

Campaign for Real Education

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“Freedom to teach, freedom to learn, freedom to choose”

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Newsletter

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Editorial

The annual round of teacher union conferences this spring was defined, once again, by pessimism and discontent. The overwhelming concern related to complaints about funding. Union leaders claim a £2.8 billion real terms budget cut over the past two years and schools were described as being at “breaking point”.

What we know for sure is that the number of school pupils is increasing. The bulge in the primary school population has now reached the secondary sector and alarm bells are ringing about staffing shortages. Are union leaders right to be pressing the panic button?

Quoting a union leader at the NUT Conference in Brighton, BBC TV News reported claims of a “funding catastrophe”. A major news report followed in order to back up the claim. Warnham CE Primary School in West Sussex, close to the conference venue, was used to substantiate the union’s point.

The BBC report described the county as “an area of low funding”. This is incorrect. Compared with most of the world, including countries with far higher educational standards, it is an area of high spending on education. True, largely rural and affluent West Sussex has suffered in the past from less funding than urban areas in England but the government’s new National Funding Formula has redressed that imbalance.

The BBC chose to ignore Ofsted’s assessment of Warnham Primary as a school that “requires improvement”. Key areas of failure include “effectiveness of leadership and management” and “quality of teaching learning and assessment”. With a small fraction of Warnham CE Primary’s budget, however, children in much poorer countries, such as Vietnam and Estonia, are a long way ahead, academically.

Instead, the report focused on a classroom rug and explained that it was purchased by parents from ‘a wish list set up on-line by one mum’. The list also included day-to-day necessities such as “hand towels, tissues, toilet rolls, glue sticks, pencils, exercise books”. Parents “have to raise the funds somehow to provide all the children in the next school year with exercise books,” because “the money is not necessarily there.”

So, where is all the money going? Does Warnham CE Primary, a school of around only 200 pupils, really need its 20 classroom assistants? To sustain fake and failed methods of so-called child-centred teaching, it probably does.

Taking away most of those assistants would not only solve budget problems, it would force teachers to ditch a lot of ineffective group work. They would be forced to use more of the teacher-directed, whole-class teaching that is the norm in the Asia Pacific superstar education systems. It was once the norm here, too and explains why, according to the OECD, we are the only country in the developed world where grandparents out-perform their grandchildren.

The real ‘funding catastrophe’ in our schools is not the spending shortfall reported by the BBC. It is profligate expenditure on supporting ineffective but expensive teaching methodologies that leave our pupils three years behind the likes of Singapore, Shanghai and Hong Kong by the age of fifteen.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the UK increased expenditure on education by around 900 per cent in real terms between 1953 and 2009. Current education spending is at record level.

Our increasing population will, certainly, mean a real-terms decrease in spending of 8 per cent per pupil by 2020. Even so, the Department for Education has pointed out that by 2020 schools will be getting 50 per cent more per pupil in real terms than in 2000.

Will the coming 8 per cent decrease cancel out the previous 900 per cent increase? Hardly! Moreover, amongst developed countries the UK continues to spend, more or less, the highest proportion of its wealth on education, according to the OECD’s 2017 ‘Education at a Glance’ survey.

The closing of the examiners’ mind!

A highly experienced senior examiner reflects on how the process of examining has been pared down to the bare bones.

In order to protect the examiner we are withholding identification.

Nostalgia! The 1990 scarlet hard-back Collins Standard 45 Diary, issued to exam board Subject Officers, still has a few blank pages. That’s the year I left and returned to teaching for a proper salary and pension as well as a fulfilling day’s work. Exam board entries from early that year are sparse and bleak. The rest of this sturdy book, however, has since been covered in ideas, energetic, cheerful and challenging – twenty-eight of my 40+ years of scribbling draft questions and mark schemes for every version of exam from the old CSE, through A-Levels, linear and modular, to O and A-Levels sat in foreign parts.

