

A Levels and GCSEs

A few years ago I gave a talk to students in Cambridge. There followed one of those rare conference events when I was asked an unusual and difficult question that was not drawn from the spin and media commentary of the week. "Mr Redwood, do you think the A levels I gained were of the same quality as the ones you gained?"

I had never expressed a public view on exam standards. A series of traps flashed into my mind of how certain answers could in true BBC fashion be spun or misinterpreted against me. I decided on a safe answer. "I have no reason to think that the Advanced levels I got were of a lower standard than the ones you must have got. Do you think otherwise?" As I feared but had decided to dodge, he was sure his A levels were of a lower standard and he was worried about what he saw as the downwards drift. I tried to rally him and others in the audience by saying I understood that the Exam Boards were very conscious of the need to guarantee comparable standards between years, and reflected that in the chosen mixture of the complexity of the papers, the severity of the marking scheme and the choice of grade boundary year by year.

This year some newspapers and commentators are asking the student's question again. How can it be, they ask, that 2021 has seen by far and away the best results in both A levels and GCSEs ever, when we are also told that the education of young people was harmed by school closures, a shortage of face to face teaching and by the imitations of the on line alternative. We are told that there can be no proper comparison and that this year's assessment is fair for the students involved given the difficulties lockdown created. It is also a year when some schools decided to teach the full curriculum for the exams and used new technology well to do so, whilst others felt more constrained by technology limitations or were delayed by slow deliveries of personal equipment to pupils in need. We are told the gap got bigger between different regions and income groups which is not a desirable outcome.

Next year will be a crucial year. Assuming that the remaining measures against CV 19 can be dropped as the vaccines work their magic the Exam Boards and teaching profession have to decide how to get back to public exams and how to calibrate the difficulty of papers, the breadth of the syllabus, the severity of the marking scheme and the grade boundaries anew. I do think exams are the least bad way to assess learning and achievement, and it should be easier to be fair between every student cohort if each year is examined to a similar standard on a similarly difficult and wide course. If too many get Grade A Advanced levels then elite universities will simply invent sterner tests to differentiate between the good and the very good. There are signs that some universities are inventing tests to do just that. I would be interested in thoughts about how the system should be re-established or reformed next year. There will doubtless be more arguments about the role of any of course work assessed by teachers, and the desirability or otherwise of students being able to take aids like dictionaries and smart calculators into exams.

University entrance

The emergence of many more higher grades in this year's A level results has produced problems for universities used to a higher failure rate to achieve required grades. Some courses at some universities are as a result oversubscribed and the Universities are having to make offers for the following year or encourage some other switching to try to resolve the difficulty.

I was a product of a different system for Oxford and Cambridge. Before or after A level Oxford and Cambridge set entrance and scholarship exams which they used rather than A level results.

The advantage of this system was twofold. The Universities were in full control of how many places they allocated and who would get them. The student if successful could press on to prepare more thoroughly for higher level study. The Colleges made their own judgements. Later as a young Oxford university teacher I became involved in the marking process for the entrance exams. I was impressed by the system. We blind double marked the papers, held conversations about all the ones where we disagreed, and used interviews to expose the issues where we did disagree about the achievement and potential of the candidate. We also sought to redress any unfair imbalance between students who had been well prepared by expensive schools for the ordeal and those who had not.

It looks as if some top universities are tiptoeing back to relying more on their own assessment of students. They need to be sure that the people they take can cope with the rigours and the independence of undergraduate study and are the best of the many who now achieve a grade A.

A Level and GCSE results

Congratulations to all those who have done well and obtained the grades they wanted in the recent assessments for national qualifications. Schools in the constituency have produced good results, allowing more young people to move into the 6th Form in a positive spirit or to go on to the university of their choice. Well done to all the schools and teachers who have helped their students to a good outcome.

Let Alok Sharma as chairman and deal maker fly to meetings, but how many others?

The establishment elite that perform the rites and fashion the weapons of the war on carbon are in danger of slipping into the bad practices of some past priesthoods. The officials and grandees tell us they need to fly around the world to conferences like COP 26 to spread the word. I can see the case for the chairman of the global conference to meet key players face to face in their own settings to try to do a deal, but the case for others is by no means clear. Too many fly around the world to tell others not to fly but to holiday near to home and to communicate on Zoom or Teams. When challenged about their own lifestyles which seem detached from Mission Net Zero they reply that it is fine because they are “offsetting” all the carbon their flights, chauffeured cars, air conditioned hotels and meat banquets generate. In other words they use taxpayers money to grant aid activities like tree planting or renewable power installation to claim a carbon offset.

As one of leading advocates of net Zero, Bill Gates helpfully explains in his book “I own big houses and fly in private planes- in fact I took one to Paris for the climate change conference – so who am I to lecture anyone on the environment?” “It’s true that my carbon footprint is absurdly high. .. In 2020 I started buying sustainable jet fuel and will fully offset my family’s aviation missions in 2021. For our non aviation emissions I am buying offsets through a company that runs a facility that removes carbon dioxide from the air”. At least Bill Gates uses his own money to offset that carbon footprint and grasps that others might see it differently.

I am disappointed that COP26 is not a virtual conference. The combination of the messaging on jet travel and the wish of many governments to restrict jet travel to stop the spread of covid would seem to make a strong case for a virtual meeting. There will be critics who will not be easily assuaged by knowledge of carbon offsets. There will also be plenty of examination of the nature of those carbon offsets to see if they are genuine and not being miscounted.

The efforts to place a price on carbon are creating inflation in various green investments as well as the more useful boosting of investment in things like trees and renewable power. They are also leading governments into seizing another new way of taxing us, by placing carbon taxes and carbon border taxes on items we need.

Governments need to explain how they will tax non fossil fuels in the world they want where they lose most of the tax on oil and gas. They also need to set out where all the electrical power is coming up from to fuel the electrical revolution.

Earley BBQ

On Saturday evening it was good to join local members of the Conservative party for a BBQ in Earley. There was a good range of questions about the pandemic, vaccinations, economic recovery, housing and planning. I also talked a bit about levelling up and ways of getting the NHS back to full running for non covid treatments.