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The problem of Picot: A comparative critique

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ABSTRACT

In July, 1987, the Taskforce to Review Education Administration in New Zealand was established. The Taskforce report, Administering for Excellence (henceforth the Picot Report), was submitted in April, 1988. The thesis of this paper is that the needs of education in New Zealand would have been better served had the Taskforce adopted a comparative and problem-solving approach, along the lines proposed by Brian Holmes. It must be said immediately that some of the recommendations are so close to similar recommendations made by the 1986 Ministry Structures Project Team in Victoria, Australia, that it is quite possible overseas data were in fact considered. The contention of the comparativisit is that such matters be considered explicitly, and within a theoretical framework that allows for sound predictions based on both local and overseas analyses.

In July, 1987, the Taskforce to Review Education Administration in New Zealand was given five terms of reference. The first four spelled out the areas of review while the fifth gave the Taskforce freedom to look at anything they considered important.[1] As has been common in such reviews, the review procedure was not specified in advance. The equally common steps of receiving submissions, visits, discussions with relevant people and organisations and specialist reports appear to have been followed. The Letter of Transmittal presumably sums up this procedure in stating 'During the last six months we have had the opportunity to consider more than 700 submissions and to meet and talk with many people and organisations'.[2] The Taskforce report, *Administering for Excellence* (henceforth the Picot Report),[3] was submitted in April, 1988 and is currently (July, 1988) being considered by government. This consideration follows a brief period during which submissions on the report could be made to the Minister of Education.

The thesis of this paper is that the needs of education in New Zealand would have been better served had the Taskforce adopted a comparative and problem-solving approach, along the lines proposed by Brian Holmes.[4] It must be said immediately that some of the recommendations are so close to similar recommendations made by the 1986 Ministry Structures Project Team in Victoria, Australia, that it is quite possible overseas data were in fact considered. The contention of the comparativisit is that such matters be considered explicitly, and within a theoretical framework that allows for sound predictions based on both local and overseas analyses.

Holmes's problem-solving approach comprises five main steps.[5] First, the problem is carefully analysed. This may be taken as including an explicit statement of what the problem consists of, for whom it is a problem, and why. Next, one or more (policy) solutions are outlined. The comparativist here draws on both local information and on knowledge of other systems in proposing possible options for consideration. Thirdly, the 'relevant' factors' are analysed. These include both educational and noneducational considerations along with ideological, political and attitudinal

variables.[6] These factors are assessed or 'weighted', so that the most important can be taken into account in any policy decision. The fourth step is to analyse the logical consequences of putting each policy option into force, using the analysis of relevant factors as a guide. At this point, the comparativist again uses information from overseas systems to help assess likely outcomes. These overseas systems are themselves assessed in terms of the same set of relevant factors established for the country in which the problem is being investigated. The fifth and final step is where the preferred policy is in fact implemented, and the consequences are compared with the predictions of step four. The intention here is to increase knowledge about the whole problem-solving process and to attempt to move toward better predictions and policy advice. With the exception of this fifth step, the Picot Report is now examined in the light of this problem-solving approach.

An analysis of the 'problem' discussed in the Picot report is not an easy task. Nevertheless, within the broad sphere of 'issues in New Zealand educational administration', it would seem that the Taskforce concentrated on six major problems: overcentralisation of decision making: complexity: lack of information: lack of choice: lack of effective management practices; and feelings of powerlessness.[7] It may be argued first that these problems do not affect the same interest groups in the same ways. For example, a high level of centralised decision making - despite concerns expressed about over-involvement of the minister[8] - may be regarded as largely unproblematic for central government, but as a significant problem for principals, school committees and boards of governors. Similarly, a lack of efficient management practices may be seen as a major concern of government in terms, of cost-effectiveness, as well as being problematic for different reasons to students and their parents in terms of the quality of education eventually received. As a final example here, a lack of information affects both administrators and clients of the education process, but the types of information involved - and hence the specific nature of the problem - are arguably very different.

Secondly, it may be argued that these problems are interrelated, but not necessarily to the point of demanding a common solution {or set of solutions). Anticipating the next stage of the problem-solving approach, it is easy to see that a better system of information dissemination may easily be proposed without necessitating change in any of the other problem areas discussed in the report. Similarly, a solution to feelings of powerlessness may life completely outside any structural changes that are possible within the realms of education. If the (set of) problems had been clearly identified in the first stage, it might have been easier for the Taskforce to recognise the very different nature of some of the issues they faced.

The point here, then, is not that the Picot Report supplies an inadequate analysis of what is problematic in education administration, that being a separate question not addressed in this paper, but that the analysis takes six 'serious weaknesses'[9] and analyses them as if they were interdependent aspects of the same problem, affecting the same interest group(s) and therefore admitting a common policy solution. In terms of a Holmes-like analysis, this is simply not the case.