I won’t be setting any more, however. As Facebook puts it glumly, if you decide to leave its clutches and have a life, ‘It looks as if you’ve reached the end’. Quite so! I’m reminded of my high-flying but principled best friend’s explanation when he walked away, having been interviewed on the final shortlist for a prestigious corporate body: ‘I just couldn’t say the words.’

So what are the words I’m instructed to use in exam questions now that I can’t bring myself to say? What are the formulae which setters must now use because ‘research’ says so? The answers are various, but they all concern some kind of coercion by language police. Readers may have been following Dr Jordan Peterson’s ‘pronoun’ persecution in Canada. My trivial, by comparison, but irritating experience, was being told that ‘which’, used properly as a relative pronoun, must be changed to ‘that’. So yes, I’m aligning myself with Peterson’s opposition to ‘compelled speech.’ Like him, and for his reasons, I will not play this game.

Is the exam setting ‘rot’, as respected colleagues and I see it, fundamentally a matter of ‘dumbing down’? Certainly we have wondered how our language and concept levels of past years can suddenly have become ‘too highbrow’ or ‘not sufficiently accessible’. The irony is that where we always aimed to give a picture, an idea or a helpful pointer in our questions, the standard for acceptability now is ‘as few and basic words as possible’. The candidates, we contend, must be left scratching their heads when faced with such pared down questions.

Teachers too must have a hard job preparing classes for such minimalism. The reason, of course, is the risk-aversion of the exam boards. No term is to be allowed which does not appear on the syllabus (now regularly called a ‘specification’). A computer could ask these questions, just by jumbling up the syllabus words and adding one of the brutalist ‘commands’: ‘state’, ‘give’, ‘assess’ etc. Most worrying is the regularly appearing formula ‘To what extent ...’ where a candidate could not reasonably have the statistical knowledge, often sociological, to answer. By contrast ‘describe’ is being dropped, in case a candidate’s ‘skill’ of ‘evaluation’ remains untested.

What does the future hold now? School exams are commodified and the Subject Officer, subject of poorly paid but diary-rich nostalgia, is now a Product Manager? Well there are good reasons why Jordan Peterson is listened to by thousands who truly fear there will be further and more radical attempts to police our academic and personal freedom. He has bravely refused to obey. I am out of a job now, but so have I.

A case for an expansion of state boarding schools?

‘If I have to give advice for an English student, I would say that you would be in for a considerable number of cultural shocks.’ Amal, a sixteen-year-old Indian pupil, made this observation to Channel 4 TV.

He was being interviewed for ‘Indian Summer School,’ a recent ‘fly-on-wall’ documentary that plunged five British seventeen and eighteen-year-old lads into the prestigious boarding school, Boon College, in the foothills of the Himalayas. Between them the youngsters had only one GCSE ‘pass’ in a core subject.

They are typical of the main losers in our school system – white working class boys. Too many schools, not least in our white ghettos, have gates emblazoned with banners heralding success. In some cases it would be more honest to display Dante’s inscription over the gate of Hell - ‘Abandon all hope, ye who enter here’ (*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate*).

To his eternal credit, Matthew Raggett, the British Headmaster of Doon College, was of the belief that six months at his Indian school might be enough to turn around the lives of these disaffected, dis-engaged and uneducated young Brits. He once taught in a Swindon comprehensive and recalls that, ‘...many of the students there were highly distracted by what else was going on in their lives. It is my hope that the experience of working class lads from the UK coming to Doon will be magical and will transform their [chances of] success.’

In the end, the experiment was no more than a partial success. Two of the boys did not last the course and the three survivors did not attain the GCSE results to which they aspired. It was a case of too little, too late. The outlook, attitude and aspirations of all five boys were, nevertheless, changed in a positive way.

Taking disaffected and disengaged young people out of the environment – home and school – where they are failing and being failed, provides a lesson beyond the confines of a television programme.

