

Picot and the market

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ABSTRACT

Existing disparities between schools reflect the various levels of privilege in school communities. It seems inevitable, given the existing social and economic organisation, that these differences in privilege and power will continue. Because school administration will be pushed further into the communities where big disparities in power, financial resources, and business management expertise are lived out, then schooling must - in the long term - reflect those disparities even more than at present.

The first thing we had to sort out in relation to the Picot Taskforce and its subsequent report was whether to approach it from a position of trust or suspicion. We were sceptical long before the report was made public. Our suspicions were confirmed by the report itself - beginning with its very title: *Administering for Excellence*.¹ On the one hand the title seems to be telling us that we need to overhaul school administration in order to promote excellence. On the other we find that the people who will be entrusted with school administration are the products of our existing - and presumably unexcellent - school system. Now, does this mean that the old system was good enough to provide us with citizens who are sufficiently competent to be entrusted with school administration (in which case, what's so bad about existing arrangements?) Or does it mean that Government is prepared to leave school administration to folk who've had an inadequate education? Or to an elite of citizens who have been lucky enough to escape the worst ravages of an inadequate system? Or what? Faced with these confusions we have to ask, 'what's going on?' 'Who's hustling what?'

Here we think 'hustling' is the operative word. The biggest mistake we can make with the Picot proposals is to look at them in isolation from the total context of policy proposals and New Right thinking (developed into a fine art among Treasury researchers who are feeding the Government their policy line) that currently dominates our lives. The point is that Picot is the thin edge of a wedge whose logic is that of market forces determining the provision of social goods and services; of privatisation: of life lived around the ethos of individuals consuming and 'choosing' in accordance with their own privatised wants: goals and values. According to this logic almost everything, including education, should be turned over to markets where individuals and isolated groups choose among options/services, etc. provided by private sector producers and entrepreneurs.² We should note the clever trick performed by the title focusing on administration. It looks as though all that is being addressed is school administration. In fact it is much more. The whole foundation of educational provision is at issue here. In revamping school administration, school provision is being turned over to the logic of the market.

Now the stronger that this logic takes hold within a society's thinking - the more people demand the 'right' to consume and 'choose' as individuals or private units - the more it becomes

necessary for the state to get out of the act of providing social goods and services. For unless the state gets out there won't be enough room for the entrepreneurs and private sector producers - our alleged economic saviours - to operate. And, of course, if we look at education specifically, we can see that a monolithic state education system might not be able readily to provide for the range of options that the ethos of individual/privatised choice demands. So if the state is to hand everything over to 'the market' and avoid being accused of providing an inferior service incapable of meeting market demands, then it has to quit education while it's still ahead - so to speak.

The picture painted by Picot is of the state providing bulk funding, setting national guidelines, and one or two other trimmings. Turning our attention for a moment away from the superficially attractive (or seductive) administrative lures, and toward the nitty gritty of school provision, we should ask what might happen under the proposed model. To get answers here we can look back into history as well as observe the present and speculate about the future. Looking back into history is interesting. The general model of the state providing funds for education to be made available on a localised and private basis in accordance with broad 'national guidelines' was in place in Britain after 1833. It was the perceived inadequacy of the provision that resulted from this arrangement, and the contribution this made to maintaining 'the Two Nations' - one advantaged and the other very badly disadvantaged - that finally drove the British government to establish a national system of education after 1870. The approach to educational provision that Picot is flirting with under the rubric of revamped administration was an acknowledged failure last century. The inequalities and injustices it harboured drove even Disraeli to despair.

And what of the present? Are the Picot proposals likely to enhance equality?³ Are they likely to address and overcome the problems of educational disadvantage that have become apparent? Or are they likely to create even wider extremes of advantage? Are they likely to contribute in any way to addressing the problem of social disadvantage generally? Or will importing the logic of the market' into education simply be one more step toward widening the gap between those who have and those who don't?

On this point one of us (Jones) has come up with some interesting data which point very clearly toward the gaps being widened within education. Let us read what her investigations have produced.

At present there are large disparities between primary schools in terms of the resources they are able to make available to their children. These differences between schools are, arguably, largely the result of the relative wealth and privilege of the school's community. When, under Picot's recommendations, the State withdraws its administrative responsibility and turns schools over to their communities, it seems highly likely that schools will be enabled to reflect even more closely the relative privilege of their communities.

