

INCLUSION vs EXCLUSION

Society is at a Turning Point

by Jack Pearpoint

"Those who are members of society, and those who are marginalised from society, have a great need for each other's gifts.

The sand of ordinary life is lived in a community where people spend their days doing very ordinary things. They write, talk on the telephone, teach children, play with babies, wash dishes, go for walks, read books, and cry on each other's shoulders. All of this happens in ordinary places on commonplace streets, all the time, everywhere. This very commonness is a real gift, a real benefit not to be ignored. The gift of surviving and growing through change belongs to the outcast.

Living on the margin either burns you out and kills you, or it turns you into a dreamer, someone who really knows what sort of change will help and who can just about taste it; someone who is prepared to do anything to bring about change. If these dreamers are liberated, if they are brought back into the arms of society, they become the architects of the new community; a community that has a new capacity to support everyone's needs and interactions." (Judith Snow at Frontier College, October, 1988, 89th Annual meeting).

Our society has reached a turning point where we must make decisions about values, direction and budgets. We no longer have the luxury of "buying" a piece of all the solutions - and thus never having to answer hard questions. The hard questions are about values - what do we believe in? What kind of future do we want for our children? How do we get there?

My analysis identifies two opposing trends, two waging factions - inclusion versus exclusion. This dilemma is broader than "schooling" and education. Most post-industrialised societies have begun to come to terms with the fact of limited resources. The debate is between people who believe in exclusivity and those who believe in inclusion (egalitarian opportunity as the predominant value).

I believe that "inclusive" options (all welcome) will utilise the talents of people who would be discarded and written off in the "exclusive" model. The "outsiders" will bring new perspectives and new talents to "policy conundrums" where we are in a rut and need "fresh ideas".

The meaning of a policy of exclusion is revealed by a "reliable" senior government official's retort when asked "What should we do about those who aren't in the 'main' stream?" he responded partly in jest, partly in frustration: "We train the best, and shoot the rest." The comment was offhand but identifies the dilemma.

The understated underlying assumptions of exclusion are, among others, that:

- We are not all equal in capacity of value.
- It is not feasible to give equal opportunity.
- We must choose and thus train an elite who will take care of the "rest".
- "They" will benefit through the trickle-down theory.

Inclusion is the opposite and works from opposite assumptions:

- We are unique in value; however, each has unique capacity.
- All people can learn.
- All people have contributions to make.
- We have a responsibility and an opportunity to give every person the chance to make a contribution.

The criterion for inclusion is breathing, not IQ, income, colour, race, sex or language.

Critics of inclusion say:

- It's too expensive.
- "They" can't learn.
- "They" don't know what's best for them.
- It can't be done.

As a critic of exclusion, I say:

- It's too expensive.
- "They" can learn.
- "They" - people - know a tremendous amount if asked.
- It can be done.

It is unethical, politically unacceptable and repugnant to "write-off" marginalised people in our society. The cost of "welfare maintenance" is unbearable, either socially or economically. In short, exclusion does not work.

The critics are right if our thinking and answers are limited to the solutions we already have in place. I want to think about a new system, one that replaces the old, not just reforms it. My vision of the new system is based on the value that "everyone belongs" - "all welcome".

We all have the power to listen to "voices" that are seldom heard. If we choose to make the time, to learn to listen, and to struggle with the pain and frustration that disempowered people feel, we will see new visions, feel new energy, and find hope in our future. There is power in the powerless. We can be catalysts, or encrusted residue. The choice is ours.