

Choice as a disposable commodity

OVER THE PAST few weeks it has been the usual conference season and I have attended a number, many of them focused on issues about education. It has been quite heartening to meet with fellow academics and share with them our mutual concerns, but also quite dispiriting because of the realisation of the context in which we all now find ourselves and the likely scenario for the future in education.

Most fascinating has been the themes that have dominated the conferences: drawn from the current right-wing agenda in education, choice and/or consumerism or "customer care". I say this because I am not even sure that many of us realised, before the election, just how great the changes had been and how much they now dominated our work, let alone our perspectives. But they clearly did so at very least subliminally so that the research agendas have all been about evaluating and reviewing these policies.

One reason why we have not directly addressed this is because we have all been so immersed in the situation that we have not been able to see the context quite so clearly.

One beneficial effect on the election result has been to enable us to see, with absolute clarity, quite what changes have been wrought under 13 years of Conservative government, and espe-



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cially that of radical right Thatcherism. There has now obviously been a massive sea-change in people's aspirations and expectations, not least brought about by the changes in education at all levels and affecting all of us in some way or another. These changes may have been informal and indirect as well as the more obviously formal changes in education policies in the broader context of social and economic changes. The first conference that I attended dealt broadly with these issues. It was on the Quality of Life in London and New York, organised by

the Joint Unit for the Study of Social Trends, a group of academics from England and the United States. Education was only one of several issues addressed over the two days.

The agenda on education was set by two papers on "choice" in education, with a keen concern over whether or not policies for schools in relatively small local areas in London and New York were to be the shape of things to come. What to me was particularly intriguing was that despite the similar language and ostensible politics of the right in the two cities the aims were really very different.

The concerns of the New Yorkers seemed to be to make public, that is state, education at the very local level better for that group of citizens and their own children. It was an attempt to free them from what was seen as the very stifling yoke of a massive public bureaucracy at 110 Livingston Street, home of the New York Board of Education.

Londoners, by contrast, seemed more concerned with less intimate and deeply felt problems. Certainly the question of whether the teachers would benefit from the changes to a more choice-based system were not presented as being on the agenda. The issues were largely to do with the choices for a far more fundamentally middle-class based clientele.

The second conference discussed in depth a study by two American education policy analysts at the Brookings Institution, Chubb and Moe. They had conducted a most impressive statistical analysis of students' education attainments from a wide range of American high schools. However, they drew the polemical conclusion that the US would gain educationally from the broadening of an education market and the abolition of any federal, state or local bureaucracy, in favour of individually competing educational institutions.

They have also conducted a whistle-stop tour of England, in the wake of their American study, and have concluded, in *The Sunday Times* magazine that British education policy on choice is ahead of the US. They consider that the policy on grant-maintained schools should be emulated in the US, given that it allows for a "market" in education. We addressed both of these studies. We agreed that the statistical analysis provided was impeccable and should be emulated by British researchers. We did not believe that the policy conclusions could be "read off" from the data. Rather the researchers seemed to indicate that effective schooling was achieved despite the bureaucracy. Nevertheless there is a need to consider how to make parents feel that schools are indeed effective.

At the British Sociological Associa-

tion's annual conference – one workshop also attended to these kinds of education policy issues, with more of a critical edge to it. Walford gave a characteristically good presentation on his work on city technology colleges, demonstrating that choice is exercised not by parents but by the school and especially its head, given the excessive demand for places. The conference was more broadly about the analysis of issues to do with Europe with the application of a range of analytical perspectives. What struck me as particularly pertinent, however, was the fact that choice and/or consumerism or markets are notions that the right applies sparingly to policy issues. They are not always universally applicable.

In a session on issues to do with feminist perspectives on state policies in Europe, I realised that it had been the women's movement that had argued long and hard for a "woman's right to choose". Here the "liberal" idea of choice became critical. But it has been over these kinds of questions for women that choice has often been denied. The state, in most advanced industrial societies, has abrogated the right to choose, especially when it has been a right-wing state. In this respect, choice is not an enduring right-wing political value. It is one that is often used expeditiously and not necessarily for all issues.