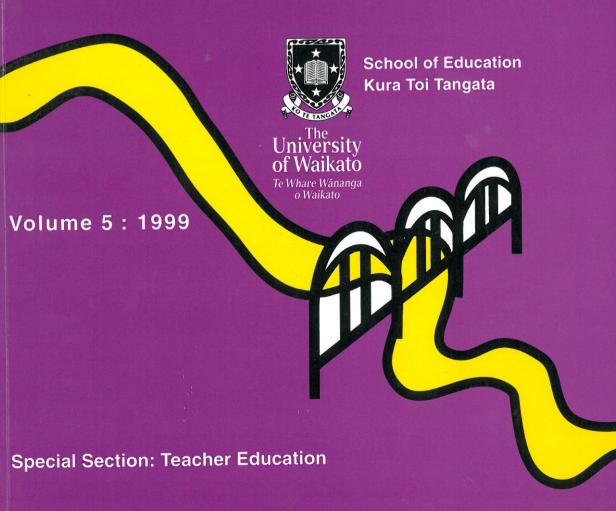
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NEO-LIBERALISM AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF DEMOCRACY: THE IMPACT ON TEACHERS' WORK¹

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ABSTRACT In New Zealand teachers have been working in a neo-liberal policy context now for 10 years The assumptions and imperatives of this political programme have had time to affect the working conditions of teachers in a multitude of ways. This paper is an attempt to unravel some of the implications and effects of neo-liberal political theory on teachers' work.

There is often a tone of bewilderment in the comments of experienced teachers, when they observe that "consultation" does not mean what they expect it to mean any more, that their opinions are not listened to; that staff no longer have any influence in major decisions, and that their input is no longer required in professional decision-making, unless they have won contracts. At the same time, there is an uneasy feeling, that the demands of the job" have grown to the extent that they no longer have time or energy to put into meaningful consultation. They are so busy doing their job that the idea of more meetings in which their opinion might, or might not, be solicited, and more time put into thinking about the nature of the job as opposed to simply doing it, seems impossible if not risible. To younger teachers, generally trained to the notion that all they have to do to be good teachers is to implement the curriculum and obey the National Education Guidelines (NEGS) and National Administrative Guidelines (NAGS), the idea that they might have some influence on the very nature and purpose of the job seems like hubris. The parameters are set elsewhere, theirs only to do and overdo.

The reasons for this change, the bewilderment and resentment that goes with it, and the heavy workload which effectively stifles response, are not accidental.

The reasons lie in the following aspects of neo-classical economics and the Public Choice Theory which derives from neo-classical economics:

- 1. Beliefs about the state and government.
- 2. Belief in the market as the model of democratic decision-making, preference for individual decision-making, disapprobation for communal or group decision-making, efficiency as a vital component in the consent of tax-payers to government action.
- 3. Disbelief in traditional majoritarian rules of democratic decision-making.
- 4. Beliefs about the nature of state service and state servants: provider capture, managerialism, principal-agent theory, accountability.

¹ I am indebted to the teachers of Massey High School, whose shared experiences and discussions over the period 1988–1998 underlie many of the observations in this paper.

Neo-liberal Beliefs About the Nature of Government

Neo-classical economics derives from the ideas of the classical economists, as interpreted by a tradition of politically conservative economists, namely, from the Austrian, Chicago and Virginia Schools. In New Zealand these groups are represented by Treasury and the New Zealand Business Round Table. Together these groups, which have their differences and defining features, have created what is today recognised as "neo-classical" economics. These people though, have not confined their re-interpretation of classical writers to the field of economics. They have actively sought to apply their ideas to the fields of politics, welfare, and education. This project of application of economics to politics and other fields is called Public Choice Theory.

One of the most dearly held tenets of these people, dating back to Carl Menger, who derived it from a particular reading of Adam Smith, is that if the government takes any part in the economy, it will distort the semi-mystical process of the invisible hand and produce inefficiencies, and thus impair the economy. Adam Smith was actually far more moderate. Menger, however, taught that the only acceptable role for government in economic affairs was to intervene in major crises – and even then the results would be bad – and to exhort the public to be more moral, work harder, save, invest, learn and so on (Streissler & Streissler, 1994). The message has not changed substantially since Menger preached it to the Crown Prince of Austria in 1886. The Crown Prince subsequently committed suicide, and we might argue that other governments which have seriously tried to apply such a pure, and self-defeating prescription, have virtually followed suit, although the body usually detected is not that of the politicians so much as that of the body politic.