The second step in a problem-solving approach is the formulation of policy options. Here, the Picot Report has taken the somewhat unusual step of presenting just one set of proposals and without prior discussion of any other options. Further, they argue that their set of proposals should be taken up in its entirety.[10] It is certainly not the intention of this paper to duplicate the total review process undertaken by the Taskforce, but a few suggestions are in order.

First, the report does not give reasons for abandoning the strong recommendation emerging from the Education Development Conference of the early 1970s (along with several earlier reviews), urging that the regional educational boards take on greater administrative and professional leadership within a given area.[11] For the comparativist, this proposal is an interesting one, given that this was in part the outcome of the Victorian review carried out in 1986.[12] Indeed the Victorian review would seem to offer a number of other useful parallels: sharp reductions in the number of staff in the central ministry; a streamlining of that ministry with policy co-ordination as a key function; and greater power for both primary and secondary schools in appointments and control of finance. Among the Victorian proposals is also the idea that schools report on their work directly to the

ministry in terms of how well they are succeeding according to their own objectives. In the light of the Taskforce's assumptions of individual competence,[13] it might be wondered why they did not consider this as an option. Indeed, it is not all clear why the Taskforce felt their package of proposals needed to be adopted in its entirety, although their warning about cosmetic reforms leaving the system largely unchanged is a sensible one.[14]

Given, however, that just one set of proposals is offered, the third stage of the problem-solving approach may now be considered. This is the analysis of relevant factors, those aspects of education and society which are most relevant to the problem currently under review. Immediately, there is something of an impasse, for the factors relevant to a problem of information dissemination are not the same as those relating, say, to good management practice. The former might include consideration of current information dissemination by schools, a look at the media in New Zealand, legislation on information, data on literacy rates, and costings for various forms of information dissemination. As well, consideration would be given to research on those involved in educational decision-making and their links with those who disseminate information. While the last consideration would presumably also be included in a list of factors relevant to the problem of inefficient management practices, it is easy to see that other factors relating to management might be quite different. They could presumably include an analysis of current staff training procedures, a look at university and other institutional curricula in areas of management, a review of management models in other large government and non-governmental institutions, and a closer look at the financial costs involved in management.

In two or three of the issues identified in the Picot Report, it is clear that the problem involves questions of local input as opposed to central control. An important relevant factor here is an analysis of sociological data relating to involvement in education. Given the Taskforce's recommendation to set up Boards of Trustees with wide-ranging powers, it seems quite incredible that there is no data offered on such matters as the following. What sorts of people are currently involved in school committees and boards of governors? What numbers typically offer themselves for election to such groups? How many meetings are normally held in a year, and what are the rates of attendance? What percentage of parents in general, and of those on committees in particular, are in full-time jobs? What difficulties (if any), are faced by those governing schools which are very small or in remote areas? What is the general availability of people with financial expertise? Along with information on relevant factors of this type, there is a need to know - at the very least - the numbers of people expected to be involved if the Picot Report's proposals on boards of trustees were to be implemented in full.

A further relevant factor relates to attitudes, ideologies and values. The report does state the underlying values and beliefs of the Taskforce quite clearly, and this is to be commended.[15] Nevertheless, there is no attempt to assess or analyse the current ideological position of government or opposition, no attempt to gauge the extent to which, historically, New Zealanders want local control in their affairs, and no attempt to assess the attitudes of New Zealanders in general towards such matters as equality of opportunity for all, especially in regard to gender, class and race. Comparativists have argued for many years that a failure to understand the 'national character' of a country[16] or to assess its 'ideal-typical models',[17] can lead to the adoption of policies which are highly unlikely to succeed. By failing to consider the political, ideological and attitudinal factors relevant to change in educational administration in New Zealand, the Taskforce has - like many others before it - not presented all the information required for good policy decisions.

The fourth step in the problem-solving method is the analysis of the logical consequences of putting one or more policies into force. As stated earlier, the comparativist uses at this point both information from the relevant factors and as much information from overseas systems as is appropriate. Once again, it is not the intention of this paper to redo the work of the Taskforce, so a few simple illustrations are offered as examples of problem-solving analysis.

First, the problem of inefficient management is dealt with indirectly by the Picot Report. Because it is not analysed as a separate problem, the logical consequences of change are inevitably

dealt with in an ad hoe fashion. The report argues for greater administrative assistance, and argues that some of this will come from money being freed up by the abolition of the boards and the central department.[18] Because there has been no analysis of what administrative expertise is currently or potentially available, it is not clear what the logical consequences of such moves will actually be. Similarly, the report notes the need for principals to have further training in administration,[19] but the same lack of prior analysis makes it impossible to see the logical consequences of such a policy recommendation. Where is such training to take place, and what resources are currently and potentially available?

In brief, the report takes inefficient management as a key problem and many might agree that this is the case. The report then provides no analysis of factors relevant to any policy option proposed. This in turn leads to a situation where the logical consequences of the policy recommendations on management efficiency cannot be determined.

