

Summerhill Showdown

ROWAN CAHILL

Rowan Cahill is a teacher, author, and education commentator. He was a founder of the short lived radical Free University (Sydney, 1968-72).

In March this year the British government failed in its attempt to close a small, privately owned, radical school in rural Suffolk. While the event generated significant media interest in Britain, it largely went unreported elsewhere. Yet it was a significant event.

The school was Summerhill, the progressive, co-educational boarding school founded in 1921 by the Scottish teacher, educationist, author, and psychologist Alexander Sutherland Neill (1883-1973). Situated on a 13 acre site, the school runs a recognisable, in many ways traditional, subject/skills based curriculum for its 63 fee paying pupils, aged 6 to 16, from all over the world.

Arguably the world's most famous progressive school, Summerhill, in the words of headteacher and proprietor Zoe Readhead, Neill's daughter, is 'about freedom for the individual, equality, democracy, and personal choice. Children are treated as individuals who have the right to be heard, and who are expected to take a responsible part in the running of their own community.'

This is not empty rhetoric on the part of Readhead. The school community of about 80 students and staff gathers at a weekly General Meeting to formulate or change the 230 school community rules. Exempt from the Meeting's jurisdiction are matters like administration business, building work, the hiring and firing of staff, and teacher wages.

Staff and students are on an equal footing with one vote each; a 6 year old has the same voting power as an adult; students numerically outnumber the adults. The Meeting helps generate the sense of community that characterises Summerhill, and is an essential part of the school's understanding of 'freedom', regarded as a multi-faceted human experience involving choices, opportunities, self-respect, awareness of and respect for others, and responsibility. Freedom is not licence.

Freedom at Summerhill involves the absence of imposed and arbitrary authority. In keeping with this, student attendance at classes is optional. Over the years it has been found

that students do attend classes once the initial 'shock of freedom' has worn off. Older students take exams if they want to, but over two or three years, not at once at 16 years of age like in British state schools. Student performance in public examinations is above the national average, and most students go on to further studies post-Summerhill.

Summerhill nurtures an environment where creativity and imagination hold sway; students are encouraged to set their own goals and senses of achievement free from compulsory or imposed assessment. Central to the school's ethos is the belief that emotionally healthy individuals find learning both natural and enjoyable.

There is one caveat. The school will not, except in exceptional circumstances, accept new students over the age of 11 years. Experience has shown that after this age children are too conditioned by conventional schooling and find it difficult to shake off what the school describes as 'anti-society hang-ups'.

Former Summerhill teachers look back on their own dedication and hard work for a common salary that makes no hierarchical distinctions, and speak of the excitement of learning and teaching in an environment devoid of coercion and competition.

The philosophy and practices of Summerhill are based on the lifetime work of founder Neill. From 1915 onwards he developed his educational ideas in 18 books, and in the school synonymous with his name. In turn he owed much to the ideas of psychotherapists Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich, and the educationist Homer Lane.

Neill eschewed notions of discipleship. His long friendship with Reich, for example, was a critical friendship, Neill criticising Reich's ideas when they

ran counter to his own thoughts, understandings and experience. In turn Neill rejected the idea of disciples; the role of the thinker/ doer is to be a source of inspiration, to show alternatives, but not to be slavishly imitated.

While Neill's work at Summerhill aroused controversy and hostility, it also generated enthusiasm and admiration. His book *Summerhill* (1962) was an international best seller, and in his lifetime he was awarded three honorary doctorates. Historically, Neill is one of the thinker/practitioners who helped turn 20th century education away from authoritarian practices towards child centred approaches, and helped give currency to the notion that education is not about training, but about the development of individual human beings.

Financially the school survives proudly and frugally on student fees and donations. It is not a well-endowed money making concern. During his lifetime Neill ploughed his considerable royalties, journalism and public speaking fees back into the school, while at various times financial support with no strings attached came from people like author Henry Miller and singer Joan Baez.

Although Summerhill does not receive any government money it is accountable to the government, because it is a registered education institution operating in Britain, meeting the mandatory education requirements prescribed by law.

Historically this relationship has been critically supportive; over the years HM Inspectors generally recognised something worthwhile was happening at Summerhill. The 1990 inspection report for example, while strongly recommending improvements, recognised that the school's approach to education 'remains of interest to the educational community both in this and other countries'.

As the nineties progressed, the relationship soured. The school was put on a secret hit list of 61 independent school TBW ('To Be Watched'), and inspected annually to the point of harassment.

World-wide, education was changing. What had taken root under Margaret Thatcher in Britain, and in the USA of Ronald Reagan, fruited and spread. Corporate assumptions and the phraseology of the market place became part of education, particularly in the OECD countries. The notion of a 'human being', with all its richness and diversity, was cast into an economic unit, embodied in the much used term 'human resource'; students and teachers alike became commodities, and schools 'value adding' enterprises. People became valued not in terms of the infinite permutations of human potential and individuality, but for their economic potential.

