we remind them that they themselves are divided on all these alternatives. But their biggest irritation occurs when the odd citizen questions the wisdom of that 'great' 1944 Education Act for having turned out to be the most ingenious piece of parental manipulation of all time. It was this Act which empowered the state to protect children from an education unsuitable to their 'age, ability and aptitude', a secret formula known apparently only to Directors of Education. Meanwhile, no doubt, education officials are impatiently waiting the genius in political theory who can explain convincingly why parental judgement is supposed to be so inadequate to choose the 'right' schoolmaster directly and yet
adequate enough to choose the 'right' government representative to secure the schoolmaster indirectly.

Most citizens undoubtedly accept in principle that the state has specially protective duties towards children since they are among the most defenceless of its members. Most would also accept the corollary that in some cases the state has to protect children against negligent parents. But fuzziness begins when the average person tries to conceive of proper machinery for state control. To some theorists the $state$, especially in the educational context, is an abstract father figure beyond all reproach. Even for some to whom 'the state' does manage to manifest itself in real flesh and blood officials and representatives, there is probably still some lingering intuition that these mortals are somehow 'different'. How else can we possibly begin to understand the evolution of the curiously cumbrous apparatus through which the state now attempts to fulfil its educational obligations? But apparent schizophrenia among voters is nothing compared with that of the state. For see how differently it responds to similar duties in different contexts. Protection of a child against starvation and malnutrition is presumably just as important as protection against ignorance. It is difficult to envisage, however, that any government in its anxiety to see that children have minimum standards of food and clothing would pass laws for compulsory and universal eating or increase taxes and rates in order to provide children's food 'free' at local authority kitchens or shops. It is still more difficult to imagine that most people would unquestioningly accept this system, especially if it had developed to the stage where for 'administrative reasons' parents were allocated shops which happened to be nearest to their homes; or that any complaint or desire to change their pre-selected shops should be dealt with by special and semi-judicial enquiry after a formal appointment with the local 'Child Food Officer' or by Pressure upon their representatives on the local 'Child Food Committee' or upon their local MP. Yet such measures are typical of English state education as it has evolved by historical accident or administrative expediency.

Parents in revolt
In some quarters, at least, there is a new awareness of all this incongruity. Recently established parent organisations for instance, are now voicing their discontent. If, with the abolition of resale price maintenance, parents can be given more freedom to buy from the more efficient supplier in retailing, why not in education? Such cumulative murmurings, it seems, have even reached the hustings:

'We aim to enlarge the area of individual choice, whether it be the housewife deciding what to buy, the industrialist deciding what to manufacture or the parent deciding what sort of education he wants for his children . . .' (italics supplied) Sir Alec Douglas-Home, at Swansea, January 20th, 1964.

It is difficult to know as yet what to make of this pronouncement since it was followed up in the very next week by the announcement of the intention to raise the school leaving age to 16 - a measure which substantially reduces the choice of many parents who agree with the complaints of their 15-year-olds that they are wasting their time at school. Nevertheless, discussion will continue. On what can the growing criticism be expected to focus its first attention?

Parts of the 1944 Education Act are obviously ripe for reform. Consider for instance Section 76, which was an apparent attempt to see that justice was done, or seen to be done, to the parent:

...as far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils are to be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.

It will be noticed that this provision precludes the parent from making the final judgement about what instruction is 'efficient'. It is not surprising that this section has now become a dead letter. Theoretically the parents' influence could make itself most effective over the choice of school, just as the parents' choice of shop for the child's clothing is effective in encouraging the supply of the most efficient product. In practice the parent has only 'Hobson's choice' as a rule. If, for instance, he does not approve of the primary school allotted to his child because it is of the 'free discipline'
variety, and prefers the 'one with the 'old-fashioned stricter methods' a little further away, there is nothing to stop him voicing his preference. It will not get him far. The parent will usually be met with formidable bureaucratic reasons why his choice cannot be exercised. If the Authority cannot prove that the parents' wishes would involve 'unreasonable public expenditure' (Section 76), they can always resort to the old formula that the chosen education does not suit the 'age, ability and aptitude' of the child.

**Zoning prevents choice of school**

The process which, whatever its purpose, holds back parents from a school which has become noticeably successful and keeps their children in inferior schools is known in official circles as 'zoning'. Educationists approve of 'zoning' on the ground that under free choice it is only the middleclass parents who are quick off the mark to transfer their children to the improving schools. If this is allowed, the 'experts' argue, it will 'tip the social balance' so that there remain predominantly middle-class (good) schools and working-class (bad) schools.

