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A Question of Democracy … or why the problem of bringing up young people will never be solved simply by school-based solutions.

To those of us living in First-World countries the early twenty-first century appears rich in opportunity, yet paradoxically the immediate future seems full of uncertainty. Individuals oscillate between exhilaration and anxiety; families fracture and communities have ever less cohesion and substance. As the full impact of a global economy becomes ever more obvious, nations too become more ‘itchy’ that policies which aim to create more equitable societies may in fact cause their people to loose out in the global marketplace. The more confused people feel themselves to be, the more concerned they become as to how decisions about the future are to be made. In times of uncertainty the practice of democracy is put to the test as it struggles with the contrary nature of human instincts.

Recent findings in bio-medical and socio-economic research help explain these contrary instincts, the resolution of which has concerned philosophers and spiritual leaders for millennia as they sought to establish the basis for civilised behaviour. From such research it is possible to understand how a particular environment reshapes a set of neurological processes that may turn innate individual or group behaviour from collaborative to competitive, from altruism to selfishness, or from empathy to aggression. Rather than seeing behaviour shaped exclusively by inheritance and “selfish genes”, or entirely by social or physical environments, we have come in the last few years to understand better the interplay between nature and nurture. There is no escaping the fact that without commonly -agreed value systems, human behaviour quickly slips back to “the survival of the fittest”, and the law of the jungle.

Democracy, it has been observed many times, is the least imperfect way so far devised for reaching decisions that concern the whole of society and which, for their implementation, require the support of everyone. Democracy is also a fragile concept because, for the voice of the people to be listened to by their elected representatives, the electorate must be able to think logically and sensitively. Critically the mass of the people must possess what the ancient Greeks called “nous”, something today we would describe as “applied commonsense”. If the decisions to be made by the people’s representatives are to be more than responses to whoever shouts loudest, then the electorate need an education in their youth that unites thinking with doing, the logical with the intuitive, and which recognises the ongoing conflicts between a private gain, and a public good.

The more complex the society, the better the electorate needs to be at sifting through crooked thinking and perceiving the long-term implications of decisions, often outside their original context. Democracy simply can’t function where the people’s thinking has not been well-honed in working things out for themselves. Neither can democracy be effective where there is no sense of community within which individual aspirations can be merged to achieve the common good.
Being a territorially-aware species humans are best able to act collaboratively when the group is small and inter-related, but easily becomes highly competitive when resources become scarce.

Furthermore Democracy doesn’t happen of its own accord, nor can its continuity be assured unless each new generation is nurtured in ways that support both their intellectual development, and their personal involvement in the maintenance of the common good. While some aspects of education can be formally taught, the ability to form judgements on conflicting expectations comes from the experience of being so caught up in life itself that applied commonsense, ‘nous’, grows through the daily experience of life’s ups and downs in home, in community, and at the workplace.

Democracy was born in the small Greek city states in the fifth century B.C., places small enough for all those entitled to vote to meet in a single place and debate, and vote, in public – probably not more than two thousand free, land-owning men. After the fall of Greece, it was to be a further two thousand years before questions about democracy became the stuff of political debate in England as the autocratic power of the Monarchy was progressively challenged by Parliament in the seventeenth century. Interestingly England was, at that time, dominated by hundreds of small market towns, each – like Stratford-on-Avon where Shakespeare grew up – having less than two thousand people. They might have lacked the large outdoor theatres of the ancient Athenians but their market squares were places where active men and women came together to trade both the goods that they made, and the ideas they were formulating out of endless arguments.

In this congenial environment the Englishman’s way of living was the culmination of the steady co-evolution of man and his surroundings that had gone on since the beginning of human time. Here in seventeenth century England was probably the finest balance ever achieved anywhere in the world between the evolution of the internal mechanisms of the brain, and a manageable, but always challengingly, environment. To survive in this equation people had to use daily the multiple forms of intelligence that we now know are to be found within each of us. Everything they created had to be made by the sweat of their brow. Life was still on a sufficiently human scale for ‘ordinary’ people to know – at a deeply subconscious level – that everything was connected. They had to act intelligently in all that they did. They asked questions, and were not content with incomplete answers. They were a practical democracy in the making.

