

Smash the Lems!

Professor Anthony Flew

At the height of the Great Comprehensive Revolution Prime Minister Wilson – a.k.a. Flash Harry – pretended that the object of the exercise was "to provide a grammar-school education for all." This claim was not merely – as, coming from that source, was to be expected – false. It was also, strictly, incoherent. For grammar schools are, or were, necessarily selective; whereas comprehensives are, equally necessarily, not. For all lovers of liberty, and for all enemies of socialism, the more honest and more appealing slogan would instead be: 'an independent education for all!'

In order to achieve this libertarian ideal we shall have to break up the Local Education Authorities (LEAs), more properly called Local Education Monopolies (LEMs). Hence a title for the present paper perhaps more suggestive of the SWP than the Libertarian Alliance. Yet a moment's thought will reveal that LEM is indeed the apt acronym. For these LEMs own and control all the state schools in their areas. At the primary and secondary levels – our immediate concern here – roughly 94% of the children in the relevant cohorts in fact attend a local state school. Is there any anti-monopoly legislation anywhere in the world which would not be activated long before a single supplier had achieved an 80%, much less a 94%, market share? In the present particular case, however, the situation is made immeasurably more scandalous by predatory pricing. For how else can we properly characterize the not merely permitted but legally mandated practice by which state schools levy no charges at all upon the parents to whose children they supply educational service?

Consumers Should Come First

What is, and should be seen as, enormously significant, is that, despite this 100% taxpayer support for these all too literally price-less state schools, and despite the cruelly

heavy taxation levied upon parents and non-parents alike in order to pay for these and other 'free' goods, even as many as 6% of children have parents able and willing to pay twice-once through heavy general taxation and then again through private school fees. They do it so that their children can have the perceived benefits of a National Union of Teachers (NUT)-free and independent education.

That snide reference to the NUT, the largest of the state sector teachers' unions, is to the point. For its Executive is strongly committed, along with both the Labour Party and Alliance, to the destruction of that tiny, competing private sector. There is a characteristically shrewd and realistic sentence from the great Smith which ought to be applied far more often than it is to this anti-competitive collusion, and to the resulting exploitation of consumers, by the vested interests of the supply side in state education:

"people of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation end in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices"

(The Wealth of Nations, I [x] c)

Now for libertarians the ultimate, or perhaps only the penultimate, answer is a comprehensive voucher scheme; comprehensive in the sense that the vouchers would be valid for use at any school, whether state or private. It is perhaps not the ultimate but the penultimate answer; since ideally, libertarians would presumably want: first to denationalise the lot; then to get the state off everyone's back by means of swingeing tax cuts; and finally to have all school fees paid directly by all but only the parents of the children in the relevant cohorts. (As late as 1969 tobacco taxes raised substantially more than was spent on state education. And why, after all, should people who have chosen not to have children pay taxes to educate the children other people have chosen to have and to raise?)

More Choice - the Answer

A comprehensive voucher scheme, however, is something which especially in a country with so tiny and so threatened a private sector in education - it would be sensible to introduce only at the beginning of a parliament. For it takes time to get such a programme working, and thus to establish vouchers as an entitlement which it becomes 'politically impossible' to take away. Nor will people spend and labour to set up entirely new independent schools so long as they have reason to fear that these will be destroyed by some subsequent swing of the electoral pendulum.

So, while we may - and no doubt both will and should - argue for the voucher as the next step but one, the short-term problem is to make the best of the remarkably radical proposals outlined in the 1987 Conservative Party manifesto. And 'make the best of' here means: not reluctantly reconcile ourselves to live with; but ponder what strengthening and improving amendments it might be practically possible to get through. We can be sure that both the official Opposition parties and opponents in the Conservative ranks - to say nothing of all the state supply side interest groups - will be working flat out to draw the liberalizing teeth of all truly progressive proposals.

There are, in this case, two essentials of market liberalization. First, parents must be able to withdraw their children from one school and enter them into another with as little fuss, and as little possibly embarrassing personal confrontation as is now required when they choose to get their cars, groceries or any other ordinarily marketable goods from one supplier and not another. At present parents can be directed to send their children to one particular LEM school, and to keep them there, with no right of exit. Often children are thus conscripted to keep up pupil numbers in schools which might otherwise be forced to shut down - thus saving the jobs of locally unwanted and unneeded teachers and others. How the management and staffs of shops and chains of shops must envy the LEMs their power to compel customers to come and keep coming; without any of that weary struggle to attract

business, and to keep it, which is so familiar to those who to profit have to serve!

The second essential is that, from whatever pockets they are immediately or ultimately derived, the funds must follow the children directly. Only when and insofar as this becomes the rule will the teachers in a school see the withdrawal of pupils as a threat to their individual futures, and be able to react accordingly; just as independent shopkeepers and independent manufacturers see withdrawals of custom as a threat which must in their most urgent judgement be overcome. As Dr Johnson said, with his usual shattering good sense:

"Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

But of course there should always be not only sticks but carrots. And it is only when and insofar as the funds follow the children to school, and the individual schools themselves - by whoever or whatever each is owned - be managed as individual profit centres, that the most effective teachers, and the teachers in whatever are from time to time the shortage subjects, become able to command higher salaries than the rest. For now it becomes obvious that it is they who attract and hold the extra pupils, followed immediately by the extra funds. Once again the great Smith put his finger on the heart of the matter when he said of (university) teachers in endowed as opposed to fee-dependent institutions:

"Their subsistence, so far as it arise from their salaries, is evidently derived from a fund altogether independent of their success and reputation in their particular profession" (*The Wealth of Nations*, V [i] f)

To most readers of Free Life proposals to break up the LEMs and to introduce the incentives and disciplines of the market into the business of supplying educational services is likely to appear just self-evidently good. But if we are to persuade a wider public to demand and to sustain radical measures directed towards this end, then we shall have to show that the present monopolistic set up is producing wretched results, and that the only real hope of improvement

lies in a fundamental shift in the balance of power from the supply to demand side. It was indeed this task to which I turned my hand in writing *Power to the Parents!: Essays in the Philosophy of Independent Education*, a book to be published soon by the Sherwood Press.