Let us look at some of the differences that exist now, under a centralised and formally egalitarian administrative and funding system. Over and above the centralised state provision of funds, primary School Committees collect and administer 'local funds'. These funds, raised through the efforts of the Committee, are used for a range of curriculum, play and teacher resources in the school. Some schools, due to the wealth of their communities and the expertise of their Committee members, are able to raise considerable funds. Others are not so lucky. Take, for example, the following Auckland primary schools. The data was collected from school principals or secretaries of School Committees.⁴

School A has a roll of 600, made up of 2% Maori, 5% Pacific Island and almost 93% Pakeha.⁵ The School Committee, all Pakeha, have the following occupations: local borough councillor, properties lawyer of large local body, accountant (The Committee Treasurer), an Auckland Technical Institute lecturer, two managers (one owns an audiovisual company, the other a personnel management firm), a librarian, secretary and industrial therapist. There are four women and five men.

According to the school principal, the Picot recommendations are 'the best thing that could have happened to us'. He maintains that they have the expertise to run their own affairs, and an excellent school committee 'who will become the Board of Trustees'.

This school has an athletics track with a banked seating area, landscape planting, a cricket pitch, football field, an Olympic-size swimming pool plus two smaller pools, and several tennis courts. It has several computers, a xerox machine, good video equipment and large hall. The school has about \$400,000 in 'various' bank accounts. At the beginning of each year the teachers at this school ask the School Committee for funds for particular curriculum equipment. Last year this sum was \$20,000. The School Committee ran a fair which 'took \$20,000 and \$14,000 profit'; it also made money on stationery sold to the pupils, book fairs, calendars, hall hire and school bus trips, as well as selling coal. They are, according to the principal, 'into retailing'. This money was spent on-items ranging from computers, headphones and video tapes to music trollies, lego, science equipment and cricket balls.⁶

Last year the Parent Teachers Association made over \$10,000 from such activities as a spellathon, the lunch room, selling T-shirts, the annual barbecue and so on. The PTA is building a fitness trail for the school at a cost of \$9,000, and has supplied the staff room with a microwave oven. The staff room also has a television set and a dishwasher.

One thing this school does not have is a heated swimming pool. Another primary school, it was said, is able to make about \$10-15,000 annually from this source.

School B is a smaller school with a roll of 211, about 75% of whom are Pakeha, 25% are 'a very diverse multicultural mixture'. About one third of the families at this school are single parent families. The all-Pakeha School Committee comprises a secretary, a part-time teacher (whose lawyer husband's secretary does the typing for the Committee), an accountant (the Committee Treasurer), a mother, a secondary school teacher, tavern proprietor and a marketing representative. There are three men and four women.

Like School A, the teachers at this school also ask the School Committee for funds for curriculum materials. Last year they requested \$6,000. The local funds account totalled more than \$12,000 which was raised through a fair (\$9,000), an international picnic tea \$1,200), and a Christmas hamper raffle with donations of the wheelbarrow and wine from parents who were builders and restaurant owners respectively (\$2,000).

This year the School Committee plans to purchase a computer for the office and to paint the swimming pool. They have good playground facilities with an adventure play area. The staffroom has a microwave oven and dishwasher which were purchased from school lunch sales profits; a mathathon organised by the teachers earned enough to purchase a computer for maths teaching. The school asks parents to pay \$15 per child per year, or \$30 per family, though only about half the families pay this.

School C has a roll of 325, about 85% of whom are Maori and Pacific Island pupils, the rest Pakeha.

The School Committee comprises two self-employed tradesmen, a trade unionist, dentist, computer operator, two mothers (one of whom is the Treasurer and Secretary), a labourer and ACCESS tutor.⁷ They are Tokelauan (1), Cook Island (2), Samoan (2), Niuean (1), Maori (1), Pakeha (2); four women and five men. While this is the formal makeup of the School Committee, any parent can come to meetings, participate and vote.

The principal informed me that they have no budget as such for teachers' curriculum materials. Teachers can get free curriculum resources such as cardboard, leather, wool, etc., from local factories, and cheap materials from the Teachers' Resource Centre. Teachers, he said, also pay for their own resources.

The School Committee raised about \$7,000 over a year through several socials and fairs (the latter raise about \$800-\$1,000 each). These funds were largely spent on computer equipment and library books for the well-stocked school library which is available for use by the local community.