Can overseas data offer any help here? It might be expected that the Taskforce would have offered some analysis of local and district control in such countries as England or the United States. Even better, they might have looked at recent moves in Australia to give school boards greater managerial responsibilities. This is especially useful if the report is to show how their proposals might actually work. In fact, it is found that similar proposals in 1986 were strongly rejected by primary schools in Victoria, so that the Ministry Structures Project Team reversed its earlier position to include such schools in their immediate plans. They eventually recommended that primary schools be at least temporarily supported by more centralised administrative structures. For the comparativist it is therefore no surprise to find that New Zealand primary schools appear to be rejecting similar proposals to those of the Victorian review, and in similar strong numbers.[20]

Within the vast range of issues addressed by the Picot report, it is perhaps worth adding two further examples where comparative data, used in a problem-solving approach, might have been useful. First, the report notes concerns expressed about equal employment opportunities for women and minority groups in a new administrative structure.[21] In a problem-solving approach of the type advocated here, the status of such groups would have been examined in the analysis of relevant factors. Then in examining the logical consequences of localising senior appointments, the impact on women and minorities would have been assessed in the light of available evidence. In this respect, the Taskforce could perhaps have read the 1986 Victorian report on School Council involvement in the selection of principals in post-primary schools.[22] This report suggests some of the important steps that may need to be taken if equal opportunities are in fact to be preserved. The Victorian report suggests further that simply incorporating equal opportunity statements into school charters is not likely to achieve the outcome the Taskforce desires. Similarly, the Victorian experience suggests that the discussion in the Picot Report on the impact of their proposals on people currently in education administration may be somewhat naive.[23] In Victoria the uncertainties of the new structures meant that specialised and highly qualified staff quickly left the education sector for other state and non-state employment rather than wait for redeployment or adverse changes in status. Informal indications are that such an exodus is already a distinct possibility within the regional education Boards in New Zealand. The quality and status of any 'educational service centre' may be drastically affected by such moves.

In conclusion, there appear to be two main weaknesses in the procedures adopted by the Taskforce. First, they attempted to deal with a number of different and quite specific educational problems as if they could all be solved together. This would not have happened had they opted for a problem-solving approach of the kind advocated here. Secondly, they (overtly, at least), ignored the opportunities offered by a comparative survey, both in terms of policy options and - more significantly - in terms of the likely consequences of their policy proposals. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the Taskforce's suggestions, the failure to profit from all available data is of serious concern. This is especially the case when, as here, the policy proposals affect directly or indirectly the lives of many involved in one of New Zealand's largest and most important institutions.

Notes and references

1. *Administering for Excellence. Effective Administration in Education* (1988). Report of the taskforce to Review Education Administration. Wellington, Government Printer. p. ix. The terms of reference relate to investigating the work of the Department of Education. the regional boards, governing bodies of schools and other educational authorities.

2. *Administering For Excellence*, p. vii

3. As is common in these cases, the report is known by the name of the chairperson (here, Brian Picot, Company Director of Auckland).

4. Holmes, B. (1965) *Problems in Education: a comparative approach*. London. RKP. Holmes. B. (1981) *Comparative Education: Some Considerations of Method*. London, Allen & Unwin. Holmes. B. (1985) The Problem-solving approach and national character. In K. Watson & R. Wilson (Eds), *Contemporary Issues in Comparative Education*. London, Croom Helm.

5. Holmes, B. (1981) op. cit. Chap. 4 and passim.

6. Holmes (1981, 1985) op. cit. Holmes argues for the use of 'ideal-typical models' to account for those more privately held attitude that affect actions. It is not the intention of this paper to utilise this aspect of Holmes' work.

7. Picot Report. p. 22. The Taskforce analysis lists 'lack of information and choice' as one weakness. It is contended here that they are separate issues and should be investigated as separate problems.

8. op. cit. p. 25.

9. op. cit. p. 22.

10. op. cit. p. vii.

11. Education Development Conference. (1974) *Organisation and Administration of Education*. Report of the Working Party on Organisation and Administration. Wellington, Government Printer. see especially chapter 3.

12. Ministry Structures Project Team Report. (1986) *Volume 1. Schools Division. Volume 2. Portfolio. Volume 3. Appendices*. Melbourne. Ministry of Education, Victoria.

13. *Picot Report*. p. 4.

14. op. cit. p. vii.

15. op. cit. pp. 3-6.

16. Mallinson, V. (1975) *An Introduction to the Study of Comparative Education*. (4th edition). London, Heinmann.

17. Holmes, B. (1981) op. cit.

18. *Picot Report*. Pp. 92-3.

19. op. cit. pp. 52-3.

20. Reported in *The New Zealand Herald*, Monday July 25, Section One. p. 3. According to the report, 80 per cent of primary, school committees in some Board areas wanted to retain the regional education boards, though possibly in some modified form.

21. *Picot Report*. p.71

22. State Board of Education (1986) *Report to Minister For Education. School Council Involvement in the Selection of Principals in Post-Primary Schools. The Status of Women*. Melbourne, State Board of Education.

23. Picot Report. p. 81ff.