Because government has such an invariably deleterious influence upon the economy, it must be reduced to the minimum functions possible. In the days of Hobbes and Adam Smith it was assumed that this meant that minimal government concerned itself with security of the country and of the individual members of the citizenry, that is, with the armed forces, with foreign policy, with internal peace via the police force, and with the law courts. So enthusiastic are the neo-classicals that they are happy to consider farming out even these minimal roles to private enterprise. However, we can in general assume that government should limit itself to matters of security, revenue, and moral exhortation. These are seen, in the literature, as the core business of government; anything else is marginal, and attracts a great deal of attention from neo-classical economists, as I will explain later.

The Costs of Social Interaction - Collective Action is More Expensive than Individual Action

In neo-classical literature, the writers see themselves as liberal and therefore put a great deal of emphasis on the freedom of the individual. Government is not seen as an expression of the collective will of those individuals, but as a means of coercing individuals to behave in ways which are not in their own interest, although possibly in the interests of others. This amounts to a denial of the primary tenet, the freedom of the individual. It is no better, in this view, if the coercion is applied to the pocket rather than the body of the individual. Any attempt to constrain the wealth of individuals has to be seen as an attack upon their ability to express and enjoy their own preferences which, through another

construct peculiar to this form of thought, is the technical description of the defining marks of the individual.

Catallaxy at Work

Neo-classical economists and their adherents believe that the invisible hand or its Walrasian equivalent, market equilibrium, or its Hayekian form, catallaxy ensures that the processes of the market arrive at the best possible distribution of goods and services, and moreover that the constant disruption and reconstitution of the equilibrium, or the forces of competition, bring about a constant evolutionary improvement in the nature of distribution, production and exchange. This belief provokes examination of how this should come about, or why the market has this superior attribute. The answers are sometimes semi-mystical, always teleological, and often refer to the notion of the survival of the fittest in one form or another (e.g. Hayek, 1984).

There is a necessity, even so, to explain why competition, or the market at work, should produce better results than other forms of human relationships. The answer is couched in the terms of methodological individualism, again a contribution of Karl Menger to economic discourse. The unit of the social sciences is the individual. All social action is simply the aggregation of individual decisions. Individuals are by nature, self-seeking – homo economicus. The market allows the self-seeking nature of the individual to be converted into co-operative behaviour, not through any altruistic mechanism, but through the individual selfseeking of buyer and seller to arrive at a co-operative decision, that is to make a sale. Therefore, there is no coercion in the market relation. Moreover, since all decisions are individual, there are few costs of social interaction. Individual decision-making is held to be more efficient than group decision-making, where there may be substantial processes of consensus-achieving going on, and the end result may still be coercion of the weak, or the minority. This argument relies on minimising or ignoring the costs of externalities created by individual action, or at best, assuming that these will be less than the costs of organising co-operation. The view that individual decision-making incurs fewer costs is often expressed as the belief that individual decision-making is more efficient (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962, p. 49).

Another justification for compressing decision-making, and the rewards that go with it into the hands of one person is that that person constitutes the winner of a *competition* for the role of manager. Competition in itself spurs people to greater and greater effort in order to win the prize, so the productivity levels, and overall improvement, thus achieved, are far in excess of the actual value of the prize; hence, a very efficient system (Schumpeter, 1954).

The Unanimity Theorem

Neo-classical economists and Public Choice theorists tend to the belief that no one should be obliged to pay tax monies for any matter which lies outside the agreed minimum description of government roles, unless they have specifically consented to that particular use of their money. This is argued on two grounds; first, that government is coercive and should limit itself to security issues, and that second, individuals should, for reasons of fairness and of social improvement generally, make their own individual decisions. Wicksell (1958) argued against the use of public money to finance a particularly unnecessary war. Other economists have used his

argument to justify a call for unanimity on all issues except those of defence, and possibly, policing (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). In New Zealand, this has taken the form of the Citizens Referendum Movement. One ex-Labour party supporter, who, not surprisingly became an Act supporter, along with a significant number of others from the Labour Party, actually produced the software to make this a feasible project. It depended on having access to a computer, and knowing how to use one (Rudman, 1998). The unanimity principle would ensure that no one was coerced into contributing to a cause of which they did not approve. Its proponents are prepared to compromise on total unanimity – figures around 80% have been mentioned – but the point is, that they reject majoritarian democracy as being not democratic enough. They reserve the right to refuse to support, as they please, areas of public life which are generally recognised as government responsibilities, in the name of freedom, fairness, and particularly, of efficiency.