A parallel documentary – ‘Living with the Brainy Bunch’ – was screened by BBC 2. Again, it dealt with the issue of under-performing teenagers. This time, though, the setting was Kingston-upon-Thames, southwest London, far from the Himalayas but with, some similar outcomes for the youngsters concerned.

The low-attaining teens at an 11-16 comprehensive were sent to live with high-performing classmates from the same school. Unsurprisingly, they encountered a much stricter parenting regime in their new homes. As with Doon College in India, the first teen ‘addictions’ to be banned or curtailed were late nights, alcohol, smart phones/tablets and irregular meal times.

The impact of this stricter parenting resulted in a significant improvement in attainment of the under-performing pupils.

Shrey Nagalia, an assistant housemaster, at Doon College told Channel 4 that, ‘No Indian parent takes education for granted and no Indian parents tell their children to take education for granted. Education in India means something that determines a student’s future.’ Much the same message came from the host parents in Kingston.

TV experiments cannot be unrolled as a national strategy for saving disaffected and, sometimes, dangerous teenagers from themselves. These latest documentaries have, however, strengthened the case for a major expansion of state boarding schools. Such schools are currently few in number. They cannot rival Boon College but they do out-perform most other state schools in the UK. Acting in loco parentis they may offer a means of salvation for that small minority of young people who are currently at the gate described by Dante.

To where will Oxford University's curriculum revision lead?

Oxford University is busily engaged in dealing with its guilt complex about slavery and the British Empire.

A re-write of academic curricula to rid them of 'pale, stale, white men' and become more inclusive of black, Asian, female and gay figures, will not be enough, it seems. Even the return of 'looted' artefacts will be step or two short of what is required. What, then, is coming next?

Funded by a 'kick-start' grant of £20,000, a university working party has come up with the novel idea of setting up a copy of the Cecil Rhodes statue at Oriel College and inviting students to graffiti it with comments and obscenities. The university's pro vice-chancellor, appropriately named Rebecca Surrender, told *The Sunday Times* that the university had agreed to fund the colonial project because it was "exciting, innovative and very relevant to our current goals . . . We are very happy that this is happening."

If such an esteemed national institution as Oxford University sees an urgent need to put its house in order in this way should other prestigious establishments be queuing up to do the same?

If so, most likely, the British Museum will need to put itself at the front of the queue. It is an obvious example of a British institution with a lot of catching up to do. Its classical portico could, in itself, be construed as offensive since it references a civilisation built on slavery. And why should an equestrian statue of that renowned imperialist and slaver, Caesar Augustus, welcome visitors as they enter via the Great Court?

Worse, a greater horror is on display in the main Greek and Roman Antiquities section. It is a marble statue depicting the African Roman emperor, Septimius Severus. Yes, that very Septimius of Leptis Magna who was in Britain between 208 and 211. That very Septimius who was so opposed to an early form of Caledonian self-determination that he concluded slavery was too good a fate for them. He decreed genocide.

According to the Roman historian Cassius Dio, a contemporary of Septimius, the Emperor was so keen to avoid any ambiguity about his orders that he quoted Agamemnon's call in the *Iliad* for the Greeks to massacre the Trojans:

Let no one escape utter destruction

Let no one escape our hands, not even the babe in its mother's womb...

Fortunately for those living north of Hadrian's Wall, the Emperor died in York (Eboracum) before his order could be implemented. Any self-respecting SNP supporter should be up in arms about the display of such a statue in London and especially those who watched the final episode of the BBC's blockbuster 'Troy – Fall Of A City'!

Not that southern Brits, like me, can be blamed by the SNP this time round. After all, we were forced into membership of the original European Union and became fully signed-up slaves of the Roman Empire. We were an early example of a people being enslaved by a foreign imperial power.

Certainly, those Romans could teach the British Empire a thing or two about subjugation, as another Roman historian, Tacitus, reminds us:

They plunder, they butcher, they ravish, and call it by the lying name of 'empire'. They make a desolation and call it 'peace'.

