

Funding the Future

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It would be good to leave the continuing A level fiasco alone this morning, but I cannot. Not that I want to discuss it directly: I have already done that. Instead, I want to consider its indicative qualities.

We knew about this issue from March. As the father of an A level student, I knew from the day that it was announced that exams were cancelled that there was stress to come. And I'll be honest and admit that both he and I suffered it. As a student with a less than perfect GCSE performance, but who had reacted well to the environment of sixth form college, I think both my son and I thought his situation would be hard to predict. As it turned out, he got his predicted grades. Like every other parent, I (or course), think they were a fair reflection of his ability. The fact that I have taught people of about his age over the last few years gave me every reason to think that they were, but now we are suffering what might fairly be called 'survivor syndrome', which is the guilt that he has his place secured when so many others have not.

And that's not surprising. Despite months of notice of the need to create a fair, open and transparent system of assessment which could be subject to appeal at every stage, and so win the support of all involved (pupils, parents, teachers, employers, universities and others who rely on this information) the government created an algorithm in secret.

It spurned available advice.

It delivered opacity rather than transparency.

It even delayed publication when that was not necessary, given that all the data to make its algorithm work was available in early June. This created a cliff-edge crisis now that was wholly unnecessary. There is no one but the government to blame for that. The absurd demand that the 'results' be published on the conventional data, which has always been dictated by the demands of the marking process, made no sense when there was no marking to do, teachers had finished their work in May and the algorithm must have taken a few minutes to run.

Every single aspect of this crisis, including the frantic pressure on appeals now, into which process it is now very obvious that no thought was given, is entirely the fault of

the government. They built a cliff, and then threw us over the edge.

The significance of saying so is not just for the importance of apportioning blame (vital though that is). It is also to make clear that this is going to happen again, at least three times this year.

The next occasion will be the GCSE results.

And thereafter there will be at least two more precipices over which we are destined to catastrophically fall.

The first of these is the end of furlough at the end of October.

The second is the end of the EU transition arrangements at the end of December.

The third, less predictable but quite likely, is the return to major lockdown during the autumn as Covid-19 cases rise again, as seems likely.

We already know there is no plan for the GCSE results, which are forecast to be even more unjust than the A level results.

Meanwhile, Rishi Sunak has said that the end of furlough is fair because it will end the pretence that people have jobs when that is not the case. It takes a very particular form of callousness that can only be born from privilege to think that way when the result will be more unemployed people in this country than it has ever known before.

Whilst the end of the EU transition is still completely unplanned, let alone prepared for at almost every level and yet will happen anyway.

What the A level fiasco has proven is that we have a government that has two fundamental qualities. The first is that it can both create and then exacerbate crises. And the second, is that it is utterly clueless as to what to do about them.

Saying this, I am making clear that the government did make the coronavirus crisis worse than it needed to be. And it still has not the slightest idea how to manage it, as the absence of a meaningful track and trace system proves. That cost lives.

And I am suggesting it made the economic downturn worse than it need have been as a result. That too will cost lives.

Now its failure on exams will blight many young people's lives.

Whilst the very obvious failure to plan for the coming recession may not have dawned on many of the 7 million still reported to be in furlough schemes (even if part time now) but it will do soon.

And the Brexit disaster to come will top all of these issues.

What I want to stress as well is that this is not disaster capitalism. That has a plan inherent within it. A cold, calculating plan, maybe, but a plan nonetheless.

But there is no plan on the part of this government. To think that there might be would credit it with an ability for co-ordination that is beyond its ability to muster.

What we are seeing is incompetence compounding indifference based on dogma that is as far removed from reality as it is possible to get, all played out in some great social experiment that presumes there is a 'guiding hand' from afar that will always save the day when there is no such thing.

This week has resulted in massive stress, and a profound sense of disquiet. Next week will see a repetition, with at least as much damage resulting. And thereafter? Things are going to get very, very much worse, with that prediction being too optimistic if coronavirus infection continues to increase.

And throughout it all we have a government so incompetent that it is reasonable to assume it incapable of planning the inevitable tea bag disposal requirement after the brew has been made because they had never anticipated the need to do so.

If this week was bad, I can only offer one promise, and that is that the worst has yet to come.