... It seems clear that the system of majority voting is not any means an optimal method of allocating resources. This fact should be taken into account in considering whether some aspect of our economy would be better handled by governmental or market techniques. (Tullock, 1988)

It is assumed that *efficiency* is a high priority, a *preference* of individual voters and taxpayers. It does not have to be called into question, because the voters and taxpayers, as rational people, are interested in their own advantage, and therefore will accept any action which is in their interest. This logic lay behind Roger Douglas's complete disregard for the wishes of the party he represented and the electorate at large. When his programme had paid off, people would accept it because of its advantages to themselves. If they did not accept it, they were considered to be not rational. The individual is by economists' definition, rational. Therefore, individuals would accept the changes.

There is no particular sympathy in this set of doctrines for the notion of democracy as a form of political inclusion. Indeed, to Buchanan and Tullock, the vote is regarded as tradeable property, like any other right. In their view, it can be redefined as an asset (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962; Tullock, 1988).

Inclusion and Exclusion

It should be noted here that the individual is defined, for the purpose of this argument, as the taxpayer. The person who does not contribute to the financial burden of government is really not seen as having a stake. But because the decisions of government are discussed in terms of the financial burden they impose on taxpayers, other moral claims that non-taxpayers might have to influence government policy are likely to be ignored. Even moral claims that taxpayers might have which are not expressed in terms of their willingness or otherwise to pay up, may be ignored.

Ruth Richardson rather elegantly described the connection between government expenditure and the impositions on taxpayers as a negative effect on the moral values of initiative and energy, which would otherwise, it is assumed, be channelled, by the invisible hand, through the market into general prosperity:

The continuing increase in the size of the State has resulted in growing debt, punitive tax levels and intolerable pressure on interest rates. These burdens have sapped the initiative and the energy of New

Zealand's wealth creators. We cannot prosper as a nation if we put spending ahead of saving. (Richardson, 1990)

Incentives and Penalties

These reasons are reasons for reducing the size of government, and where possible, ensuring that decisions are made by individuals rather than by corporates, teams, committees, departments, or government itself. As far as possible the decision-maker should be the person who is financially affected. To this end, neo-liberal theory prefers to privatise decision-making wherever possible, and if that is not possible, to delegate decision-making to someone who has an interest in the results of their own decision-making, in a manner similar to that of the taxpayer, investor or owner. In other words, the first option is to privatise, the second is to corporatise, and the third is to introduce market models of accountability. This logic explains the huge incentives offered to people who would probably do the job for much less. The incentive, and the implied punishment have to be as great as that which, it might be believed, the private owner of the organisation would have, in order to attain comparable levels of commitment and accountability.

Provider Capture

The neo-liberal description of people as rational and self-interested, indeed, rational only to the extent that they are self-interested, means that they must view public servants, including teachers, as being primarily motivated by self-interest. For some reason which I do not fully understand, the self-interest which is the driving force behind the operation of the invisible hand in the markets is deemed to be counter-productive when it is exercised by an employee. Therefore, public servants are likely to feather their own nests, pervert money to their own uses, extend their empires, or bureaux, and generally distort their employers' purposes to suit their own (Mises, 1945; Niskanen, 1971). This reprehensible – and inherently unavoidable – characteristic of public servants means that some form of control must be instituted.

There is a whole field of economic science called the theory of the firm surrounding this "principal-agent" problem. The principal is the employer, or owner, not the school principal. Dr Roderick Deane, once employed in Treasury, and an important figure in New Zealand neo-liberal decisions, explains as he advocates the privatisation of state owned enterprises:

In summary, the lack of ability to transfer property rights . . . and the absence of direct or exclusive rights by individuals to any income accruing from the improved use of public assets, reduces the incentive to control agency contracts and agency costs, may well reduce the incentives for satisfactory economic performance . . . (Deane, 1989)

The generally advocated solution is to put in place a series of observations and incentives to ensure compliance with the wishes of the employer. These are generally known as performance management, appraisal and performance bonuses.

However, the point as far as industrial democracy is concerned is that the opinions of employees are not only not wanted, they are positively dangerous,

since they allow the employee to subvert the requirements of the employer into the wishes of the employee group. The advice and suggestions of employees are inherently suspect. This is the origin of provider capture, a neo-marxist idea, which had its roots in Ivan Illich's (1971) thesis, well grounded in many cases, that the rich were more able to access government-provided education opportunities than the poor, for whom, in South America, they were intended. In New Zealand such opportunities were never intended specifically for the poor. The middle classes of this country basically worked through government to provide opportunities for their own families. The poor piggy-backed upon them, except Māori, for whom government provided education from a period much earlier than that provided for Pakeha, and for different, assimilatory reasons.