If our intellectual institutions wish to vilify imperialism and slavery they should start with the classical world. Rather than calling for the return of the Elgin marbles to Greece they should be demanding they be crushed into powder for being products of a slave empire. Equally, they should be urging the Italian government to bulldoze the Roman Forum and to pay us reparations for the best part of four centuries of enslavement.

As for Hadrian's Wall, our greatest symbol of imperial oppression, it should be dismantled stone by stone, and used to build a memorial to Britain's enslavement.

Oxford University has enough brainpower to work out the logical conclusion of its new slavery and imperialism project.

School Selection and Pupil Performance

Has schooling based on selection had its day? A much-publicised study by King's College London claims that pupil attainment is largely down to genetic inheritance rather than to attending a selective school.

Another indictment of school selection, from academics at Durham University, has followed:

'Grammar schools in England endanger social cohesion for no clear improvement in overall results. There is no reason for them to exist.'

This is a surprising conclusion. Only 5% of schools are grammars. It is a predominantly comprehensive school system that has given Britain what David Cameron told his party conference in 2015 is 'the lowest social mobility in the developed world.'

The foundations on which both the King's and the Durham studies are based should concern us. Their 'research' depends overmuch on the reliability of GCSE results for measuring pupil attainment.

The erosion of standards that defines this all-ability exam is not a context explained by the research. Its introduction in 1988 was at the expense of GCE O-Level, the more rigorous grammar school exam.

The consequent collapse in standards was vividly demonstrated by the BBC in 2016. It arranged for a group of fifteen-year-old South Korean children to sit an hour-long version of GCSE Maths. Most needed only around fifteen minutes to complete it. After having a bit of a giggle about how easy it was, they explained that GCSE is set at the level of primary school (age 8-13) maths in South Korea <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-wales-38115296/south-korean-students-finish-welsh-gcse-maths-paper-in-15-minutes>

The OECD has come to a similar conclusion about mathematical attainment in the UK. It ranks it around three years behind the best of the Asia Pacific.

The GCSE maths exam, clearly, under-tested the Koreans. They could do no more than attain full marks. Even with a new higher grade introduced last summer, the GCSE exam is poor vehicle for identifying the most able candidates, such as many at grammar schools.

The task is not made any easier by the fact that 'raw scores' are converted into what are called 'uniform scores' for the purpose of grading. A 'uniform score' of 100 per cent can be attained with a raw score of significantly less than 100 per cent. <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-system/how-grades-are-determined>

The problem with using GCSE for measuring attainment of many grammar school pupils is that it does not discriminate sufficiently at the top end of the ability range. It is no coincidence that the OECD's highest-ranked school system, Singapore, still uses a version of that former UK grammar school exam - the GCE O-Level. It is still produced in the UK - by the Cambridge Board (UCLES) - but, effectively, banned here.

As education secretary, Michael Gove recognised the problem with the examination system and sought to restore to it some integrity and rigour. His slightly more demanding GCSEs started to be phased in last summer with new-style papers in English and Maths.

To get around the obstacle of the papers being, relatively, a bit harder the boards have been required by its supervisory body (Ofqual) to lower the 'pass mark'. It fell to as low as fifteen [sic] per cent in Maths.

Setting a low pass mark for what remains a comparatively easy exam means, of course, that more children pass. It also means that the distinction between the performance of academically selective schools and non-selective schools - grammars and comprehensives - is blurred.

The credibility of both recent studies is undermined by their over-reliance on GCSE grades to measure final attainment. Partly because too low an academic ceiling is set by GCSE it is difficult for the most able pupils at secondary school to record as much progress as less able pupil on the complicated new Progress 8 measure.

Scoring a hundred per cent on their GCSE Maths paper would not allow the Korean group to show any progress since primary school. On the Durham survey they would find themselves at the bottom of the progress table. This is the situation in which some grammar school children find themselves.

