

My speech during the debate on the Awarding of Qualifications: Role of Ministers, 9 September 2020

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Having listened to the exchanges and read some of the documents before the debate, I am satisfied that the Secretary of State asked Ofqual to deliver the right answers. It is disappointing that its algorithm did not work and it was right that it had to be changed. Once the decision had been taken to close schools and not to proceed with exams, I think the best answer probably was to look to the teachers to evaluate the pupils and put them in the right rank order, but for there to be some moderating influence so that, overall, we got a fair spread of results. However, it appears that the algorithm did not do that and produced all sorts of individual injustices. It may have produced what Ofqual thought was the right answer school by school, but it did not produce the right answer pupil by pupil. That was a great pity and it was clear from what the Secretary of State has been saying that that was not shared with him, which is why we are debating this today. We should now move on. As many have said on both sides of the House, we need to learn lessons and make sure that the class of 2021 is better served and does not have the same difficult foray into getting their results as the class of 2020 did.

I am very pleased that a decision has been made that exams will be reinstated. I note that we have had one Ofqual consultation already, with some conclusions, and a further consultation is under way. We have a series of new injustices that have to be dealt with, and they need to be dealt with quite soon, at this early stage. Some pupils were taught a full timetable of lessons remotely by their schools. Others had very little teaching during the summer period. Some schools were better equipped to press on with the full rigours of the GCSE and A-level courses and others were not. We need to ask ourselves what will happen in those situations, where some have been prepping for the full exam and others are now saying that perhaps they cannot in time prep for the full exam. Can we create some more time to make sure that all can be brought up to a satisfactory situation?

I see that it has been decided already that there will not be field work for geography and geology, which is quite a big loss, that there will not be formal oral examinations for languages, including English language, and that there will be less of a syllabus for those who are doing history and geography, in terms of choice of questions. These quite big decisions have already been made. I hope that there will be no need for any further decisions that could in any way undermine the reputation or the quality of the exam that will be set, and many will pass, for the class of 2021.

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that getting the students who are due to sit their exams next year, in all the subjects that he mentions, back into the classroom again is vital to their continued academic success? Will he also join me in welcoming Labour's refreshing new

position of wanting to see all children go back, having dragged its heels on this issue over the summer?

John Redwood: I am delighted that the Opposition rightly wish to see children properly educated. I have never doubted that they wanted to see children properly educated—that must be a shared view that we all hold—but it would certainly be good if the Opposition carried on in the spirit of co-operation and responded to some of the consultations, for example, because very important decisions will now be taken over when the exams will take place, what the content of exams will be and how they will be marked and assessed. We need to have two things first and foremost in our minds: of course, we need to be fair to the pupils and to take into account that their education has been interrupted in recent months, but we also need to make sure that the system itself guarantees quality, so that they get a qualification that means something and is widely respected both at home and abroad. I hope that the Secretary of State will soon be able to bring forward positive proposals so that the class of 2021 can be properly looked after.