With students regarded as products, curriculums

were developed to design them; with the introduction of extensive and expensive testing processes they could then be measured and compared like any other factory product. In Britain, as elsewhere, assessment processes came to dominate the education process, along with national tests, inspections, and League tables which contentiously compared, rated, and 'failed' schools, teachers, and students irrespective of socio-economic and cultural considerations.

For Summerhill matters reached crisis point in 1999 when the Office For Standards in Education ordered a full inspection of the school, sending a team of 8 inspectors, instead of 2, mandated to produce a public report instead of a confidential letter to the school.

Summerhill cooperated in an open and helpful manner, providing access to relevant documentation, teachers, students, classes, and meetings. The inspection team, however, was reluctant to engage with the school as a community; team members appeared angry and confrontational when dealing with the Summerhill philosophy. There was minimal examination of activities beyond the classroom; pupils, parents, and an army of distinguished ex-pupils, were not consulted.

The result of this inspection was a series of negative findings against Summerhill. While recognising pupils were generally well-behaved, courteous, related well to staff and to each other, and had a very good understanding of citizenship, the inspectors noted they were often 'foul mouthed'. The report's critical fixation on shared toilet facilities, with no distinction between male/female/staff/students, and a later general reference to 'physical contact between staff and students which could be misconstrued', together smearingly hinted, though not stated, at sexual impropriety.

Specifically Summerhill had abrogated 'educational responsibility' and failed in regard to management and leadership, having 'drifted into confusing educational freedom with the negative right not to be taught'.

The report wanted the toilet matter cleaned up, and insisted the school's democratic ideology change to accommodate mainstream practices of compulsion, coercion and competition. Failure to comply within 6 months meant the school would have to close.

The unstated logic and implications of this report were clear to anyone with an understanding of Summerhill philosophy and history. The school could not and would not comply, since the history of Summerhill, and its education philosophy, are centred on Neill's stubborn vision of freedom as a theory and a practice. Without that Summerhill is nothing. Neill had never compromised. His daughter was of the same stock. Therefore the school would close. Strike

one school, possibly the most important, off the government's secret hit list.

There was the right of appeal to the Independent Schools Tribunal at the High Court in London, before a judge and two educational experts. So Summerhill took this option and came out fighting, announcing its intention 'to maintain and vigorously defend its fundamental principles'. At the same time it broadened its self-defence to campaign for alternative schools generally and their right to legally exist 'with due regard to their principles and philosophy without harassment and discrimination from official bodies (subject to complying with normal health and safety regulations).'

A campaign of email, letter, and telephone lobbying got the ball rolling, targeting the Minister for Education specifically, and all MPs generally. A fighting fund was established, donations solicited, and a well organised public relations/media campaign developed, capitalising on the media's historic interest in the school; eventually the story was covered by all sections of the media locally and nationally.

Creative luminaries like author Michael Moorcock and singer/poet Nick Cave lent their voices to the campaign, while famous ex-pupils like American actress Rebecca De Mornay publicly testified to Summerhill's unique worthiness.

The Internet was creatively utilised, the Summerhill homepage and links providing support guidelines, and campaign news on a daily basis. Donations and expressions of support flowed in from around the world, ranging from internationally respected educationalists to ordinary people attracted by the David vs Goliath element.

Significantly the school was able to hire — on reduced fees — a legal team, with expertise in education law and human rights issues, which included Geoffrey Robertson QC.

The matter came to court on 20 March 2000 and ran for three days, during which the government case collapsed. The appearance of Robertson caught the Department for Education and Employment off guard, its witnesses apparently overwhelmed by his cross examination. The toilet matter hardly got a look in, and was retracted after a brief discussion on the

first day. A key government witness was understandably troubled by migraine on the third day, having become tangled during an examination of education 'best practice' on day two. It was also on day two that the existence of the government's TBW list became public knowledge.

The appeal took place in a packed court, and in the full glare of the national media. It ended when the Secretary of State for Education offered the school a deal, which was accepted after a meeting of Summerhill students agreed to its proposals.

The threat of closure hanging over Summerhill was lifted as the government agreed to no longer pursue its complaints about the lack of compulsion at the school. The government also appeared to acknowledge flaws in its inspection system; the school will not be inspected again before 2004, and when that happens the views of students will be taken into account and the 'full breadth of learning at Summerhill' considered. The government was ordered to pay the school's appeal costs.

Robertson's opening statement to the tribunal was an hour long.

In delineating the history, philosophy and importance of Summerhill, he made crucial points about modern education that are worth reflecting upon:

'... Neill's legacy is a living one ... the system he devised to nurture humanity in children so that they could fulfil their real potential in adult life works as well as it ever did, and is for some children the best education they could possibly have. And just as it was necessary, in the last century, that Summerhill should survive as a reproach to the cruelty of formal education — the regular beatings of children, the rote learning, the tyranny of exam results — so it is even more necessary that it should flourish as an alternative today, an alternative to both state and independent systems which have not found ways of combating racism and bullying and sexual abuse, which are strait-jacketed by a narrow national curriculum and undermined by large classes, and where the tyranny of the exam result is worse than ever. In any intelligent education system, Summerhill would be supported and viewed as a precious resource.'

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