Such cultural and economic inquisitiveness converged with that Puritan theology that stressed the responsibility of the individual directly to his or her God for their behaviour, exemplified in John Bunyan’s creation of Pilgrim’s Progress. Bunyan caught the mood of these people and turned the ordinary Englishman’s life from an uncertain journey into an eternal personal pilgrimage by providing every man with a colloquial story whose values they could live by, and on which they could model their lives. Here was the foundation of the Protestant Work Ethic. Pilgrim’s Progress was the ultimate self-starting and self-regulating guide to overcoming the distractions of everyday life and remained, after the Bible, the most widely-read book in the English-speaking world until early in the twentieth century. It was John Milton in his capacity as Secretary for Foreign Affairs to Oliver Cromwell who expressed more succinctly than anyone else what had to be the nature of the education of a person worthy to live in a democracy: “I call a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously all the offices both public and private, of peace and war”, he wrote in 1644. With less than thirty words Milton defined the Puritan ideal of a mature, interdependent and essentially self-correcting
society that would ultimately be responsible for England’s phenomenal growth as the world’s pre-eminent industrial power two centuries later.

England’s experiment with a limited form of democracy collapsed with the death of Cromwell, and with the Restoration of Charles II it was possible that Milton would even lose his head. Further dreams of democracy would thus be dormant until the first third of the nineteenth century. Totally forgotten was Milton’s proposal that a primary school should be established in every village paid for out of a local rate. Forgotten too was Milton’s recommendation that the post-reformation grammar schools, which still adhered to a strictly classical curriculum, should be replaced in every market town by Academies for young men between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one. In such academies parity would be given to the study of academic as well as artisan skills. When Milton called for a complete and generous education he meant just that, an education where the skills of thinking and doing were truly complimentary. Without such a breadth of understanding, Milton readily appreciated, a man would never be able to fulfil his responsibility both to his friends, and to the greater community.

For the better part of the century up to the 1760s and 1770s, formal education in England largely festered. While an increasing number of people learnt to read and write in the thousands of ‘dame schools’ (often held in church porches) that littered the country, the English were so busy making money that they just couldn’t be bothered to go to school, especially secondary school. Winchester College received only ten new pupils in 1750, and the number of students going to Oxford and Cambridge fell by nearly a half. The young Humphrey Repton was typical of his time. Removed from Norwich Grammar School at the age of twelve because his “father thought it proper to put a stopper to the vial of classical literature, having determined to make me a rich, rather than a learned man.”

Yet in the middle years of the eighteenth century, when most people were too busy to go to school or think about democracy, innovative and entrepreneurial activity knew no limits. The result was dramatic. No society in history has ever had to reinvent itself so quickly, or so often, as did England in late Georgian times. Here was the spontaneous expression of a people’s energy, dependent not simply on the brilliance of an inventor but on the practical skills of carpenters and blacksmiths, goldsmiths, clockmakers and engineers, in hundreds of towns and thousands of villages ready instantly to turn such designs into new machines. England was full of resourceful thinkers who knew how to make their innovations work, and got up and did so

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It is nevertheless ironic that, at just this moment when intellectual and practical creativity merged to create what could have been the ideal environment for a functional popular democracy, the Industrial Revolution (itself a child of all that practical creativity), effectively changed every aspect of that earlier equation. While men of business became phenomenally wealthy the descendants of countless generations of self-taught farmers, small tradesmen and craftsmen who had made all this innovation actually happen, saw the craft traditions they had inherited from their forbearers completely disappear within a couple of generations. Robust individualism – the essential ingredient for a functional democracy – was replaced by an unthoughtful, demotivated and unskilled mob of people, ready only for the life of the factory that was then being created. Rather than a people who could have rebirthed democracy the stage was being set for Disraeli’s ‘two nations, between whom there is no intercourse, no sympathy; (whose citizens) are as ignorant of each other’s thoughts… as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of
different planets”, as England began the process of splitting itself into communities of either the rich, or the poor.