The school also has a photocopier and video recorder. It has no playground equipment aside from a few pipe bars on the concrete area. The staffroom has a Zip heater.

The Principal pointed out that they limit the amount of money asked of parents. The \$13.50 per child annual stationery request is often not paid. There is a limit of \$2.50 per child per term on bus trips. According to the principal 'you can get to see a lot by walking around the place. You don't need these expensive trips'.

School D has a roll of 280 – 85% Maori and Pacific Island children, 5% Asian, 10% Pakeha. The five women and four men on the School Committee are a community worker, receptionist, three mothers, factory worker, clerk, self-employed cleaner, self-employed plumber. They are four Maori, one Samoan, four Pakeha.

The secretary of the School Committee, a community worker, thought that the Picot recommendations would be 'a disaster for us'. They have enough problems, she says, sorting out the existing system with little financial confidence and expertise.

Like School C, this school does not have an annual request from teachers for equipment. The School Committee is able to raise about \$4,000 in local funds annually from such things as hall hire, and selling sweets, sponges and plastic bags to the local community, as well as a fair (which raised \$1,200 last year). According to the principal, these funds last year were spent approximately as follows: \$1,500 for books (half of this sum goes on replacing books which are lost, stolen or damaged); \$1,000 for xerox paper ('teachers use a lot of xeroxed resources rather than more expensive books'); \$700 on physical education equipment ('mostly replacement' ... 'uniforms are falling off kids'); \$800 on 'little necessities' requested from time to time by the teachers, such as pegs, curtain wire and so on. The costs of all resources are approximately doubled due to theft and damage.

Recently the school held a special Gala Day (the first in 15 years) to pay a debt of \$2,000 on the xerox machine. Unfortunately the hall hire scheme is under threat due to neighbours' complaints about noise at social functions. And there has been a need to limit selling plastic bags etc. via the pupils because some parents, having felt obliged to purchase these, have got into financial difficulties.

The school has a video recorder (no camera), a xerox machine, one netball court painted on a concrete area, a swimming pool (with corroded fluoridation equipment). They have no computers ('low priority - too expensive') and little in the way of playground equipment. They tend not to go on school bus trips or picnics because of the expense. They ask for \$15 per child or \$20 per family annually for stationery - about half pay - but like School C the principal and teachers avoid asking the community for money' because, 'we know there are financial problems out there for our families'.

More educational resources do not necessarily add up to a better education. However, when children have access to excellent sports facilities, a range of interesting maths resources, computers, and trips to a variety of places, they must benefit educationally compared with children who have none of these things.

The difference between schools, sketched out in the few examples above, exist now. Through the contacts, expertise and financial resources of parents in the school community, primary schools in wealthy areas are doing well. With more power to use that expertise in the post-Picot era, these schools will be enabled to benefit further. Schools in poorer and more culturally-diverse areas, without such financial and management expertise and resources, must be relatively worse off.

Those well-meaning liberals who argue that such views undervalue the skills of working-class Maori, Pacific Island and Pakeha people simply avoid the issue of privilege and power. Middle-class power is consolidated upon the shared control which professional and managerial groups have over the knowledge and resources which are economically and socially valuable. In the context of running a complex educational business - which is what the Picot report asks 'the community' to do - the obvious management expertise/contacts/ experience available to a working-class mother is hardly comparable to that available to a lawyer, accountant or business manager.

In summary, the existing disparities between schools reflect the various levels of privilege in school communities. It seems inevitable, given the existing social and economic organisation, that these differences in privilege and power will continue. Because school administration will be pushed further into the communities where big disparities in power, financial resources, and business management expertise are lived out, then schooling must - in the long term - reflect those disparities even more than at present.⁸

Ironically, one has to agree with the Minister of Education, that post-Picot 'schools will more closely reflect their communities'.

This seems the inevitable outcome of the Labour Government's systematic dismantling of the State, a process of which the Picot report represents one aspect. Far from the 'ideal' outcome of 'government by the people, for the people', we will have 'the survival of the wealthiest' in education as elsewhere, as people in grossly inequitable situations are left to sort it out for themselves.

Let us now consider some other possible consequences of education being made into a market of consumer choice; into a more privatised, individually managed operation.

