

Some modest PROPOSALS

For once in his career, **Phil Beadle** is letting someone else do the talking. You couldn't make it up...

Recently, cleaning up my e-mail account, I found something I was about to delete that came from one Alexander Laing, concerned citizen of Leamington Spa, in May 2010. He'd sent a letter to Michael Gove and, for reasons known only to him, copied me in. I think someone may have been listening...

“Dear Mr Gove,

I've worked all my life and one of the benefits of this effort is that my children have advantages. I want them to do better than less privileged children and am somewhat tired of their genetic, economic and social gifts being offset by policies, the intent of which appears to be to level the playing field. I have, therefore, a few modest proposals for you to consider.

First of all, you've plenty of excuses to stop BSF. Bright new buildings are a senseless encouragement to the children of the feckless. School buildings send important messages and the message to these youngsters should be: 'Don't get your hopes up.'

Next in your sights should be 'equivalences'. The point of academic

qualifications is they set children apart: they are where advantage expresses itself. Bear in mind it is a filter system you'll be running; this will help that filter system work more effectively. So dump the academic diplomas as a contradiction in terms; all they do is to make becoming a plumber more difficult than it needs to be. You need a good, clear difference between education and training.

I don't suppose you could come up with anything to completely screw up GCSEs? They're pretty well embedded, I know, but you could reasonably throw a few spanners in the works to stop the rough getting steadily better at passing them. Make iGCSEs available to everyone so we can have something a bit more culturally searching to establish the distinctions between children. If we must have a level playing field, I should at least like a home game.

Better still, how about bringing in something like the old matriculation exam for everyone, whether they're going to university or not? That would set academic qualification unequivocally at the top of the pile. It does no one any favours being artificially coy about success and failure.

What's the point of sending my children to a genuinely good school if the benefits of doing so are progressively eroded? Why set up academies for the ungrateful, where we might, at best, talent-spot the half a dozen or so kids with potential we might otherwise have missed? It is time to target more promising populations with this kind of school. You can always scout talent with local specialist schools for aspirational families; cream off any rising quality. For goodness' sake, they could even run such schools themselves!

All that might put a stop to rough schools masquerading as good ones into the bargain. Once you've taken out fake scores, make the league tables reflect only academic achievement. That leaves the exams themselves, and I say 'exams' advisedly. Not 'modules' you can take as often as grandmother took her

driving test. Not coursework essays written in collusion with teachers. One-off, terminal tests like we took, sitting in silence without anything for support but our brains. Tests of memory and reason. Tests of character.

Once the exams are challenging enough to be sure only the right type of children get through them, stop making allowances for those taught in so-called 'rough' schools. We live in a world of absolute standards. There are no triumphant D grades, wherever you started from.

Market forces are the primary agent of social control, or social harmony, so let's remove Educational Maintenance Allowances. Pump up tuition fees. Let poverty do its work.

And there you have it. I'm sure you can smuggle a programme like this past the electorate. They secretly want this kind of orderly, nostalgic vision: a nation confident of its values. What the country needs is coherent policy, systematically activated, that restores advantage to its proper place.”

With thanks to Mr D.

PHIL IS RUNNING THREE INTENSIVE DAY COURSES – ‘OUTSTANDING LITERACY ACROSS THE CURRICULUM’ – TOWARDS THE END OF 2012 (EXETER, 30TH NOV; LONDON, 11TH DEC; MANCHESTER, 13TH DEC). FIND OUT MORE AT [HTTP://TINYURL.COM/BP6KH2O](http://tinyurl.com/bp6kh2o).

PHIL BEADLE IS AN EXPERIENCED TEACHER, AUTHOR, BROADCASTER, SPEAKER, AND JOURNALIST. (PHILBEADLE.COM)



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