

Education and the Public Good

It is in the public interest to protect the public good. The air and water that comprise the natural commons are essential components of life. Perhaps we need to understand public education as an element of our 'social commons' – as part of the lifeblood of our collective well-being.

The 'public good' is being challenged

The 'public good' refers to actions taken in the interest of all citizens. Unfortunately, it is a concept that has fallen out of favour in recent years.

*The **communities and schools** series was launched by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy with support from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. The case for education as a public good in Canada is compelling. Strong public schools and healthy communities that share responsibility for the well-being of youth are crucial to our country's future. Through stories and commentaries that link theory and practice, we hope to help inform citizens' understanding of education issues and engage them more deeply in their communities and schools.*

“In a few short years we have gone from a political economy that was spread over an increasing number of citizens, that responded to the will of the nation, to one that is focused on an ever smaller segment of the population, and that responds to nothing more than the needs and will of the market” [Stewart 1998: 18]

Indeed, the concept of the public good flies in the face of unfettered individualism that has become the hallmark of the 'new economy.' Why be concerned about the common good when it is apparently more profitable to look out for personal interest?

Even the concept of work has become individualized. For many Canadians, work has shifted from a position of steady employment with a single or at most a few employers over the course of a lifetime. Today, many unattached workers sell their talents to the highest bidder through self-negotiated contracts.

An entrepreneurial mentality requires and indeed thrives upon taking chances, jumping at opportunity and seizing the moment. Risk! is the operative word when it comes to modern-day success.

Ironically, the origin of social programs in the industrialized world was rooted in the need to reduce risk. They were the bulwark against an unstable economy. They helped compensate for an insecure income. They protected against an uncertain future.

But market ideology – which is anything but new – clearly has gained ground in recent years with business and government elites. “It is now an article of faith that we are overgoverned and overregulated, and that we ought to throw off all the panoply of strictures and services, from environmental protection to minimum wages, before we are stifled entirely” [Stewart 1998: 17].

So is it a lost cause to revisit the concept of the public good? Is it a waste of words to bring back these words? In a word, no.

The public good is still good

The concept of the public good may be unpopular or poorly understood. But it is still important. Perhaps it is time to restate the case. Indeed, many average Canadians are skeptical of the apparent ‘virtues’ of unfettered market ideology.

Part of the defence for the public good arises, in fact, from the very demands of the new economy. Fears have been expressed about the so-called ‘brain drain’ – which has been defined in fairly narrow terms as the loss of skilled Canadian workers to the US. Policy proposals to stem the brain drain typically have focussed upon aligning our wage and taxation systems with the US [Schwanen 1999].

But policy responses which Americanize our labour market and taxation systems inadvert-

ently could have the opposite effect. “The danger is not only that we fall short in attempts to make our labour markets and tax levels competitive with those in the US, but also that in the process we would sacrifice the positive features that distinguish Canada. Those distinctive cultural, institutional and civic traits are critical, albeit underrated, dimensions of Canada’s competitive advantage” [Kesselman 1999: 3].

In other words, trying to make Canada less like the nation we are and more like the nation we aren’t inadvertently could end up driving people away. Our interest in the public good actually confers a competitive advantage with respect to the quality of life.

Lessons from the ‘old economy’ are also instructive. A national system of social security evolved in Canada in the years following the Second World War. The various programs that comprised the social security system were an antidote to the hunger and deprivation arising from the economic devastation and social despair of the Great Depression and wartime chaos.

The publicly financed health care system in Canada also makes a vital contribution to the public good. It is a collective commitment that provides essential health services to which all citizens – regardless of income, residence, language or race – are entitled. The protests in Alberta against Bill 11’s introduction of private clinics spoke clearly to the perceived value of public health care.

Investment in a healthy population is the basis for a vibrant economy with healthy, productive workers. But public support for health care also helps ensure a healthy society generally free of widespread disease.

Programs in respect of the public good are essential not only for remediation. They are crucial forms of investment. Neurological research is proving the importance of the early formative years. There is ample evidence that support for early childhood development reaps substantial returns in overall health and well-being later in life [McCain and Mustard 1999].

High-quality early childhood development services contribute immeasurably to the good of all. They improve children's subsequent performance in school, lessen the learning risks linked to low income and enhance parents' child rearing and coping skills. The literature on crime prevention (a priority for Canadians, according to opinion polls) points to the need for a range of family supports [Waller and Weiler 1986].

Public education is the bedrock of democracy

A system of high-quality public education – the primary concern of this *communities and schools* series – advances the well-being of all citizens. Education, which is considerably more than schooling, is a necessary means to accomplish many of our most cherished public purposes [Mathews 1996: 26].

Education and skills development are essential to the economic health of individuals and of nations. Most jobs in future will require at least a high school education. In order to compete in a rapidly changing knowledge-based world economy, both developed and developing nations must invest heavily in education, training and skills formation.