More Resources Doesn't Equal Better Schooling

The first obstacle to overcome here is the spectacularly false assumption – an assumption nevertheless still almost universally, made both within and in external discussions, about what Tom Lehrer would have called Edbiz - the assumption that education output is always, directly and regularly, proportionate to resources input. Perhaps the most bizarre instance of the making of this assumption is the practice of describing *increases* of teacher/pupil ratios as *improvements*.

In any other industry, and in default of clear evidence of at least proportionate output improvements, staffing increases would be recognized as proving a progressive and monstrous overmanning. Yet the fact is that no one has ever been able to refer us to any British research evidence suggesting that such staffing increases have in truth resulted in any improvements much less some substantial and directly proportionate improvement, in actual teaching effectiveness. Indeed the weight of the abundant US evidence indicates that, if there is any correlation, it is negative; which ought not to surprise those who know that these increases have often been achieved by admitting into teacher training virtually anything which can move and talk. (In 1975, for instance, over 40% of those accepted had no O-level or equivalent in mathematics, and virtually all of these were eventually turned out as supposedly qualified teachers; without of course, any serious attempt to overcome this or other similar individual disqualifications.)

In the last thirty years public spending under the budget rubric 'Education' has in real terms quadrupled, while as a proportion of the national income it has doubled. Only very recently has the general public been treated to a few glimpses of the truth that we

often receive wretchedly poor value for the money which the tax collectors extort from us to give to the politicians to spend on 'Education'; a truth which the taxeaters of Edbiz are eager to conceal, yet which has to be seized if we are fully to realize that none of the big problems will be solved by simply stopping 'the Cuts' - what cuts? - and pouring still more tax money into the LEMS. None of this should be surprising. Nor will it in fact surprise any who have taken the measure of monopoly, and especially of state monopoly.

For example: Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (the HMIs) have in the past been known to rebuke Conservative controlled LEMs with admittedly above average educational results but below average expenditure. But in the last twelve months they inspected 200 science lessons in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), by far the largest of the LEMS, reporting that 55% of these were 'unsatisfactory'. Very substantial minorities of the whole 200 were judged to be idly unprepared and/or grossly incompetent. This time even the HMIs were unable to avoid pointing out that this disgraceful performance certainly could not be attributed to any shortage of funds or equipment. In fact ILEA spends more per pupil head than any other LEM, and 40% more than the national average, getting in return some of the worst if not the very worst results.

The second big obstacle in the way of anyone wanting to persuade the general public to demand and to sustain measures to break up the LEMS, and to encourage inter-school competition for custom. Is the lack of information about educational outputs. Yet this very lack of information, and the nature and the extent of opposition to all attempts at remedy, is itself by far the strongest reason for suspecting that a lot has been and is going very wrong. Why, if the object really is to ensure that all our children leave school having achieved the highest levels of educational attainment of which they are individually capable, are 'the bottom 40%' allowed to leave without taking any independently assessed test in anything? There are parallel and more particular questions to be pressed about the lack of numeracy which are becoming ever more crucial conditions of employability.

In every case where either there are no such established tests or, though tests are taken, there is opposition to revealing the results, we have to raise the Roman lawyer's question: '*Cui bono?*'. Since no one has ever met any Head Teachers who were not eager to tell the world about the successes achieved in their schools, we know how to interpret the "total opposition" of the NUT and other public teachers' unions to the clause in the 1980 Education Act which required all state schools to publish the results achieved in public examinations. Many if not perhaps most of their members had teaching failures to hide. The NUT Executive knew it, and was doing its best to ensure that the information should not get into the hands of those who have most need and right to have it. These, we need scarcely say, are the parents of those children who were attending or might later attend the schools in which most of these failures are occurring; and who, if only they had the right of exit, would be able to search out a more promising alternative school.

Sell education Like Soap powder!

Finally, in order to bring out how extraordinary, and how intolerably authoritarian and statist, established British educational arrangements now are, consider some words from The Chief Wet, always known to *Private Eye* as The Grocer. (it is odd, is it not, that the man who introduced the term 'wet' into Conservative political discourse should himself have become the The Chief Wet?) For Edward Heath once dismissed the idea of the voucher as a "crackbrained scheme for selling education like canned spuds in a supermarket."

To see that this is indeed its greatest merit, let us for one moment imagine how it would be if groceries were marketed in this country as educational services are. Presumably the socialist argument would then be that it is even more important that all our children should be properly fed than that they should be adequately educated. (Indeed it is more important, since if they starve to early death they will not survive to go to school.) Next, since some parents might neglect to feed their children, and since it is intolerable that anyone should get private gain from supplying the necessities of life, it becomes

clear that all children must eat in Children's Mess Halls (CMHs), to be owned and operated by Local Messing Monopolies (LMMs).

This granted, it is but a short step to a socially and gustatorially comprehensive messing system, with no 'divisive' creaming off of the heartiest and least fastidious caters. So no parental choice can be allowed: every child will have to eat at the CMH prescribed by officials of his LMM. And, of course, the Labour Party and the Alliance will want to shut down any independent restaurants, offering meals to children whose parents are able and prepared to pay. With these proposals in their opponents' manifestoes a fourth term for the Conservatives should be in the bag!

Free Life