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## **Tomlinson Will Destroy A levels by Stealth**

**New Politeia Study Urges Government to Depoliticise Exam Setting and Marking.**

The A level disaster of 2002 has been buried by the series of official reports supposed to investigate it. Politeia's next pamphlet, *A levels: Fiasco and Future* goes behind the lines of the official machine. The author, Politeia's director, Dr Sheila Lawlor, painstakingly pieces together the evidence to reveal just how little has been resolved, and even worse, how the latest official plan threatens the continued existence of A levels except in name alone.

Dr Lawlor shows, first, how many of the 2002 candidates still do not know whether their papers were unfairly downgraded, and whether their results have been fraudulently (if not criminally) manipulated, and who is responsible. Second, she explains how the very problems that undermined A levels in 2002 will face the A levels again this year. The standards of the new A levels – taken under the system introduced last year – are supposed to be the same as for past A levels. Yet all concerned concede that they cannot be the same, because the new system, which pools marks from examinations taken both after the first year in the 6<sup>th</sup> form and after the second year, is fundamentally different from the old one.

Third, and most worrying, Lawlor shows that A levels are threatened with extinction – at least as the sort of examination they have traditionally been, which measures intellectual ability and mastery of subjects for the academically able. If the plan goes ahead, A levels will become rather another GCSE, a narrowly-conceived box-ticking exercise, where any student who has followed the course can get full marks. Furthermore, the role of teachers as examination markers and experienced subject-specialists, who use their wider understanding and discretion to assess the candidates, will be diminished in favour of rule-bound marking according to pre-determined criteria, carried out, perhaps under supervision in marking factories, by people who need have neither great skill nor long experience. As the author explains: -

‘Tomlinson's idea really means that the A level will turn into another version of failed models for national curriculum and GCSE. The exam is envisaged as a number of hurdles where pupils will show they have acquired certain competencies: if they have acquired them all, they will be presumed to have deserved the highest grades ... In short, here is a proposal for what amounts to a cloning system, which will award potential clones the same marks provided they go through identical hoops.’

At the root of the problem over A level is the extent to which the government and the education officials and advisers have systematically intervened in the exam system, politicising it, and destroying standards in order to buy votes. The fiasco of 2002 showed how such intervention can misfire, but while those responsible get off scot free, the candidates and their teachers and schools, the universities, the employers and the country at large ultimately pay the price.

*A levels Fiasco and Future* proposes that A levels should be depoliticised. Responsibility for them should be delegated to a completely independent body, made up of university academic specialists. Such a move would allow the examination to become once again a test of knowledge of a subject in breadth and in depth, along the lines of the 18+ examinations in other European countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland. (The pamphlet draws on the lessons of *Comparing Standards 16-19 Academic and Vocational* whose authors contribute their view of the way forward for the individual subjects of Maths, English and History.) If government will not de-politicise A levels, Lawlor urges the best course is for the universities to set their own, rigorous entrance exam as a rival to A levels.

‘Unless the A level becomes once again an examination of intellectual ability and subject mastery, set by subject specialists capable of exercising independent professional judgement, it will descend to a mere box ticking operation in which the half-educated measure the uneducated.’

*A levels Fiasco and Future* by Sheila Lawlor is published by Politeia, 22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QP on Monday 13th January 2003 at £5-00. Enquiries to Dr Lawlor at Politeia 0207 240 5070; or (w/e) 01223 350094