Up to now ordinary folk have been too readily silenced by such slick speculation. But now that people's commercial imagination is being stimulated by the new freedoms in shopping they may soon be able to do a little theorising for themselves. They will see perhaps that competition does not necessarily result in the good getting better and the bad getting worse. On the contrary, the standards of suppliers usually rise, keeping reasonably in step with one another. With really free choice, an initial trickle of children transferring to efficient schools would threaten, in the eyes of the inefficient school directors and staff, to become a tidal wave of mass emigration and so draw public attention to their inefficiency. Automatically the inefficient would be prodded into removing the source of their weakness and to catch up with the efficient. The ability of parents to 'vote with their children's feet' is ultimately the only sure way of getting parental wishes really respected, and it would certainly be more powerful than all the parents' associations put together.
So far, however, the recently established campaign groups of parents seem to be resigned to a policy of pressing for improvements of the state service within the present framework, an attitude which involves the assumption that the state should continue to play the predominant part. It will be surprising if these tactics meet with much more success than, say, the representations of Consumer Councils to the nationalised industries. Improvements in the coal industry, for instance, are far more likely to have come from the stimulus of a major competitor such as oil rather than from the meagre representations of consumers on official committees. By contrast, the most solemn inadequacy in state education is the absence of any such powerful competitor. Private schools cannot properly fulfil this role under the present system, since their competitive potential has been crippled by state opponents with the advantage of always being able to dip into public revenues to cover their costs. Incidentally the lack of market discipline on these costs may hide waste, inefficiency or worse. Public revenue replenishments, of course, flow in from compulsory taxes, the yields from which quietly and automatically increase as national income grows.

The only way out of this dilemma is to facilitate the return to a much wider system of fee-paid schools which would use mainly fee revenues to bid for teachers, equipment, buildings. I say a return to such a system since most parents were paying fees for the privately sponsored education of their children a century ago (a fact rarely taught in social history today). To anticipate the protests against such suggestions it is necessary to review old arguments which attempted to justify the original provision of state schools and see whether they are true today.

**State monopoly in education**

First, it was claimed that a state school was often needed to offset the tendency of monopoly in one region by a private school. This anti-monopoly argument now stands on its head. The substitution of state monopolies for private ones makes the situation worse, for statutory monopolies more easily entrench themselves. 'With a private monopoly at least there is a chance that one day it will be challenged by a newcomer. This chance is much less likely under the state system because a
monopoly state school can ward off any challenger by using the advantages of public revenues to outbid it. If, for instance, the salaries of State school teachers are paid out of compulsory taxes, then, in the words of Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*, such salaries:

put the private teachers who would pretend to come into competition with them, in the same state with a merchant who attempts to trade without a bounty in competition with those who trade with a considerable one.

The second argument was that parents cannot make wise choices if left to their own devices because they do not know all the relevant facts. (This paternalistic view is often held by people who send their own children to private schools: are they in favour of a state 'soup kitchen' education only for other people?) Such an argument assumes that the state's choice of the best kind of education is based on unanimous professional advice. But teachers and educationists do not speak with one voice; their advice had swung from one extreme to another in the past. Above all the argument that parents cannot be trusted to avoid bad private schools is irrelevant, because all private schools are vetted by the Minister. Indeed, over 60 per cent of private pupils are in schools recognised by him as efficient. The remainder have to be registered by the Ministry, which implies that they are not inefficient.

Third, would the alternative of a free market result in the rich getting the best, when uniformity of access to schools is needed for better social cohesion? Put this way, of course, the argument cannot be held at the same time as the second one because it makes contradictory assumptions about the capacity of parents in judging which is best. But it resolves itself into an objection to all the superior educational influences that children have by living in richer homes or in homes in which parents put education relatively high in their scale of values. Ultimately, this is an attack on richness are such and should be made openly in proposals for more progressive taxation. If we decide that we cannot do without money incentives, then inequality of income has to be accepted, and no educational purpose is served by trying to disguise it from children or by protesting, as, for instance, Elizabeth Young did in
Encounter that 'the public schools have a higher pupil-teacher ratio because they are able to pay their teachers more.

If we really want equality of opportunity, how is it nobody ever argues that we should be spending, for instance, about twenty times more on physically and mentally handicapped children, or three or four times more on some, West Indian or Pakistani children, than we do on the poorest ones in our state schools? Afore important, the state system, far from achieving social mixing, makes things worse, since working class people tend to live in working-class districts so ensuring that the local primary school takes predominantly working class children. Rationing of school places geographically is the obvious and easiest criterion which presents itself to official administrators. Arguments in terms of Mr R.H.S. Crossman's 'educational apartheid' or Mr Vaizey's 'caste divisions' should be preceded by attempts to solve the apparently inherent contradictions in the state system which is supposed to put these wrongs right. (Another fact of life is of course that most people, including many opposed to private education in principle but who now send their own children to private schools, do not really wish, to abolish independent schools anyway.)

