

ADAM SMITH ON EDUCATION

James Stanfield

In Book V, Chapter I, Article 2d of *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith tackles the issue of education and gets into what can only be described as a bit of muddle.¹ First, he proposes government intervention in education in circumstances where ‘it can never be of the interest of any individual or small number of individuals to erect and maintain a school’. Why? Because, ‘the profit could never repay the expense to any individual or small number of individuals’. Six methods of government intervention in education are then examined, and while the nationalisation of schools is rejected, Adam Smith does lend his support to subsidising school buildings, legal obligations to attain certain educational standards, and subsidising the private fees payable by poor parents. However, Smith also makes numerous references to successful privately run schools which he also compares favourably with existing public schools. Therefore, if the market was already supplying education, how did Adam Smith justify his proposed government interventions?

According to the late E. G. West, the dilemma which confronted Smith was that towards the end of *The Wealth of Nations*, he had found that his great discovery – the division of labour – was now inducing a state of torpor in the minds of workers which was stupefying their intellects. Adam Smith’s personal opinion concerning what he thought to be an adverse moral trend in society was therefore his sole justification for state intervention in education. As E. G. West suggests, it would appear that ‘he could not resist the opportunity to super-impose a corrective upon his economic system of natural liberty and self-interest’. For Adam Smith, the Authoritarian Philosopher, this corrective was state-enforced education.

What is distinctive about Adam Smith’s views on education is that whilst he believed in achieving education for all, his solution did not lie in abolishing school fees and making education free at the point of use. Instead fees should be subsidised ‘so that even a common labourer can afford it’, and the teachers should only partly be paid from public funds, ‘because if he was wholly or even principally paid by it, he would soon learn to neglect his business’. Smith was especially critical about the University of Oxford where he believed that ‘the greater part of the public professors have for these many years given up altogether even the pretence of teaching’.

Despite Adam Smith’s muddled views on education, there are still important lessons to be

learnt. These lessons have become increasingly clear following my recent research trip to the Kibera slums, Nairobi, Kenya. Several focus groups were carried out with parents who currently pay school fees at local private schools for the poor and choose not to take advantage of the recent abolition of school fees in all government schools. Time and again I was told of the decline in teaching standards in government schools following the abolition of school fees. For example, one parent explained that she preferred the private school because in the public school the welfare of the children was not taken care of, and that ‘before the free education programme was introduced, the teachers were busy with the pupils; now, they know there is no money coming in, so they are not really concerned’. If this effect has been witnessed nationally then Tony Blair’s *Commission for Africa* has much to learn from Adam Smith’s fundamental opposition to free education and the abolition of school fees.

Adam Smith attended the local grammar school in Kirkcaldy, the town of his birth, before leaving for Glasgow in 1737. The records highlight that in 1765 some families had complained that their children were not getting their due ‘in the grammar school by not having been taught [*sic*] writing’. In response to this growing customer dissatisfaction, Adam Smith’s former school revised its syllabus and the fees paid per quarter. The fees were: English by itself, one shilling and sixpence; English writing and vulgar arithmetic with one hour of writing daily, two shillings; Latin by itself, three shillings; Latin with writing and arithmetic, three shillings and sixpence; Latin and Greek or Greek verse, five shillings; decimal arithmetic, mensuration, trigonometry and algebra, three shillings; Church music (on occasion), gratis.

Over 200 years later and we have now become accustomed to viewing and thinking about education as one large whole, with no recognised or perceived value. Commenting on such discriminatory pricing in education, Robert Lowe was later to observe that ‘In Scotland they sell education like a grocer sells figs’. One wonders what a fig would look like today if the majority were grown on government farms and distributed free of charge.

1. For a detailed exposition of Adam Smith’s views on education see a previously unpublished paper by the late E. G. West titled ‘Adam Smith’s Proposal on Public Education’ – available from the E. G. West Scholars’ Page (www.ncl.ac.uk/egwest).

James Stanfield – University of Newcastle upon Tyne