In an American Express ad, a man in a cowboy hat declares: "Small businesses are the lifeblood of our community." American small businesses may still be struggling in a tight economy, but they are also basking in a rash of good publicity. They are seen as symbols of independence, self-reliance and perseverance. And politicians of both parties are vying to prove that they are the true champions of today's small-business entrepreneurs.

At the core of the almost universal admiration of small business is an assumption: that ultimately it will be such enterprises that revive the economy and create needed jobs. But is small business really the solution to the nation's economic woes? Probably not. In a recent Harris Poll of more than 1,400 small businesses, two-thirds said they would not increase hiring this year. And even when small businesses hire, they tend to hire small numbers of people.

Big business remains the primary driver of economic growth and job creation. Consider Europe's crisis. Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy – the countries with the most profound economic problems – are among the countries with the largest percentage of workers employed by small businesses. Meanwhile, the countries with the lowest percentage of workers employed by small business – Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the United States are some of the strongest economies in the world.

The correlation is not a coincidence, it reflects a simple reality: small businesses are, on the whole, less productive than big businesses. Moreover, there are some things small businesses just can't do. You may favor the homemade pastries at the local bakery, but it's unlikely you'll ever buy a car made by your local machinist, and if you could, the cost would be astronomical. Some things just require economies of scale. Large sellers can negotiate more competitive prices, and they can make up for smaller profit margins through greater volume.

Still, there is a reason small business has such a claim on the American imagination. To understand the roots of the small businessman's political ideas and concepts, one needs to begin with the struggle between the agrarian spirit (the heritage of the pre-Industrial Age) and the cosmopolitan spirit. Small businesses are a contemporary embodiment of many pre-industrial ideals. Not surprisingly, their political beliefs tend to reflect highly individualistic values and a skepticism of big government. There is ample proof of their fidelity to limited government, free markets and traditional morality, which they regard as the virtues of an earlier way of life. They feel deeply that those who stand apart from them are willing to trade the ideal of individual freedom and initiative for the false bait of a security that no political power can ever provide.

Adapted from The Los Angeles Times
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OH, TO BE BILINGUAL IN THE ANGLOSHERE

There are many reasons to be grateful for being part of the "Anglosphere". English is the world's language of science, technology, business, diplomacy and popular culture. It probably explains why native English speakers are so reluctant to learn a second language. It's not worth the effort.

In 2005, the European Commission carried out a survey of the European Union's 25 member states. The two with the lowest rates of bilingualism - defined as being able to hold a conversation in more than one language - were the UK and Ireland. It's a similar story wherever English is spoken as the mother tongue. Only about 25 per cent of US citizens can converse in another language. In Australia, the rates are even lower.

Compare that with continental Europe, where more than half of the citizens are bilingual, and not just because they live in countries like Luxembourg with multiple official languages. Even in France, which has only one official language and is immensely proud of its linguistic heritage, most people speak a second language.

Again, this is largely down to the dominance of English. Across Europe, English is by far the most commonly learned language. High levels of bilingualism are not driven by a general desire to learn languages but a specific need to learn English.

People born in countries where English is not the mother tongue, have their own reasons to be thankful: being bilingual is good for your brain. It doesn't matter whether you are brought up in a bilingual household or learn a second language later in life, speaking more than one language improves cognitive function across the board, from planning and working memory to concentration and multitasking.

Most significantly, being bilingual can sharpen the ageing mind, delaying the onset of dementia in those vulnerable to it by as much as half a decade. It is one of the most effective forms of "brain training" available.

Yet at the same time that the benefits of bilingualism have been discovered, education systems in English-speaking countries have continued to be relatively neglectful of foreign languages. In the UK, the number of schoolchildren choosing to study a second language to A-level standard has halved since the early 1990s. In the US the proportion still remains even lower than in the UK.

The neglect of language teaching is mostly due to the fact that native English speakers simply lack incentives to learn another language. But given the general cognitive benefits of speaking a second language, a decline in language teaching will likely mean a decline in education attainment.

In a fiercely competitive world, being born in an Anglophone culture is not quite the blessing it may first appear.

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ONLINE SCHOOLS: PASS OR FAIL?

Nothing ignites passions quite like discussing how to educate kids: private or state-run schools? Traditional or modern curricula? Standardised testing or continuous assessment? Now there is another question that is pushing the others into the background: face-to-face or virtual?

In the US, a quarter of a million children now attend online-only schools. Over half a million take some virtual classes alongside traditional teaching, and the movement is growing. Instead of kids going to school, school increasingly comes to them via the internet.

Could virtual schooling be a charter to cheat, coast or cut class? Even if it is not, it must surely deprive children of the non-academic goals of schooling, including developing social skills and encountering ideas not available at home.

Virtual schooling could also exacerbate existing inequalities in education, since it is available only to families who can afford to have an adult at home to perform the duty of care normally assumed by teachers.

These are legitimate concerns, but they do not amount to a conclusive case against virtual schooling. Proponents say there are great advantages too, such as being able to track every lesson a student embarks on, and then using that information to tailor each child's education to their needs. There is far less opportunity for kids to be bullied. And increasingly, social lives are mediated online.

Another reason to be positive about virtual schooling is that it opens up debates about education that go beyond narrow questions of who funds and governs it.

Just because schooling has traditionally been delivered by a teacher standing in front of a class doesn't mean that is the optimum way to do it. That model is largely a legacy of the technology available when universal education began in the 19th century, namely chalkboards and textbooks.

That is not to say education has stood still. Far from it; teachers are pragmatists, and they have seized upon new technologies to combat the ever-present problems of budget cuts, overcrowded classes and changing curricula.

Still, while virtual schooling holds promise, it remains unclear whether it can do the job of transforming children into young adults with the social and intellectual skills required to function in the world.

What is needed is something similar to the controlled trials used to evaluate new pharmaceuticals. That doesn't mean randomly assigning children to various educational systems - including a control group who get a placebo education - but simply assessing and comparing existing approaches in order to discover what works best for whom.

That, unfortunately, is not yet happening with virtual schooling. However, before schooling moves inexorably online, we need to know whether it works so as to determine how to educate our children.

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