

FREE TO CHOOSE: YES, PRIME MINISTER

James Stanfield

So the Prime Minister finally let him have it. 'Humphrey, I'm going to let parents take their children away from schools. They will be able to move them to any school they want.' Sir Humphrey genuinely didn't understand. Dorothy Wainwright therefore intervened. 'The government, Sir Humphrey, is going to let parents decide which school to send their children to.'

The Prime Minister then outlined his proposal. As the penny finally dropped, Sir Humphrey exploded into protest – 'Prime Minister, you're not serious . . . You can't let parents make these choices. How on earth would parents know which schools are best?' The Prime Minister then quizzed Sir Humphrey on his former school, Winchester, which he reluctantly admitted was of course chosen by his parents. 'Prime Minister, that's quite different. My parents were discerning people. You can't expect ordinary people to know where to send their children.' Sir Humphrey then warned the Prime Minister that the Department of Education would block the proposal. However, the Prime Minister had already planned his response. He would abolish the Department!

This conversation can be found in a classic episode of *Yes, Prime Minister*. The authors (Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn), based this comedy series on their own research into the workings of government, and found that there was a wide gap between the rhetoric and the realities of running a country. According to Antony Jay, the controversy surrounding the issue of choice in education provided one of the most 'hilarious absurdities', for the system was based upon the restriction of choice to all parents except the rich and those who condemned this inequality sought to remove it not by extending choice to the poor but by denying it to the rich as well! The defence of the system rested on the absurd argument that 'politicians, educationalists and officials know better than parents . . . The argument absolutely demanded a place in our series' (Jay, 2003, p. 11).

For Antony Jay his research also helped to shed light on what he has since described as the 'fatal error' of government intervention in education – subsidising schools instead of parents. This approach had not only removed all effective choice from parents, but had also created 'a massive bureaucratic superstructure of inspectors,

auditors, committee advisors and administrators, with an accompanying blizzard of regulations, guidelines, consultative documents, reports and instructions'. In contrast, directing funds to parents 'restores their choice and creates competition between schools – competition that is far more effective in raising standards than bureaucratic control and regulatory frameworks' (Jay, in Tooley and Stanfield, 2003).

Of course the authors of *Yes, Prime Minister* have not been the first to shed light on this 'hilarious absurdity'. Milton and Rose Friedman, in their 1980 publication *Free to Choose*, expressed a similar concern with 'educational reformers who often self-righteously take for granted that parents, especially those who are poor and have little education themselves, have little interest in their children's education and no competence to choose for them.' For the Friedmans, however, this was no laughing matter, but a 'gratuitous insult'.

Such patronising and often insulting views on education still find support today in the educational establishment. However, what is even more depressing is that the fundamental problem with these views has been discussed time and again over many years, but obviously with little or no impact. In 1868, Sir Robert Lowe explained how parents had one great superiority over politicians and education experts:

'Their faults are mainly the corrigible faults of ignorance, not of apathy and prejudice. They have and feel the greatest interest in doing that which is for the real benefit of their children. They are the representatives of the present, the living and acting energy of a nation, which has ever owed its sure and onward progress rather to individual efforts than to public control and direction. They have the wish to arrive at a true conclusion, the data are before them, they must be the judges in the last resort, why should we shrink from making them judges at once.'

Reference

Tooley, J. and J. Stanfield (eds.) (2003) *Government Failure – E. G. West on Education*, London: Institute of Economic Affairs.

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