Who can pay fees?

Finally, are some parents too poor to pay school fees, or even if they could afford it would not value it sufficiently if left to themselves? This was the way that the classical economist, Nassau Senior, argued for temporary state intervention in the nineteenth century. Even at that time, nevertheless, when education was not compulsory the Royal Commission on Education of 1861, of which Senior was a member, reported that ninety five per cent of parents throughout the country were buying some education for their children. Their fees were subsidised by endowments and grants from the state, but there seems to have been a lively desire to pay more where specially good tuition was offered. Moreover, Senior openly argued that the poor were themselves most important contributors to the state subsidies since taxation was in those days very regressive, falling heavily on
commodities in daily consumption. Although theoretically we cannot today identify which tax pays for which state service, it is useful to keep informing ourselves about the sources of government funds. The £885 million quietly collected on tobacco alone in 1962 was more than the current expenditure of £789 million on education. Taxes on spending, many of which are acknowledged to be regressive, amounted in 1961 to £2,759 million or more than two-fifths of all taxation. The net is wide: it includes taxes on petrol, oil, motor vehicles, beer and tobacco, besides stamp duties, import duties and purchase tax. It is hardly surprising that many people are too poor to afford private education.

But let us suppose for a moment that these indirect taxes were drastically reduced. Should we suppose that after nearly a century of state education the ordinary person would go out and squander the balance? And supposing the state decided to contract slowly out of education, as it would be forced to do if its indirect tax revenues were cut, so that it could no longer supply 'free' education: why should we not presume that ordinary people would devote much of their balance to the purchase of education for their children? They vote for their own money to be spent on education in public, judging by its prominence in election manifestos, why do we assume so readily that they would not spend it directly in private? One thing could be certain, the voice of the parent would receive far more respect once he was restored to a more central position in matters of the purse. And the resulting improvements in efficiency would be shared even by those who would voluntarily spend least of all on their children.

**Vouchers for education**

Attempts to strengthen the private sector have so far not been very successful. It is unfortunate, for instance, that proposals for state bursaries to enable children of poor parents to stand a chance of entering the public schools (on the lines of the Fleming Report) have never amounted to much. Whilst the government has lacked enthusiasm on this kind of suggestion, the local authorities have been more interested in the development of their own schools. A more modest plan which may
stand a sporting political chance in view of the alarm over the impending large shortage of primary school teachers would be to explore the possibility of enabling some parents to do a deal with the government at the very commencement of their children’s education.

Supposing the central and local government has to be ready to spend £60 per annum for the schooling of a child entering school at 5 years old. If this money were simply handed to the parent in the form of a voucher so that it was earmarked for education, the government would be relieved of one more headache. There are several technical ways of doing this - an extra coupon in the family allowance book, for instance.

It will, of course, be objected that this measure would give money to rich parents who would have sent their child to an independent school anyway and that, therefore, the government would be involved in a net increase in its payments from a fixed revenue. But this objection refers to inequality of income generally, so it can be treated in the context of taxation as a whole. A second criticism might be that although the immediate pressure on the most congested state schools would be eased, the increase in spending in the private sector would either simply increase the size of the queues already waiting to get into the private schools, or, if places were found, there would be more teachers in private schools and less in the state system. But there is evidence to show that not all local authorities are prepared to staff the schools up to the limit of the available supply of teachers. This is especially so at a time of heavy pressure to keep the rates down after the shock of revaluation. Again, independent schools, not being confined to rigid restrictions such as age limits or regional quota systems, can draw upon a wider range of people to staff them. In 1963 the State recruited 30,000 new teachers and fatalistically ‘lost’ 25,000. No doubt the independent schools could find more imaginative ways of cashing in on this pool of expensively trained but shockingly wasted talent if they were confronted with many newly liberated parent customers flourishing their vouchers at their doors. Further,
if parents were given £60 vouchers spendable on schooling, many of them would begin to add to it marginal amounts so boosting the net effective demand for education. The added expenditure would result in a net increase in the recruitment of school teachers through the attraction of higher salaries. If these suggestions are too revolutionary for political acceptance at the moment, at least there would be some virtue in a pilot experiment in a county or borough. It would reveal the extent of the demand for a wider choice of school and the other possibilities about staffing mentioned above.