Overwork

It can be assumed that the employees of large organisations, of which government is the paradigmatic example, have used the laxness, or lack of personal involvement of the supervisors, to indulge in feather-bedding, or empire-building, or institutionalised time-wasting. Therefore, it can be concluded that more people have been employed than are necessary to do the job, that various devices have been developed to absorb time, that the use of resources has been inefficient, that people are not working to capacity, and that there is slack in the system in a variety of forms. Hence, it is a matter of good governance, or management, to tighten up in such a way that these practices are squeezed out. This can be done by reducing funds, reducing staff, or increasing expectations of productivity. No fall in productivity or quality need be expected, since it may be assumed that the increase in productivity would come about from the cessation of the feather-bedding practices.

Managerialism

To achieve efficiency, as described earlier, and accountability, one person needs to make decisions, the collective should be excluded from decision-making, and the decision-maker must be very sensitive to the wishes of the employer. This is managerialism under which the manager is glorified and rewarded for loyalty, the workers at the face are observed and rewarded for docility, but not too highly rewarded, because the watchword is efficiency which means delivering value for money (as measured by outputs in relation to inputs) to the investor, or taxpayer. In this scenario, middle management has little place.

It is not feasible to pay middle managers enough to ensure their compliance, and it is difficult to supervise them adequately, especially since they often have some prestige, expertise and an office to hide behind or in, and they are likely, if not adequately recompensed to ensure compliance, to become subversive. Hence the preference for flat management structures. Heads of departments are natural leaders of the chalk-face troops and consequently dangerous. In schools, heads of departments whose input was once vital to the running of the school, have seen much of their influence being taken over by boards of trustees, which now have responsibility for policy, and by contractors to the Ministry of Education and NZQA for various curriculum and pedagogical areas which were once school matters.

Managerialism has been applied quite rigorously to schools. The principal has become the agent of the trustees, who, under an elegant legal fiction which the

government would have liked to approximate more closely to fact, became the employers" of teachers. By thus devolving power to local communities, the government was aiming first, to reduce the involvement of government itself, second, to enlist the assumed greater efficiency in terms of costs of social interaction of voluntary associations, as compared to government, and third to engage the self-interest of parents in such a way as to control the self-interest of teachers. If an exchange could be created between teachers as sellers of services and parents as buyers of those services, parents would both keep the wages low in their effort to keep the operations grant as high as possible, and oversee teachers carefully to make sure that resources were fully and efficiently applied to the education of their children.

As the NAGs have it:

Each Board of Trustees is required . . . to develop and implement personnel and industrial policies, within policy and procedural frameworks set by the government from time to time, which promote high levels of staff performance, use educational resources effectively and recognise the needs of students . . . (my italics). (National Administrative Guidelines)

The 1993 OECD Report confirms the association between devolution and the tighter management of resources and teacher salaries:

Direct resourcing of all grants (including the bulk funding of all salaries) is seen in the longer term by the Government as an important contributor to self-management in the school. It is believed that giving the board and principal control over most of the school's resources will provide a significant boost to the most efficient and effective overall use of resources in the school (my italics). (OECD, 1995)

There were a number of problems in this scenario, not least of which was the resistance of the teacher unions. ERO (1995) however put its finger on a few more:

A number of problems arise in relation to the quality of service that can be expected from a relatively low wage industry. These problems become more significant where, as in almost all New Zealand schools, boards of trustees do not have full control as governors over employment contracts, wage levels, and incentives for recruitment purposes or for recognition of performance. (ERO, 1995, p. 2)

The Efficacy of Efficiency

Does this work? The people who believe in this theory or set of theories are not predisposed to acknowledgment of the import of empirical evidence (see, for instance, Friedman, 1954) and have not put in place any research which would establish beyond doubt that surveillance, incentives, higher workload, and the other characteristics of managerialism have achieved higher levels of production. If the outputs are defined narrowly enough, and the loss of traditional, less-observable forms of production are ignored, these results can be achieved. Tim Hazledine (1996) argues that the stagnation of the New Zealand economy *after* the

economic reforms resulted from the absorption of productivity in management and surveillance. As if in (reluctant) support, the 1993 OECD report on New Zealand education confirms a slight reduction in the amount of money that went into learning and teacher salaries, and a rise in the costs of management and administration in the period 1992-1993.

