

Poverty, inequality and education - are we catching the British disease?

London Report 2 from TJ Ryan Foundation Executive Director Professor Roger Scott, Easter 2014

"Food poverty - the scandal that shames Britain" was the headline in *The Independent* on Wednesday April 16. A report had found nearly a million people now relied on food handouts to survive. This story led in front of the Ukraine crisis and I wondered whether there is a hidden underclass in Brisbane with the same dependence arising from the same cuts in benefits. Further on in the paper were articles about vigils calling for an end to hunger, noting compassion was disappearing from the welfare state and an increase in repressive attitudes to immigrants.

The Guardian had a similar lead focussed on a letter to PM Cameron from 40 Anglican bishops and 600 other church leaders. It also talked about the problem of rising house prices, an investment bubble which has made access to public housing unaffordable as prices rise but which rewarded those already entrenched in the market.

The main *Guardian* leader was about another form of deprivation - access to primary school. This turns out to be currently about access to the first choice of primary school as the competitive ethos takes hold to replace notions of neighbourhood inclusivity. The effect is to generate hasty building programs and cramming in class rooms, plus the increasing attractiveness of Academies free from local authority control and able to be selective in ways which reinforce disadvantage for those at the back of the queue. For those able to afford it, a de facto school starting age is now two years old as parents use enrolment in the nursery school attached to their preferred primary school as a guarantee of success in what is becoming extremely hot competition.

Further on, there is an article which responds to complaints from teachers about the exhausting regime imposed on children who leave home at eight and spend ten hours at school while both parents work. One mother of clearly substantial means suggests school offers a much better experience than any other, recounting problems when no granny is available nearby - ie using a nanny, an au pair or other child-minder, all of dubious provenance. *"Everyone wants to do the right thing for their child; and the fact that primary schools don't slam those brightly coloured doors bang on 3.30pm is, in my view, a blessing for all involved."*

Another striking education story in the *Guardian* focussed on assertions about a plot to infiltrate Islamic fundamentalists into secular state schools via the Academy option of community control of school boards and appointment of an Islamic principal. Civil libertarians complained that the investigation was given to a counter-terrorism expert and not an educationist, a complaint supported by one of the country's senior police chiefs. A columnist argued "whatever the result of the investigation into an alleged plot, education has been disrupted by the academy agenda."

The link here is the "academy agenda" which translates in Brisbane as state independent schools - the same scheme of devolution of power to school principals and local community boards being trumpeted by the current Queensland government. Where local communities develop a unified sense of purpose and have members with potential managerial competence, schools will thrive - in some cases to promote a particular set of religious values, in others to capture the scarce resources of quality teachers and quality principals. They thrive at the expense of less well-endowed or less motivated communities such as in poorer suburbs and rural and remote locations. The fundamentally egalitarian purpose of a unified teaching service operating under a common set of rules and resource entitlements is lost. This is the darker side of the competition among parents for access to schools which develop a high reputation for excellence.

In the British system, inequality is more obviously reinforced by the market dominance of high-fee private schools confusingly called "public" and also by the fact regular "un-independent" state schools have been managed for generations by local authorities. Nevertheless the trend to social disadvantage is observable.

This is reflected at the top with the accelerating social inequality in gaining access to universities. In general the higher up the league table of excellence the fewer the number of students who have not come through the public school system and the very few at all from the "un-independent". The Independent newspaper reported that there has now been a recent study which suggests there is a poor return on investment in a British non-elite university course. Graduate salaries have plummeted compared to average salaries so more and more people who battled disadvantage to scrape in may find they have wasted their time at university in terms of salary benefits. Australian Ryan Foundation research associates have plenty of fresh ground to till in this field of learning if they examine British comparisons.

Pollywaffle and God

The *Daily Telegraph*, not my usual broadsheet of choice, upholds traditional values with a headline on the day before Good Friday - "Cameron Puts God Back Into Politics". Any local echoes?

"The Prime Minister, who once described his faith as being 'like Magic Radio FM in the Chilterns - it periodically fades and reappears' has found greater strength in religion since entering office". He attacked those who demand strict 'neutrality' in public life on religious matters, arguing that it would deprive Britain of a vital source of morality although he had no intention to 'do down' other religions. There were voluble protestations from Cameron about "confidence in our status as a Christian country, more ambitious about expanding the role of faith-based organisations (ed - but presumably not terroristic Islamic schools) and frankly more evangelical about a faith that compels us to get out there and make a difference to people's lives."

Cynics among bishops who had signed the letter of condemnation concerning welfare cuts suggested this was a calculated response and, when he threw in the word 'evangelical', he was seen by others to aim a sop to the traditionalists who had disapproved of Cameron's legal changes concerning marriage equality.

Elsewhere in this Easter season, the *Telegraph* was back on its usual message of attacking the nanny state. It had a story about problems of delays in gaining a council permit generated by the need to meet complex health and safety procedures to prevent an actor playing Jesus slipping and hurting himself as he ascended the cross. This had the arresting headline : **"Crucifixion fails risk assessment, so passion play is cancelled."**