English society today is still paying the price. Men who had learned an apprenticeship from their fathers now realised they had neither a craft skill, nor a set of social and moral values to offer their own children. Men lost faith in the value of fatherhood. Adam Smith, who argued in The Wealth of Nations for the financial benefits to be gained from mass manufacturing processes also warned that, should this happen, the earlier “alert intelligence of the craftsman” (the attributes of their fathers and grandfathers before them) would be replaced by factory operatives who would be “generally as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become”. And that is exactly what did happen, and continued to happen across vast swathes of the country throughout the nineteenth century and much of the first part of the last century. Working men lost not only their dignity, but also their sense of purpose and involvement – the very things necessary to make democracy work.

The Industrial Revolution represented social meltdown on a scale never before experienced, or anticipated. “What to do with the children?” became an urgent problem that was resolved in two entirely different ways. The first was custodial, and aimed at reinforcing the status quo. To keep the youngest children off the streets, and to protect them from the worst excesses of nineteenth century society, private benefactors (largely the churches) built, and ran, an increasing number of schools for children up to the age of eleven, always taking the greatest care to tell the children of “the folly of thinking it unjust that one man should receive more than another for his labour”. This was what the Victorians, so conscious of social divisions, were to refer to in Parliament years later as ‘the Education of the Poor Act’. It was to be education for the masses, but most certainly on the cheap. Of teachers in such schools one government official noted, “Little else is required of a teacher other than an aptitude for enforcing discipline and acquaintance with mechanical details and preservation of order, and that sort of ascendancy in his school which a sergeant major is required to exercise over a batch of new recruits.” It didn’t seem very inspiring, or very nice.

The second response could not have been more different, and must be understood if the nature of England’s educational malaise in the twenty-first century is to be rectified. It goes like this; self-made Victorian entrepreneurs, aspiring to improve their own social strata, were determined that their sons should not go through the same grubby apprenticeships which had made them wealthy. At the same time they had no wish for their adolescent sons to litter the drawing rooms of the country mansions their newfound wealth enabled them to build. From the late 1830s onwards it was Dr. Arnold who showed how the ancient free grammar schools with their cloistered buildings and ivy-covered walls, could be requisitioned and turned into elite boarding schools, taking only the sons of the rich and leaving out the local boys. Within a few short years the Victorian public school (which were never public in the sense we now apply to state schools), radically transformed the nature of English society by diverting the adolescent sons of the entrepreneurs away from the apprenticeships into boarding schools.

Those elite boarding schools quickly recovered the classical curriculum that a generation before had been seen to be in terminal decline. By merging this with what quickly became known as ‘muscular Christianity’ the Victorians effectively used education, to create and then reinforce, class boundaries. Secondary education which through the benevolence of earlier generations had for centuries been seen as a ‘public good’ to be provided free of charge to the most worthy of youngsters, became under the Victorians a privileged way of life open only to those with the money to buy into what would then become a ‘private gain’. Right through to late in the
twentieth century the old-school tie often mattered more than which university you went to, or what job you held.

It is irrefutable that the public schools provided much of the manpower and the idealism that created and extended the British Empire, but they nevertheless left an indelible mark on English national life that has been far from helpful. As the sons of the gentry began to leave their homes at the age of thirteen-and-a-half they grew to have a greater loyalty to their classmates (and the style of living they adopted) and their school, than they did to their home communities. This has done enormous damage and over time it has led too many such boys, as they became adults, to be more comfortable in their London clubs, than serving as elected officials on their local county or parish councils. This trend has grown worse in the latter part of the twentieth century as the residue of that noblesse oblige tradition espoused by the most socially conscious of the Victorians, weakened still further. In turn it has led to a serious loss of social capital, and a greatly weakened sense of civil society.

