

It's OK to change even if the new won't be perfect

Opponents of change commonly try to set a test of perfection. They try to persuade everyone that no change can be permitted unless its advocates can show that the change will solve all present problems and will create no new problems.

On the other side, opponents don't even have to prove the proposed change harmful: It's enough just to spread fear and doubt, asking endlessly: What if? What if? They know that most people are comfortable with present arrangements. So they conjure up evils that might appear were we to change; ask, "Why take the chance?"

If we allowed the presumption of necessary-perfection then every proposal would be doomed to fail. "Nothing works right the first time you try it", Albert Shanker wrote at one point. If perfection were the test, nothing would get done.

Common sense suggests we compare the pluses and minuses of the new arrangement with the pluses and minuses of the present arrangement. Policymakers and the public can then come to a reasonable conclusion whether on balance the change ought to be made.

An unproductive discussion

Unhappily, the question does not get set this way. Both sides are to blame.

Those advocating change too often frame the discussion to contrast the Awful Reality of the present with the Ideal World of the future. They want to persuade us that today's problems will disappear come the new day when the world runs as they mean it to run.

The defenders of the status quo tell us how the present arrangement is supposed to work. They do not want to talk about how things really work - and fail to work - today. They talk about how well public education works in theory. Over the years many people have come to accept this ideal as the reality. Many feel uncomfortable with a realistic description of the institution and its operation.

	Now	If we change
'Changers'	Everything is terrible	Everything works fine (in theory)
Defenders	Everything works fine (in theory)	Everything is terrible

It is hard to get the arguments to meet, hard to compare realistically the imperfect situation we have today with the

(differently) imperfect situation that will be created by some change. In other words, to compare real with real. (Legislators are not much interested in comparing ideal with ideal.)

What's tried doesn't have to be perfect. It simply needs to be better, on balance, than what we had before. Some changes surely can make things worse: These we want to avoid. Some changes can make institutions work better: These we want to adopt. Mistakes are made, people learn.