More importantly, I believe, are the consequences which are not defined in terms of outputs. Teachers have always put a great deal of energy into the parameters of their own employment, for example in contributing to staff meetings, school policies, developing programmes, curriculum, and assessment. Nowadays, there is a great deal of resentment in staff rooms as meetings become consultations which are actually information-giving, not consulting at all. School boards of trustees are obliged, if not grateful, generally, to staff members who are prepared to put in time devising policies on many such things as harassment, equity issues, grounds-use and local curriculum. They do this because the trustees, are technically responsible for these policies, have neither the time, the expertise, nor the resources to do it. Teachers become understandably disillusioned when, having done the hard initial work, they find that a board of trustees has altered a policy without consultation, or with notional consultation, for reasons which the staff sometimes find difficult to accept. The most potent source of tension between boards and teachers is over the bulk funding or direct resourcing policy decision, which vitally affects the working lives of teachers, but which the government, and many boards, prefer them to have no part in.

Susan Bridges sees the overwork of teachers as being a direct result of a combination of the reforms and of teacher goodwill and professionalism. Ironically, the very pre-reform ethos of teachers may have caused them to provide evidence that there was sufficient slack in the system that they could indeed be called upon to do more work:

It is my belief that teachers, having taken to heart Picot's original ethos of partnership, willingly increased their workload in order to ensure that their school and the children they taught would not fall victim to any negative changes precipitated by the reforms. Wanting to meet the needs of the local community, they have become increasingly involved in communication, resource management and school policy developments. In primary schools enormous accommodations have been made to encompass the various responsibilities of the Boards of Trustees, which were previously the domain of the Education Boards. (Bridges, 1992, p. 5)

Case Study: Curriculum Reform

The new curriculum is an example of contractualism replacing industrial democracy. Before the contract system was brought into play, teachers, qua teachers, and interested parties from industry, tertiary education and the Ministry, would argue the case for the format and inclusion or exclusion of particular items in the curriculum. The process was slow, but by its end, all participants understood why a topic or item was in, and why other things were left out. There was little left to do in the way of professional development in the sense of teaching people what was in or implied by the curriculum, although there might be plenty to do in areas of content or technique. The case nowadays is very different. Vast amounts of time and money are expended by the Ministry, the schools, and the

teachers in teaching and learning the curriculum. Not only that, but the curriculum is seen as a source of potted lessons, which require no educational justification, just the justification that they are derived from "Level 3, Item 2, subsection 34". The evidence from what little research is available is that whilst teachers approve of the curriculum, the students themselves are learning less under this regime (Harold, Mansell, Hawksworth & Thrupp, 1999).

The most impeccable curriculum is no substitute for a teacher who is teaching what is passionately important to them, and what they can justify to themselves and others in terms of the interests of the child and the society in which the child takes its place. The processes of teacher autonomy and input in a democratic process of defining their own job parameters can not effectively be supplanted by a managerial process of providing chapter and verse and insisting that the teacher simply carry out the requirements. The result will be a state of anomie where workers have no sense of involvement or commitment to their job. In this condition, teachers are not going to bring about the wonders which we are told will result from all the new phenomena of reformed education.

The Replacement of Professionalism

Similar tales could be told about assessment systems and research programmes dictated by the terms of the contract rather than by the knowledge, or interests, of the researcher or the needs of the researched. The disregard for the collective knowledge of teachers may cost this country very dearly in the long run. The great problem is that if teachers lose their professionalism as they adopt practices of technicist compliance, an enormous fund of energy, thought and knowledge will be lost. Furthermore, professionalism will be extremely difficult to reintroduce to a generation of teachers who have learned to be directed and over-independent.

Neo-liberals exercise a great deal of influence upon education, not just in Treasury, but widespread in senior levels of government, among both the public servants – or contracted staff – and the politicians. The problem lies in the administrative reforms which we were once assured would not impinge upon the classroom, and in the manner in which people are heard, or not heard, rewarded, or not rewarded, trusted or distrusted. These things have spread into the very material of the classroom, and into the relations between teacher and principal, teacher and subject matter, teacher and teacher. In the process of redefining relationships, and in so doing, of redefining persons, older values in the form of participatory democracy, consultation, trust, professionalism, are being lost. Ironically, they are being substituted by command, information, indoctrination, distrust and surveillance which look likely to be less efficient.

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