Two other consequences of such elite education cast shadows which stretch down into our own century. One of these was the influence of the classical tradition which led many of their former pupils, in later life, to uncritically accept Plato’s explanation of human nature as being dependent on whether a person was born with gold, silver or iron in their blood. To such men destiny was unchangeable and education was about polishing up what was already there, not revealing talents not immediately obvious. For the better part of a hundred years the English establishment was slow to heed developments in biology and genetics suggested by Darwin, and in psychology as taught by Freud about the evolutionary nature of inherited predispositions. Consequently, such men’s uncritical acceptance of the Greek and Roman thought has damaged English education in a further devastating way – to the Romans the education of a child below the age of ten or twelve was merely women’s work, not until a boy was well into puberty did the ancients think it worth sparing a man to be their tutor. So to the Victorians it was the education of boys thirteen and older that mattered, early years were of little concern to them.

Is there still any significance for us in all that? Yes… for to this day English education, in so many ways, takes secondary education more seriously than primary, and extends a far greater respect to a secondary teacher than to a primary teacher. Despite what Ignatius Loyola taught his followers nearly five centuries ago and all that we now know from research about the malleability of the young brain, England persists in spending more on the education of an eighteen-year-old than on a five-year-old… and it is the wrong way round; quite simply the system is upside down.

Then there remains the organisation of the Victorian public school, where the code of behaviour by which privileged young Victorian youth grew up, was totally autocratic. Democracy did not enter into the equation – when in doubt as to the rights or wrongs of a matter what counted in the time of Tom Brown’s School Days was loyalty to one’s team, to one’s leader and to one’s social status. What mattered was accepting uncritically what you were told to do until, when you yourself became top-dog, everybody would do exactly what you told them to do. By an extraordinary twist as the nineteenth century drew to its close, the social status of elementary school headteachers was seen as the equivalent of successful shopkeepers, while public school headmasters achieved social parity with cabinet ministers. When six of these formidable headmasters went on to become Archbishops of Canterbury they even outranked the Prime Minister. To a terrified youngster the headmaster was the personification of both God, and King. By 1913 it was claimed “there is probably no position in English civil life where a single individual exercises such uncontrollable power over others as does the Head of a successful public school”. The existence of two such totally different approaches to children has been
catastrophic. As Edward Boyle, the one-time Conservative Minister of Education was reported as saying shortly before his early death in 1967, England will never reach its full potential if we remain a people divided by the way we educate our children.

**Does any of this matter now, and does it have any relevance to England’s ability to make real democracy work?** Or does it seem that I simply have a grudge against the public schools? I certainly do not have a grudge, indeed I was well educated in such a school in the 1950s, and much enjoyed the experience. Subsequently I spent many years in education including teaching in preparatory schools, a secondary modern, and at that most elite of grammar schools namely Manchester, and then for a dozen years I was Head of an old sixteenth century grammar school as it became a comprehensive school. For more than twenty years I’ve been involved in various school-community projects. A dozen years ago I was invited to Washington D.C. to head up a team of international research scientists investigating the nature of human learning. But I am not simply a theoretician; my wife and I have three sons who have taught us more than we have ever taught them, and I learnt more about the theory of teaching as a geography teacher whilst out on the mountainside on fieldtrips than ever I did in a classroom. I now lecture on human learning in many different countries which has given me many opportunities to look at schooling in England with a focus sharpened by my overseas’ experience. That is probably why I’ve been invited to give this lecture in Australia, a lecture based on the book the Initiative is about to publish in England, *Overschooled but Undereducated: Society’s failure to understand adolescence*.

So, to the first part of that question – does this hinder democracy from working? I know that if we are to create an appropriate education for the future we must properly understand the reasons for the malfunction of the present system otherwise we will never get a correct bearing on where we need to go to in the future. Key to that malfunction has been the way that the elite boarding schools have glorified a form of education that is separated from the life of the community, and from the day-to-day concerns of ordinary people. By so separating school from community youngsters in their most formative days are separated from the function of democracy. And so, briefly, I must go back to history, to the latter part of the nineteenth century to see how this aspect of separation happened.