1. One interesting possibility is that we will come to look on education as being more like telephones and car number plates than the lofty human enterprise we've seen it as in the past. What does this mean? It is no accident that a whole range of telephone models and the gimmick of personalised car number plates have opened up at this period in our history. For these are just reflections of turning services over into markets for private choice and entrepreneurial activity. They're just parts of the 'toward prosperity via the free market' approach. What we are being invited to do by the Picot proposals is to take a step toward putting education on a par with telephones and car number plates: turning it into an object of private consumer choice. As human beings, we find this offensive beyond words. We refuse to look on the education of children as something to be put into the same bag as trinkets and baubles: as something to be made into a commodity fetish.
2. Overseas evidence strongly suggests that the public is increasingly seeing the nature and role of education as being narrowly bound up with job preparation. In the U.S., for example, where a shrunken job market has been a problem for a longer time than it has here (as yet), there is a strong tendency to push education in the direction of a narrow careerism. There is every reason to expect this trend to increase here as well. What this means is that turning education over to market forces will produce a narrow, vocationally oriented approach to preparing our children for life. The demand for education to be relevant (in terms of private choice) can be a very limiting thing. For

at a time when nearly everyone is anxious about his/her place in a rapidly shifting job market, relevance has come to mean little else than job preparation. While many jobs require applicants to know how to read and write and to possess skills for specialised employment, few employers require mastery or even familiarity with literary canon, the arts, and music, much less a secure command of history and the social sciences. Conservatives demand "excellence", by which they usually mean that schools should offer a more rigorous science and math curriculum - a notion in keeping with the ... idea that mastery of techniques is equivalent to progress. Their language of "achievement", "excellence", "discipline", and goal orientation really means vocational education or, in the

most traditional mode, a return to the authoritarian classroom armed with the 3 Rs curriculum.⁹

There is a sad irony in this likely trend. At the very time when our children need a wide and challenging education to allow them to ask how far their society is meeting their interests, and how far it is promoting the interests of a few; at the very time when they need an education which will stimulate in them the creativity and insights needed to meet the challenges of the future; at this time they will be led by the market into a narrow, uncritical, 'downlifting' apology for an education.

3. At the same time as people put their faith in schooling to deliver their children into employment, the shrinking job market will make it impossible for schools as a whole to meet these aspirations. But if the administration of education has been given over to local community representatives, then the blame for this perceived failure of schooling will be directed at these individuals - rather than at the government, which is where it belongs. It is government policy which condones unemployment - by refusing to take the necessary and possible steps to provide jobs for all. If this is where responsibility and blame ultimately resides, we should not permit them to be deflected. But this is precisely what we would do if we accepted the kind of approach to educational administration advocated by Picot.
4. By far the most worrying aspect that lies in wait as a time bomb amid the pages of the Taskforce report is what happens in a society when the mentality of the market becomes more and more deeply entrenched. We have recently seen Gibbs and Trotter¹⁰ - arch advocates of the free market - go strongly onto the offensive, demanding that the government go further and further into free market type reform. We must not be misled by David Lange's resistance to their extreme demands into thinking that anything supported by the Minister of Education will be all right. For while it is true that the Picot proposals do not lead us immediately and deeply into the world according to Trotter and Gibbs, it is equally true that they put us firmly onto this road. And where this road can lead should inspire us to resist Picot for all we are worth. For in other countries it has led people far beyond the realities demanded by the Gibbs's and Trotters of this world. The market can lead to the very limits of human indignity and demise. The following example is extreme, to be sure. But it is real, and as such an indication of what can befall victims of the market ethos.

The Guatemalan news agency, Enfoprensa, recently reported that from October 1, 1986 to March 31, 1987, 193 Guatemalan children were sold as organ donors. Seventy of these children were reportedly purchased by people in the U.S.¹¹ When the racket was uncovered, some of the children awaiting transaction were only a few weeks old. The others rescued in time were all under 2 years old. Those people who pioneer transplant technology, who advocate it, and who make it available, would scarcely have in mind the idea of selling and buying Third World children for essential supplies. Obviously, those who develop such technology seem more concerned with saving and enhancing life than with taking or degrading it. The fact is, however, that when the supply of medical services is turned over to a market, and where market forces lead, then the sale of children as organ donors easily becomes a reality. Indeed, it fits the rationality of the market - where anything can go so long as there is a demand for it. Given the technology, the resources, and the wish to 'save' one's own child, it may become the most rational thing in the world to purchase a kidney - or a heart: especially if one can conveniently overlook the fact, or be saved from the knowledge, that this organ came housed in a living child.

