

# Charter Schools

## *Challenging the Politics of Envy and Forced Consensus* By John Bachmann

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At a lunch a week after the release of his report, Gerald Caplan was asked why charter schools were not among his recommendations, Mr. Caplan, an out-spoken proponent of the politics of envy, replied that he could not support any initiative that would most benefit those who are already better off. Taking this line of thinking to its ludicrous extreme, we should stop building roads because people in BMW's enjoy them more.

Caplan's own report makes reference to the dizzying diversity of opinions about problems and solutions in our schools. Yet when it came to proposing solutions, the Royal Commission refused to challenge the notion of a "one-size-fits-all" school system. To gain some insights into how we can overcome this obsession with maintaining a forced consensus, it may be instructive to revisit the recent history of the Russian Empire.

The road that led to the Soviet Union's shredding of the Iron Curtain in a swirl of glasnost and perestroika had many beginnings. One of the less notable - but perhaps the most influential - of these was the decision in the mid-80s to allow individuals on collective farms to sell privately the produce from a small fraction of the state-owned land.

To no one's surprise (save, perhaps, some Politburo members), the yield-per-hectare and the quality of the produce from these minute, often hand-tilled, plots greatly surpassed that of the collective farms. This graphic demonstration of the power of individual empowerment and reward had a disproportionately profound effect on the Soviet populace and undoubtedly hastened the historic events that followed.

This lesson has not been lost on the educational Politburo entrenched in our ministries, faculties of education and school boards. The charter schools that reform groups are promoting as a low-risk, low-cost route to meaningful reform are like the private Moscow vegetable stalls. If allowed to do so, they will provide a showcase for alternative approaches and will eventually introduce choice AND cost savings to our schools.

That provincial ministries of education, school boards and teachers' unions are resisting the setting up of these educational staffs in the public market speaks volumes about their closed-mindedness and their commitment to retaining power and "punishing" the affluent by not providing ANYONE with choice.

Compared to the challenge confronting education reformers in Canada, Gorbachev's jostling with the Politburo and the Red Army was a cakewalk. We must build on the momentum established through the Royal Commission report and reform initiatives in other provinces and call for education ministers to have the courage to lead by insisting that our publicly-funded schools offer meaningful choices.