By 1870 the churches could no longer afford to build still more schools especially in the urban areas. Government would have to become involved. Consequently, the 1870 Education Act established locally-elected School Boards, authorised to raise funds through local taxes to build and maintain non-denominational elementary schools for children up to the age of fourteen when most would proceed to apprenticeships. The School Boards with their locally elected trustees attracted a lot of interest, and loyalty. This could have become democracy in practice. Able to raise money from taxes rather than from the church collection plate, board schools started to extend their curriculum beyond the three Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic to include science, technology, some creative arts subjects, and modern languages. By the 1890s so popular had these schools become that an increasing number of pupils enrolled for more advanced studies and were keen to remain in school up to the age of sixteen and possibly beyond.

Such growth in popular, rate-supported education, offended the public schools with their belief in the superiority of the classical curriculum. This led to scare stories that such a ‘modern’ approach to education would undermine English society. It is a paradox that while industry led to England’s economic preeminence in the nineteenth century, those very men who were responsible for it were so embarrassed by the nature of where they had come from, that they did all in their power to deny the significance of technology to the well-being of the country.
This reached a climax in the Parliament of 1902 (elected by a franchise composed of only 60% of the country’s adult male population) which voted to prevent elementary schools from teaching pupils over the age of fourteen, so vastly reducing the opportunity for people to study technological subjects. The arguments had been intense as the Establishment dug itself in. If you vote against the all-through elementary school, Herbert Asquith, soon to become Prime Minister, told the Commons, “You will put an end to the existence of the best, most fruitful and the most beneficial educational agencies that ever existed in this country.” Instead Parliament proposed to create a number of rate-supported grammar schools for that minority of fourteen-year-olds deemed suitable for further academic study. Nothing, a hundred years ago, was to be provided for ‘the non-academic’ (a horrible English expression). And here was the eventual rub, something that still plagues us in the twenty-first century. When searching for an appropriate grammar school curriculum to serve largely working-class children, the Office of Education (its officials drawn exclusively from the public schools) chose a model based closely on the classical curriculum of the public schools with very little science, and even less technology. Academically able working-class pupils were taught to think and act as if they were associate – though always inferior – members of a public school, wearing uniforms (which made them stand out a mile from their less-able friends), and playing rugby, not soccer, as a measure that they were now upwardly mobile and would quickly dissociate themselves from their local communities.

So it was that in 1938, twelve months before the beginning of the Second World War, only 18% of English fourteen-year-olds were still in school, one of the lowest figures for any of the so-called advanced countries. Grudgingly and with no great enthusiasm, the War Cabinet assigned to R. A. Butler the task of setting up a national secondary education system. Winston Churchill placed one condition on Butler – absolutely nothing should be done to disturb the status of the public schools. What a post-1944 education system would look like teased Butler’s imagination. Here, once more, the influence of the classical curriculum view of education came to the fore – which isn’t surprising when it is realised that out of the seventy leading figures in the administration of education between 1870 and 1963 sixty-three had been educated in public schools. Such men knew more about Plato than they did about technology, child development or the relationship of the environment to intelligence. Consequently, the 1944 Education Act defined a tripartite system of secondary education, based quite literally on Plato’s explanation of there being three kinds of pupils – the bright, the technological, and the plodders. Trying to put a contemporary scientific gloss on this, Butler and his Parliamentarian colleagues allowed themselves to be convinced by proselytizing psychologists and psychometricians, that intelligence tests could be devised which, if administered at the age of eleven, could accurately predict which pupils should go to which kind of school. For twenty years English education was haunted by the fear of the Eleven Plus exam, an assessment system which we now know misplacced up to 20% of the population.

The legacy of the Eleven Plus exam lives on in the school buildings that we can see to this day. Because middle-class children appeared to do better in the Eleven Plus most Post-War grammar schools were built in residential areas, while most secondary modern schools were placed in working-class areas. Furthermore grammar schools had a building allowance half as much again as the secondary moderns. We no longer call them by those names but sixty years later, their origins are starkly obvious in their design, and no amount of fresh paint and billboards can disguise their very different expectations. One looks a place of distinction while the other is a utilitarian assemblage of classrooms scattered around staff car parks.

