

Pasok needs ideas; the government needs backbone

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Editorial

The government continues to fight for its education reform programme against demagoguery from the opposition and a public that seems not to know what it wants.

It may seem as though opposition in the form of partisanship and inertia could easily be scattered, especially when the potential gains from reform are great. It is just as well to remember that partisanship and inertia have helped shape this country for decades.

Demotic Greek was a political cause of the left since the late 19th century and did not prevail as the official language of education and government until 1975. Prime Minister Harilaos Trikoupi faced strong inertia to reforms that aimed to modernise teaching methods, increase the science curriculum and make the spoken Greek of the day the language of instruction as long ago as 1884. He was forced to withdraw altogether a proposal to charge school fees.

Politics and inertia are still alive and well. Pasok's shadow education minister Milena Apostolaki complained that the government never shared its interim proposals over several months of deliberations, but chose instead to leak them to the press. She invoked that slick political euphemism, dialogue.

We feel the need to remind Apostolaki that her party walked out of what started out as a cross-party discussion on education reform last year. By choosing to remove itself from the process, Pasok rejected dialogue. It is the height of hypocrisy now to call for it on a *tabula rasa*.

It is also highly doubtful what the benefits of dialogue would be. The government-appointed National Council for Education and the education ministry have both published detailed proposals. Pasok has published nothing.

The public seems as confused as Pasok seems futile. In a nationwide opinion poll carried out just before the government unveiled its latest proposals, two thirds of

Greeks said that they are unhappy with the state of the university system. Nearly half believe in non-state universities. Yet half broadly disagreed with the proposed changes. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that half also confessed to being ignorant of them.

At the end of the day most public debates come down to money, not ideology. An Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development conference in Athens served as a reminder that Greece currently spends less than half the OECD average on education ([see table on page 4](#)). In the current climate of privatisation, many Greeks are perhaps worried that the government is thinking of outsourcing education to the private sector.

Greeks are hard-wired against the private sector when it comes to institutions of social cohesion such as education and health. That is not necessarily a bad thing. The US has stubbornly resisted universal healthcare as a Trojan horse to capitalism, but its private sector is now discovering that health benefits are one of their fastest-growing costs and an increasing source of concern to workers. The private sector has also proven its inability to provide affordable metropolitan public transport in many capitalist economies across the world. Socialism and capitalism are clearly not opposed, but necessary to each other.

But the well-placed Greek faith in certain socialised services has pitted them implacably to establishing an interface between private and public sectors in education. In the area of finance, the government proposals do not go far enough.

Education Minister Marietta Yannakou has gone out of her way to deny any possibility of fees in state universities, for example. But the Greek bias against a co-payment on tertiary education is absurd for two reasons. First, Greeks know that the true cost of underinvestment in education has already been rolled over to them. According to the National Statistical Service, Greeks spent half as much again as the national budget on education in 2004 (2.5 billion euros and 5.9 billions euros, respectively). Just under 200 million euros of that was for tertiary education.

Greeks spend an even greater amount when they send their children to study abroad. More than 30,000 students are currently enrolled in universities in Britain and the US alone. Britain subsidises their courses, but deems their spending while living in the UK to be a greater return.

Second, public universities are conscious of their social responsibility to charge reasonable fees. In Britain, for instance, the annual undergraduate tuition for UK and European Union students was raised this year to 3,000 pounds. It is not negligible, but it is negotiable. Students unable to afford it have the option of a scholarship programme or a long-term student loan. Surely the qualitative difference between Athens University and London University is worth that cost. And education borrowing would make a very small addition to the 69 billion euros Greek households owed banks last year.

Greek public universities would also gain enormously from soliciting private endowments - something they could do with great success if the government agreed to make them tax-deductible as in the US. Libraries, scholarships and laboratories are

massively expensive. Every public penny is spoken for, but there is much private wealth looking for a legacy.

It is far more difficult to adapt an outdated system than to build it to the needs of the age from scratch. Pasok and four fifths of the public are calling for dialogue and consensus. That is a siren song. The government cannot please those who are opposed to it for the sake of opposition; nor those who would water down change until it changed nothing; but it can sway the rational by staying on message.

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