What this example forces us to ask is whether we can predict where the first serious step toward making education into a market might lead.¹² Can we foresee the outcomes? If we cannot, should we not resist, stall and oppose with all our efforts until we better understand what it is that we are playing with? A market in blood produces AIDs panics. A market in transplant surgery produces babies as organ donors. Why on earth should we presume that

education should be exempt from its own breed of market-led horrors? They may not be as direct as the Guatemalan example. They might in their own way, however, produce their own unique form of human deprivation, degradation and decline. If we do not feel confident that we can foresee all the outcomes; if we do not feel confident that we can prevent the unthinkable happening, we should resist. After all, the market has already shown our apparent willingness to live with the reality of well over 120,000 unemployed.¹³ What other human scrap heaps await us in the market place?

In the end we see no reason why anyone who is unhappy with the outcomes to date of Rogernomics could expect to be happy with the eventual outcomes of a Picot approach to education. After all, both 'visions' come out of the same stable. On the other hand, we can see why those who are happy with the 'progress' of Rogernomics¹⁴ might be thrilled to bits with the prospect of education being taken aboard in the same way. Our own recent history should be flashing warning lights at us right now.

P.S. At the public meeting where the original version of this paper was read, a person from the floor raised the question of the wasteful duplication of resources that would almost inevitably result from the kind of atomised approach to educational administration recommended by Picot. To her, as much as to us, this seems a genuine problem: why duplicate resources when they could be shared around? Why deplete the earth's resources in privatised consumption? But while this occurs to some of us as a problem, it is viewed as a virtue by those who see increased consumption of goods and services as the way toward prosperity. When faced with the Picot plan we should ask 'whose interests will it serve?' When we meet people who sing its praises we should ask of them 'what have you got to sell?' At the end of the day we see here, once again, education emerging as a mere means to a (dubious) end – namely, prosperity according to the rampant consumer society. The battle is to restore education as a human end in its own right: as the gift of enlightenment, growth, and dignity as a person. This end accords much better with the call to be an educator.

Notes and references

1. 'Excellence' is one of those New Right buzz-words that should set alarm bells ringing whenever we hear it. It goes along with 'efficiency', 'accountability', 'effectiveness', 'rationalisation', etc. For a full glossary, see almost any Treasury document. For critiques of this jargon and the philosophy behind it, see Ira Shor *Culture Wars* (RKP 1986) or Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux *Education under Siege* (RKP 1986). A very important introduction to what is at stake is provided by Michael Apple in *Education and Power* (RKP 1982) especially pp. 119-134.
2. See Apple *ibid*.
3. With regard to equality, it is very important not to follow Treasury and Government thinking and slip into talk of equity as the social goal. Equity is compatible with gross inequality; hence its favour with supply side economists and New Right protagonists. Anyone who can find a single recent Treasury document that does not laud equity should let us know so that we can add it to our collection of unicorns.
4. Owing to constraints of time, the data was not checked from other sources.
5. This is the Maori word for white New Zealanders and is widely used by the latter self-referentially.
6. Last year this school spent a mere \$200 on taha Maori resources (i.e. those specially devoted to the dissemination of Maori culture) and \$2500 on advanced reading materials for 'children with special abilities'.
7. ACCESS is a training scheme aimed to impart marketable skills to unemployed young people.
8. The report recommends a differential funding formula which is the same as that currently in use, with the addition of a factor for proportion of long-term unemployed persons in the area. While this formula ensures schools in poorer areas receive more state funding, the point is that the economic and administrative problems experienced by these schools are not so 'easily' solved.

9. Aronowitz and Giroux 1 op. cit., 1-2
10. Alan Gibbs and Sir Ron Trotter are businessmen noted for their extreme free-market views and strenuous attempts to influence economic policies.
11. See Granma Weekly Review, 15 May 1988
12. This is precisely how we view the Picot proposals – as the first serious step toward turning education into a market.
13. With a total New Zealand population of about 3.3 millions, June 1988 figures show that just over 10% of the putative workforce are unemployed.
14. The Minister of Finance, Roger Douglas, has his name attached to his brand of economic policies.