Tragic as all that was there was a still greater tragedy. For very good child-development reasons public schools have consistently maintained thirteen and a half as the appropriate age of transfer.
Butler understood that in 1944 but with only the money to provide for compulsory education up to the age of fifteen what could he do? He was constrained by the decision taken in 1902 to rule against all-through schools (like those now found in Finland, the country with the highest scores in the OECD) preferring to accept the public schools’ assumption that young children should be kept away from the serious work of secondary education. Butler compromised – he lopped three years off the elementary school curriculum and transferred it to the new four-year secondary school. No research that I know of suggests that eleven is a good age for transfer – many youngsters never settle into secondary schools. But even more seriously, from 1944 onwards the new primary schools were expected to do in six years what the old elementary schools had done in nine and in most cases it just couldn’t be done. Now in 2008 primary schools are constantly blamed for not achieving that which the compromise of 1944 made virtually impossible.

It took the country twenty years to recognise the stupidity of such a tripartite system of secondary education. Neither Conservatives nor Labour could think of anything better in the mid 1960s than to create an English equivalent to an American community high school, a comprehensive school that it was thought would satisfy all children. But England is not America, and what might have been a highly appropriate solution in 1902, and might just have worked in 1944, was now totally out of step with the social expectations of the 1960s and ‘70s. Put simply the comprehensive school sought to undo the damage wrought by intelligence tests and to improve the opportunity for those children coming from deprived backgrounds. Comprehensives sought to capitalise on the sense of local community and to bind formal and informal learning opportunities together. In doing so they tried to unpick much of the 1944 and 1902 Education Acts. What they left intact, however, was that other aspect of 1944 namely the division of education at the age of eleven. The proposals of 1965 could have been more beneficial to young people than the Acts of 1870, 1902 and 1944 put together. But they weren’t. Grand proposals required great sponsors, and both parties were at best equivocal in their support for comprehensive schools. No great champions emerged because England had lost its zeal for education as a common good – the 1970s were to be all about private gain. Earlier, opportunities for children had been mightily constrained by the kind of school they attended. If a grammar school, then the academic curriculum severely limited the development of social skills, while if it was a secondary modern school the mere impossibility of pursuing academic study to any depth deprived most youngsters of a chance of progressing much beyond the lifestyle of their fathers. For comprehensive schools to work then strong and determined political support was required, support which neither political party was prepared to give.

By the 1980s the idealism of the Post-War years had withered, and England was fast becoming consumed with a search for the good life, hopefully to be achieved by burdening oneself with as few commitments to other people as possible. With this weakening of commonly agreed codes of behaviour and morality with which to shape everyday personal decisions, government found itself having to prescribe in ever finer detail what must, and must not, be done. In a travesty of what should be a civilised society governments began to assume that the best way to avoid anti-social behaviour was to play on people’s fear of being caught out and punished. All this meant that schools were no longer able to call upon a home background sympathetic to the expectations of the schools, the teachers, and the whole way of life as had been expressed in schools of less than a generation before. Into this malaise in 1988 stepped Kenneth Baker, not with any new or polished-up vision of education but with the determination to apply whatever pressure was necessary to get the system (uncured of its original faults) running more efficiently. And for the past twenty years that has been, in effect, the policy of both Conservative and Labour governments. There is nothing, they have assumed, that can’t be fixed or a rigorous assessment
system identify. The more the teachers scream, the more the parents complain and the more the pupils yawn, the recipe of the past few years have all been remarkably alike – and ineffective.

In the late 1980s central government started seizing control of education, and subsequently extended their powers – and their responsibilities – by over-ruling the power of local education authorities. This was a bad move for democracy because local government was the traditional place for aspiring national politicians to cut their teeth. At the same time government began to denigrate the views of any educationalists who articulated ideas that didn’t fit their current political aspirations.