The educational establishment would have us believe that GCSE results provide a valid educational foundation on which to construct all sorts of research claims. It does no such thing.

According to the Joint Council for General Qualification, for example, when GCSE was introduced in 1988 the 'pass' rate (A to C) was 41.9%. By last summer, 2017, that pass rate (A* to C or equivalent 7,8,9), had risen to 66.3% - a percentage increase of 58.2% in twenty-nine years.

Better still has been the improved performance of the brightest pupils. Those gaining the highest grade rose from 8.4% in 1988 to 20.0% in 2017 – an increase of 138% and amounting to a fifth of all candidates.

To offset the grade inflation Michael Gove introduced a higher ninth grade on a new 1-9 scale. It was phased in for English and Maths, last summer and was attained by 3.1% of candidates. Once this extra grade applies to all subjects it will help to more accurately gauge the performance of grammar schools relative to non-selective schools. It will not, however, bridge the three-year attainment gap with the best performing education systems of the Asia Pacific. For that we will need to raise standards considerably from a much earlier age.

The conclusions about grammar school performance reached by both the King's study and the Durham study are flawed. Since over a fifth of candidates are now attaining the highest grade in most subjects it is impossible to distinguish between able pupils in grammar schools and those in state comprehensive schools.

The research findings qualify as 'dodgy dossiers' that have generated a frenzy of anti-grammar school fake news!

The case for grammar schools is simple. They allow academically able children to be taught in line with their aptitude. The all-ability GCSE has been an insult to their intelligence for too long and has failed to challenge either them or their teachers. The new generation of GCSEs has an extra grade that may help but not in the context of last summer's 15% 'pass' mark.

The case in favour of a totally comprehensive school system is equally simple. Ensure that UK comprehensives match those in South Korea, Singapore or Shanghai by making the GCSE a 13+ exam. After sitting the GCSE at age thirteen, pupils should follow either an academic or a technical/vocational pathway – 'grammar' school or technical school.

Then it would be: 'Welcome, post-Brexit UK, to the wonderful world of 21st century educational 'super-star' status!'

BBC's 'Civilisations' – a review of the opening episodes

The BBC's 'Civilisations' series got off to a bad start and audience viewing figures for the BBC's 'Civilisations' series were soon in free fall. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ratings-crumble-for-bbcs-civilisations-8c0mwd2fs> This is not a surprise. Condescending and self-righteous, it is guilty of the very cultural supremacism it was designed to combat. Shoving an incoherent, unscholarly, multi-cultural mishmash down our throats for a winter evening's TV viewing was never going to be a winner. The brilliance of the photography cannot distract from the noticeable absence of any coherent sense of direction.

What on earth is it all about? The only thread of sense and intelligibility is a vague notion that an element of artistic output creates a civilisation. Stunning as many Ice Age cave paintings may be, is that what they constitute? For all his presentational skills it was embarrassing to watch Simon Schama, in the opening programme, trying to make the case and to link it to a hoard of Chinese masks of which, he admitted, we know nothing about.

And then, in Programme 2, we have had Mary Beard explaining her incomprehension – “ a real puzzle” – when confronted by a gigantic 3000 year-old Olmec stone head in the jungles of central America. Her peregrination around ancient Egypt, China, Greece and Italy informed us, more or less, that the quality of art was in the eye of the beholder. This assertion, though, did not excuse a lad from ancient times ejaculating on a nude statue of Aphrodite. Beard accused him of rape against the stone. We finished up back in the jungle with the giant stone head. Mary, like the rest of us was in Monty Python mode, trying to work out what was it all about and what is the meaning of life.

Sir Kenneth's Clark's masterly original 'Civilisation' may have had a slightly celebratory tone about it. This was because western civilisation has a lot of which it can be proud. This new pluralised version - 'Civilisations' - is all about debunking the Clark thesis and replacing it with politically correct confectionary.