Public education also creates informed consumers who can make intelligent choices as to the products they wish to purchase. Smart con-

sumers can drive the direction of markets rather than having markets drive them. At the end of the day, it is informed consumers who ultimately will translate the principles of sustainable development into practice. Informed choices help ensure that economic decisions incorporate social and environmental imperatives.

But the impact of public education moves well beyond training-for-a-good-job and smart purchase. “Economic well-being is a by-product of education whose primary purpose is the acquisition of moral and spiritual power” [Tory 1924: 15].

Public education builds the foundation of nations. Schools help students develop values related to the welfare of society. The Royal Commission on Learning asserted: “We are convinced that, as difficult as it sometimes seems, and as incomplete as it will always be, a part of the task of schools must be to transmit to students some sense of honesty, truth, civility, social justice and cooperation, and a determination to combat violence, racism, gender inequality, and environmental degradation [Ontario 1994: 61].

Moreover, public education has long been understood as the great equalizer. Public schools, in particular, represent one of the few institutions in which individuals of diverse backgrounds can come together. By definition, public education is an inclusive system. “Public schools are a crucible for Canadian society, spanning the cultural, racial, linguistic and economic diversity of the country. Education is the only institution in the country that can provide the glue of shared values and history, providing its citizens with a sense of what it means to be Canadian” [Lewington 1993: 17].

Public education is also the foundation for an informed intelligent citizenry that comprises

the bedrock of democracy. Indeed, there were good reasons to support the introduction of public education more than 100 years ago. “Prominent ‘rebels,’ such as William Lyon Mackenzie in Upper Canada and Louis-Joseph Papineau of Lower Canada, saw extended schooling as an important instrument of democratization” [Axelrod 1997: 25].

Public education would help ensure that “voters could read and think well enough to understand the issues they faced, were independent enough not to allow their votes to be bought, were interested enough in public affairs to follow politics between elections and perhaps even become involved in political life themselves, and to live with political disagreement, conflict and ambiguity” [Osborne 1999: 5].

This support for democracy is as important today as it was in the last century. Universal education is not only desirable and necessary for the conduct of a democracy. It is, equally importantly, a distinguishing practice of a society that properly can be called democratic [Crittenden 1973: 131].

At the international level, public education plays a central role in personal and social development. It is not a “miracle cure or a magic formula opening the door to a world in which all ideals will be attained, but as one of the principal means available to foster a deeper and more harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression and war” [Delors 1998: 13].

Yet there are continued assaults on public education

Despite the importance of public education to the economic, moral and democratic health

of individuals and of nations, it has been subject to continual assault. There have been ongoing budget cuts and repeated attacks on the teaching profession and school curricula. We are a country that has taken to, in the words of University of Toronto Professor Ursula Franklin, “awfulizing” our system of education [Makhoul 2000].

Why are we letting slip away the “the most powerful instrument of good that has ever yet been placed in the hands of man”? [Saul 1995: 65]. The pat answer is that we cannot afford the high cost of public education – that we must cut back to ensure the long-term survival and integrity of the system.

But the so-called ‘savings’ are a short-sighted disinvestment. Education actually reduces costs to taxpayers. Dollars spent in schools lower costs down the road on unemployment benefits, welfare and prisons and other social problems [Steinhauer 1995].

And the cuts come at a time when the public education system has faced growing demands arising from profound social changes. If anything, public schools require more, not less, support.

Education should be treated as an asset

Another problem is that education is treated, for public accounting purposes, as a cost rather than an asset. From a bookkeeping point of view, it is a clear liability. A golf ball, by contrast, is considered an asset and the sale of it is a measurable factor of growth [Saul 1995: 152]. The result is that current concepts of assets and liabilities render us unable to take into account the needs of a sophisticated society.

So public education is cut in order to reduce our 'liability.' And so begins the self-fulfilling prophecy.

The more that basic educational services are cut, the worse they become. Class sizes grow. There is less individualized attention. There are fewer services for advanced students as well as those with learning disabilities. Resources become more scarce for children from immigrant families who require help learning the basics of English or French [Bullock 2000].

Endless cuts effectively create a system that is doomed to fail. This statement should not be interpreted to mean that money is the only route to quality. But adequate funding sure does help – especially when it comes to class size and basic supports for special learning needs.

We need to protect public education

Should we care if public education survives? Yes. There is far more at risk than public schools themselves.

The very foundations of democracy and inclusion are threatened when we continually weaken the primary tool that makes possible our freedom and high quality of life. "Throughout the West, we are slipping away from that simple principle of high-quality public education. And, in doing so, we are further undermining democracy [Saul 1995: 65].

John Ralston Saul is not alone in his fear. "An adequate vision of common education for the citizens of a liberal democracy warrants a sober faith in common schools as a potentially powerful instrument of social good and it should also make us deeply wary of public policies that would undermine them" [Callan 1995: 252].

It is time to challenge the death-by-a-thousand-cuts approach to public education. It is far too precious a public good.

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