Politicians have, in effect, plunged education into a deep hole of their own making out of which they now seem incapable of digging themselves. The public, who have been told by politicians for many years that the crisis in education was due to the slovenly performance of teachers and schools, are now beginning to turn and are putting the blame for the inadequacies of education onto the politicians. The problem goes back a long time. In conversations around a family dinner table, youngsters complain about the endless regime of tests, worksheets and uninspiring teachers. Their parents remember the chaos of the early days of comprehensive education with schools on split sites, and teachers uncertain of what they were doing. If a grandparent enters the conversation he or she will recount the horrors of the Eleven Plus examination in the 1960s whereby three in every four pupils failed to get to grammar school and were sent instead to the ‘uncertain’ secondary modern. If the family is fortunate to have a great grandparent around they will remember pre-war days when there simply was no schooling beyond fourteen other than for the privileged elite. Such family conversations quickly come around to questioning whether any politician ever stops to see where their proposals fit into a bigger and more ongoing concept of education. Here is the danger; when the electorate really begin to lose faith in politicians, democracy is in grave danger of collapsing. That is the problem which England now has to face.

When I was studying education in Trinity College, Dublin in the 1960s, our professor had a very homely definition of education. He told us that a quality education resulted from the balance that would be achieved in a three-legged stool which, unlike a four-legged chair, could balance on any surface, however rough. Balance, that is, providing the legs were of equal length – and he told us that those legs were the home, the community and school. If any one leg grew too long the whole chair was thrown out of balance. That is the problem in English education today. Listening to that metaphor an earnest senior education official noted in 2007 that the three legs had now been replaced by a stool with effectively two legs – one called school and the other called government. Then she added, apologetically, “home has almost disappeared, and we don’t have to worry about community any longer.” Inadvertently, I think she described the predicament of English education better than anyone else.

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This lecture, based on the soon to be published book *Overschooled but Undereducated: Society’s failure to understand adolescence* describes the predicament of the English education system. It is a predicament to be found to varying degrees in a number of other English-speaking countries. And ‘predicament’ it surely is – a difficult, unpleasant and embarrassing situation – for a country’s failure to nurture so many of its young people, from birth through adolescence to early adulthood, reflects badly on all of us. Such a predicament reflects a much weakened sense of civil society. Too much of what should be the normal responsibilities of individuals has been passed to, and apparently willingly accepted, by parliamentarians and turned into legislative
prescription. The truth is that schools neither need more money, nor politically-imposed prescription, anything like as much as they need parents and communities who are equal but gloriously different partners in the creation of a world fit for children.

If western society is to survive (and it really is as serious as that), it is essential that all those involved with young people escape from that assumption made a hundred years ago by early psychologists, that adolescence is an aberration, something which is an inconvenience – an irrelevance which has to be got over. Recent research in cognitive science and neurobiology suggests that apprenticeship was a culturally-appropriate response to the neurological changes in the adolescent brain. Adolescence was a form of intellectual weaning whereby the more skillful and thoughtful the apprentice became, the less dependent he or she would be on the teacher. As the German philosopher Nietzsche put it succinctly “It is a poor teacher whose pupils remain dependent on him”. That is a truth which we have to recover.

While the human brain has evolved to enable each of us to function effectively in complex situations – we naturally think big, and act small – modern education has become side-tracked into creating specialists who are well-qualified in their own disciplines, but nothing like as good at seeing the wider impact of their action. Because formal education has done its best to neutralise the impact of adolescence, recent generations of young people have been deprived of the strength that comes from knowing that they are not frightened of taking difficult decisions, and if necessary picking up the pieces when things go wrong. Society has effectively lost the plot: adolescence is an opportunity, not a threat. Understand that, and it changes everything.

An education system that truly went with the natural way in which people learn – I call it “going with the grain of the brain” – would prepare children in their younger and prepubescent years for the self-defining struggle that is adolescence. Milton understood this most clearly back in 1644. There is a delightful story which illustrates this well. A man seeing a butterfly struggling on the sidewalk to break out of its now useless cocoon, bent down and with his pocketknife carefully cut away the cocoon and set the butterfly free. To the man’s dismay the butterfly flapped its wings weakly for a while, then collapsed and died. A biologist later told him that this was the worst thing he could have done because the butterfly needed this struggle to develop its muscles to enable it to fly. “By robbing the butterfly of the struggle, you inadvertently made him too weak to live”, the biologist explained.

Every child in the twenty-first century needs the struggle of adolescence to sort themselves out in just the way that Shakespeare’s generation did in the late sixteenth century. Only by sorting themselves out can adolescents put away those childish behaviours which earlier had served them well. Sometimes alone, often with their peers and supported by the guidance of wise and caring adults, adolescents need a careful mixture of guidance – and plenty of space to work things out for themselves. Give me land, lots of land... don’t fence me in, sang Cole Porter in the 1960s in what could be seen as the signature tune of adolescents – don’t fence me in. It is through the struggle of adolescence that youngsters develop the strength for adult life. To waste adolescence is to deny future generations the strength essential to deal with the ever changing scenes of life.

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We live in destabilising times. What is most troubling, from the perspective of the story this lecture has told, is that I personally find myself less confident now than as a schoolboy in the
1950s, that education will eventually win out over catastrophe. I fear that, as ever busier individuals, we have become so distracted by our technological progress that we’ve been blinded to the threat that people who have been overschooled but undereducated pose to the on-going well-being of civilisation. The truth has to be that the more confused adults feel themselves to be about the big issues of life, the less willing they are in their turn to give their adolescent children the space to work things out for themselves. Uncertain adults breed uninvolved, inexperienced adolescents: a society that has to rediscover reasons for its faith in the future is a mean place in which to bring up children. A whole new way of doing things has to be found. We each have to start thinking strategically, and that involves analysing problems in depth by separating out symptoms from causes, appreciating other people’s perceptions, and above all avoiding the temptation to set up still more short-term panaceas that have so characterized the last twenty or thirty years, and which simply detract from long-term solutions.

To establish a national vision of education in terms similar to that of Milton has now to be the starting point for a national strategy that reverses our overschooled but undereducated society. It should be self-evident that the better educated people are, the less they need to be told what to do. Unfortunately the reverse is equally true, for the less educated people are the more governments feel it necessary to issue even larger rulebooks. That then becomes self-perpetuating, for the more people accept being told what to do, the less they think for themselves. Which is the point that I believe England has now reached, and I must ask you to question whether Australia is also getting to such a point. We have become so over-taught that we have lost the art of thinking for ourselves. How do we break out of this self-repeating cycle?

The second part of the strategy involves acting upon that research into the learning process that, starting with the insights of Milton and his mentor Comenius, has now been reinforced by findings from neurobiology and cognitive science. This gives a whole new way of looking at the evolved grain of the brain, and calls for a pedagogy that works to progressively wean the growing child away from its dependence on instruction. Just as parents have to let go of their children and a shipbuilder has to have faith in the yacht he built to sail into unchartered waters, so education has to be a relationship of trust, not control. This is absolutely basic to worthwhile learning. If as an adult or an inquisitive young person we equip ourselves to be able to do something, and then are constantly over-ruled or micromanaged, we fast lose the motivation as control slips away from us.

Thirdly, England, as with many other nations, needs an education system that would reverse the priority that Dr. Arnold gained for secondary education in favour of seeing the primary sector as the time and place where the essential foundations for lifelong learning are built. Secondary education would then involve schools sharing with the greater community the responsibility for providing adolescents with the range of in-school as well as community-based learning opportunities. This is hugely challenging both for the current structures of education, and to the public’s perception that school should be the place to do with children what adults now think they are too busy to do for themselves.

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That is the challenge; that is where we are now. It is tough, but we have no alternative but to act, for knowing what we now know we no longer have the moral authority to carry on doing things the way we used to do them. Remember, just as the rising sun heralds the promise of another day, so the natural exuberance of youth predicts the arrival of fresh potential. In the saga of the
ages, if a generation fails, the fault lies squarely with the previous generation for not equipping them well-enough for the changes ahead. The most immoral thing that any man can ever say is “this will last out my time”. We were all once adolescents; those of you who have had the patience to sit through this lecture to this point have done so, not on the strength of your own muscle or brainpower but because we have each been privileged to walk with older men and women who have stiffened our sinews, and stretched our minds. Do that right now and generations yet unborn will give thanks that we returned adolescence to its rightful place of enabling young people to go beyond their self-imposed limitations, and exceed their parents’ aspirations. That is what adolescents do naturally – given the right opportunity.