When the BBC's own Arts Editor, Will Gompertz, awards the series only two stars out of five, you know that the corporation has gone seriously astray:

'For all its faults (partial, dogmatic, occasionally dismissive), the Kenneth Clark written and presented originals had a clarity, structure, and coherent argument that made them fascinating to watch and easy to follow.

In contrast, from the programmes I have seen, Civilisations is more confused and confusing than a drunk driver negotiating Spaghetti Junction in the rush hour.'

How refreshing it is to see such honesty from within the BBC!

Unsurprisingly, some big guns have been brought in to defend the series. BBC Radio 4's 'Civilisation: A Sceptic's Guide' by Professor David Cannadine is the latest offering. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09sn1hj>).

Cannadine is the most eminent of historians and is President of the British Academy. What he says, matters and what matters most in the context of the new BBC series is that he embraces its vision - its denigration of Clark's presentation of western civilisation.

He gives the Enlightenment's Edward Gibbon a particularly hard time, ignoring the qualities of his "Decline and fall of the Roman Empire in order to focus on the faults. For Cannadine, both the Enlightenment and the Renaissance were too Euro-centred to be of great importance to civilisations in a global sense. His radio discourse does, however, cite admiration for the Aztec empire. Strangely, it ignores those many thousands who had their still-beating hearts torn out of their bodies in bloody orgies of human sacrifice. Hunter-gatherer communities, instead, are praised for surviving for 40,000 years whilst so-called 'civilisations' have come and gone.

Cannadine has form when it comes to bashing traditional notions of history – especially British history. In 2011 he published 'The Right Kind of History'. It was accompanied by a BBC Radio 4 programme entitled, 'The red bits are British'. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b015ygj9>

The BBC previewed the programme in these terms:

'Over the past two years, historian Sir David Cannadine has led a ground-breaking research project at the Institute of Historical Research on the teaching of history on English state schools during the past century.'

Generally sympathetic to the knowledge-lite 'new history' approach that characterises history teaching in schools today the three hundred and six page book provided in-depth coverage of the debate about what history should be taught in our classrooms. Remarkably, Cannadine's extensive research generated only a passing reference to a highly publicised dispute at Lewes Priory School in East Sussex in 1989. It was raised in parliament on several occasions and was the subject of a debate in the House of Lords. A number of eminent peers backed the teachers, including Lord Charteris, formerly the Queen's private secretary.

The issue at stake was history teachers losing their jobs for criticising the lack of knowledge required by what was then the new GCSE history exam. Cannadine, the ready critic of other historians, ignores completely the loss-of-livelihood-as-punishment part of the story and makes no mention of the parliamentary debate.

The threat of such treatment has ever since been a powerful incentive for teachers not to whistle blow. The same incentive applies to other public services. In parliament, East Sussex was compared to East Germany.

All of this, and more, appear to have escaped Professor Cannadine's 'ground-breaking research'. Was this because such evidence did not fit the narrative he wished to present? Does he have any credibility as the BBC's chosen commentator on the relative merits of Kenneth Clark's version of 'civilisation' and the new worldwide, ragbag, and multi-cultural version?

No comment

“I’m a Bakerite. I think he’s a great man. The more I hear from him, the more I think he’s got it.”

Robert Halfon, chairman of the education select committee. Guardian 17.4.18

"It's like they've lost the ability to actually speak to another person and air their grievance." The first reaction to a problem is too often "a knife or a fist."

Teachers describe their first-hand views of the knife culture among some young people in London. BBC 12.4.2018

“Earlier this month, the annual conference of the NUT section of the National Education Union heard that some secondary schools are teaching Macbeth every year for five years because it will come up in their GCSEs.”

TES 16.4.2018

“Students at an Oxford college have cancelled a party with a cannabis theme after fellow undergraduates complained that not only is the drug illegal and a health risk but that the event amounted to the appropriation of another culture.”

TES 18.4.18

“Middle class families who use private tutors to help get their child into a grammar school should pay extra tax, a report suggests.”

DAILY MAIL 22.3.2018