The family versus the expert

It has been unnecessary to become involved in the deeper philosophical question whether a parent should have the right to absolute control over his child. In a free society no one individual, whether parent or state official, should have absolute power over another. The function of supervising a child is such a delicate personal matter that it is probably best to visualise it undogmatically in the form of a balance of influence between one individual, the parent, who by nature is closer to the child and therefore has the best opportunity for gaining a comprehensive knowledge of its needs, and other individuals, perhaps appointed by the state, who can at least check that the child is not being neglected. But generally, if the family is regarded as a desirable institution the onus should be upon those who wish to interfere with it. That parents will make mistakes is not a sufficient argument for placing them under the present degree of constraint. It has to be shown not only that they will fail to learn from their mistakes but also that the mistakes made by state representatives will not be bigger still. But whatever happens we must not allow the 'expert' to be the only judge of mistakes. For the moment we do, we hand over gratuitous support to those, such as Mr Vaizey, who tells us in his *Economics of Education* that reliance on the family as the basic unit of society 'is not one that would readily stand up to sociological analysis', and that education can be regarded as 'an intervention to save the individual from the family'. Since when did we start drifting into a 1984 world in

2 The proposal for education vouchers is worked out by Professors A.T. Peacock and Jack Wiseman in *Education for Democrats*, Hobart Paper 25, Institute of Economic Affairs, 1964.
which sociologists not only received their salaries from us via compulsory taxation but made our value judgements for us as well?

**More choice would increase expenditure on education**

The present method of state intervention in education is not divinely inspired. The attitude is all too common that private schools are 'the ones that got away' and that a method should be devised to 'integrate' them somehow into the public service. Why should we not equally consider the opposite possibility: whether states schools should be 'integrated' into the private system, especially where it can be shown to be superior? The state would still be accepting its major responsibility to supervise the quality and quantity of education. There is never any need for a government to provide the schooling of children if the parents would do it any way. Local experiments are continually needed to see what parents would do with fuller responsibility and given quid pro quo tax reductions, or at least money vouchers. If the experiments showed that parents could still not exercise sufficient responsibility, then something would be very much wrong with the state schools that produced them. If, on the other hand, the parents accepted their new powers with good sense, then a wider choice of schools would result. The consequent availability of alternatives to state schools would give the parent more power vis a vis local administrators and greater competition and flexibility would result. There is little risk of a parent making a positively bad choice of school since the whole of the private school sector is now underpinned by Ministry inspection and registration.

Parents have one great superiority over the Government or the administrators. Their faults are mainly the corrigible faults of ignorance, not of apathy and prejudice. They have the wish to arrive at a true conclusion, the data are before them, they must be the judges in the last resort, why should we shrink from making them judges at once?

Such were the words of Sir Robert Lowe on the eve of the revolutionary Education Act of 1870. Some may not care for his opinion, but no one could dispute the framework of alternatives in which it was expressed.
Robbins and higher education

But so accustomed have we become to the idea of the government spending our own money for us on the education of our own children that many do not seem to notice how the state juggernaut is now lurching its way into higher education too. The debate about the Robbins Report did not centre on the question whether the proposed substantial increase of expenditure from £200 million to £750 million by 1980 should be handled mainly by the government or by individuals and families. The participants in this debate argued rather about who was to be the overlord; should we have one or two ministers? Yet the Robbins Report justified this vast increase of public expenditure on the grounds that:

'To spend more on higher education would almost certainly be the average family's individual response.' (Report, page 208.)

In other words, if the state reduced taxation and played a smaller part in higher education, families would buy higher education themselves. And this does not mean only rich families, for remember the vast amount of regressive indirect taxation required - at the 1964 budget it was taxes on beer and tobacco to which the Chancellor resorted in order to find the money for new public expenditure programmes. If people would spend the money on education anyway, why the need for the state to spend it for them via its cumbersome bureaucratic machinery?

If more freedom were restored to the family by tax reduction, the question whether there should be one or two ministers would settle itself more easily, For in that case there would be thousands of ministers of education, as many in fact as there are heads of households. If we are to accept with such fatalism the tendency of our tax system to monopolise the sources of educational finance, then the government will inevitably intervene in education more and more. The reverse policy, that of reducing taxation, is the only way in which we can secure that the control of education is shared by all and not confined to academics and government administrators.
Many writers on education and many educationists tell us that increased choice in education is only possible if we have more education. The argument here is the converse, that we can have more education in the end only if we have increased choice. Parents must not be put off with the argument that choice is impossible because of shortages. For choices in education are in fact made every day when new appointments are being negotiated, new curricula introduced new schools built. These choices need not be the monopoly of officials if the parent’s wishes are taken into fuller account by allowing him the freedom not only to vote periodically at the ballot box but also to choose directly from the day-to-day supply. Grown-up people in an affluent society should demand nothing less, especially if they wish their children to enjoy still greater affluence in the future.