

INTRODUCTION

Have the wheels fallen off the Government's educational reform caravan? There have been many signs since the start of the year that this may well be so. The zigzagging of policy over fundamental aspects of the new system, the chopping and changing of the Education Review Office, increasing confusion and clamour over tertiary education, the ever more discordant ambiguity of policy objectives such as equity, continuing evidence of inequalities within and through the system - these are all symptoms of a grand strategy running into the sands. At the same time public opinion polls tell a consistent story: the reforms are not popular with the electorate. And as is being publicised with increasing frequency in the media, many local people and schools are finding out that the much vaunted freedom hailed in the Picot report is in reality a new form of chain.

And yet it seems unlikely that these failures will lead to any overt abandoning of reform. Partly this is because there is too much tied up in the rhetoric of reform: especially in an election year it is unacceptable to admit defeat or error. As well as this, though, the plain fact is that the reforms cannot simply be cancelled: returning were as wearisome as go o'er. Many promising developments that have emerged as by-products of reform might also be lost if this were to occur. There will also be the diehards of reform who insist that things are not so bad, who might argue indeed that even if the caravan has lost its wheels this need not prevent its efficient management.

Moreover, beyond the general election in October lies the prospect of renewal and a thorough extension of key aspects of the current reforms. A potent and dangerous mythology has developed over the past year that the ideas of the Picot report were fine but the educators have bungled or subverted their execution. In reality, much of the blame for the current problems must rest with the naivety of the Picot proposals and the faults in the original design - faults which were indicated in many places, not least in the special issue of *Access* (volume 7, 1988) published within a few months of the Picot report itself. Interested readers might look back at the kinds of criticisms suggested in that issue of *Access*. Even so, it is all too predictable that there will be moves afoot to recapture the spirit of May 1988, when the world was new and to be young was very heaven. The recent report by Stuart Sexton for the Business Round Table makes abundantly clear the potential that exists for further initiatives to reinterpret and pursue the 'original intentions' of the Picot report.¹ It seems increasingly likely, too, that there will be growing pressure to adopt hand-me-down policies from the bargain basements of Britain and the United States. National Party spokesperson Lockwood Smith has already expressed his enthusiasm for aspects of the British Education Reform Act and American early childhood education.

Amidst these portents of right-wing consolidation and renewal, however, there may also be signs of fragmentation over the future direction of education policy. The 'New Right' is neither monolithic nor all-powerful, despite many claims to the contrary. Under a National government there might well be increasing tensions between what have been described as the 'libertarian' right and the 'moral authoritarian' right in the field of education.² At its most basic, this would boil down to the issue of how to guarantee a 'decent society' when schools are opened to the whims of the marketplace. Both in America and in Britain the 'New Right' reforms of the 1980s have come under pressure from within as well as from without.³ It will be interesting to see whether the New Zealand education policy debate will imitate these trends in the 1990s.

In this situation it may be perilously tempting to hold fast to the structures and supposed values of the existing (disappearing?) education system. And yet such a conservative impulse must also be resisted. The need instead is to develop real alternatives to the policies that are currently being

imposed, and strategies by which to mitigate the most invidious effects of these policies. In this direction there is currently a great deal of important, and heartening, activity. It is also important to continue to discuss matters of perennial significance irrespective of what happens to be the current flavour of the month. This issue of *Access* contains two major addresses presented by Professor Roger Dale and Professor Jim Marshall, both recent appointments to chairs in education at the University of Auckland, each of which provides valuable insights into the problems of the current moment, but also suggests constructive approaches to the issues of the longer term. Both emphasise the need for critical perspectives on education policy. Dale argues that university education departments 'have a duty to remind society of its educational promises and to monitor how effectively those promises are being fulfilled'. Interestingly he is sceptical of the currently fashionable term 'equity', and suggests as an alternative that of 'parity'. Marshall focuses on the current reforms of tertiary education, and suggests the importance of developing research in this area conducted by people with 'sound knowledge and understanding of social, political and economic theory'. As well, we continue our major emphasis on Maori educational alternatives in these pages with a most interesting piece by Nena Benton of the NZCER, comparing Kaupapa Maori schooling with initiatives developed to save the indigenous language in the Basque Country in Spain. Running through the issue is a strong message about the need to draw on the experience of earlier initiatives, not only in this country but around the world, to build up a comparative and historical dimension in critical responses to New Zealand education policy.

Notes

1. Stuart Sexton, *New Zealand Schools And Current Reforms* (February 1990).
2. Bruce Jesson, Allanah Ryan, Paul Spoonley, *Revival Of The Right: New Zealand Politics In The 1980s* (Heinemann Reed, Auckland, 1988)
3. Ira Shor, *Culture Wars: School And Society In The Conservative Restoration* (RKP, Boston, 1986); Michael Apple, 'Ideology, equality, and the New Right' (paper presented to NZARE special interest seminar, Massey University, July 1990); Clyde Chitty, *Towards A New Education System: The Victory Of The New Right?* (Falmer Press, London, 1989).

Gary McCulloch

Education Department, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand