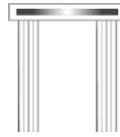


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PUBLICATION DATE: **Monday 5th July 2004**

Woodhead attacks Tomlinson scheme for A levels: The diploma scheme will lower academic and vocational standards further, says next Politeia pamphlet.

No exam has been the victim of such attack as the A levels, which by fair means or foul, the left has wanted to abolish. But because the exam inspires confidence, politicians have couched their attack in a coded language of ‘broadening’, ‘modernising’ and making it more ‘accessible’. Now the gloves are off. Mike Tomlinson has been appointed to prepare the blueprint for the future and abolish the A level for once and for all. No one could be better equipped. Having exonerated the Government for its fraudulent and unfair treatment of A level candidates arbitrarily marked down for political reasons in the recent A level fiasco, Tomlinson has shown he can be counted on to take the battle against A levels forward.

Tomlinson’s scheme is to replace the A level with a series of ‘interlocking diplomas’ and a ‘diploma framework’. There is to be a complicated structure of core and other components. These will promote a series of diffuse aims from allowing ‘space’ for innovative learning and teaching, and imposing a dirigiste scheme for ‘personal choice’. There will not be an exam, but rather a qualification which ‘delivers’ breadth, depth and stretch, uses profiles of achievement and cuts down assessment, especially external assessment.

Chris Woodhead in *How to Lower Standards: Mike Tomlinson’s Modest Proposal*, considers the plethora of suggestions which will, he says, ultimately lead to the destruction of serious learning. The plan to balance specialization and ‘general learning’ is sinister. The more ‘general learning’ imposed, the less time there will be for rigorous academic or vocational studies. That to impose ‘motivation’ will lead, as so often in the past, to shallow pleading ‘for relevance and instant gratification.’ Even the genuflection to ‘choice’ does not in fact mean a sensible plan to introduce the real choice of a good academic and a good vocational system, for which the country is desperate, but a vague aspiration to an even more diffuse system of ‘personalized learning’. That, says Woodhead, is no more than ‘a mix and match approach ...’ that undermines the essential integrity of the body of knowledge (be it bricklaying or Latin) the student has to master.

The proposals, explains Woodhead, will ‘neither restore intellectual rigour to academic examinations nor provide the less academically able with the practical, vocational courses they so desperately need. They will throw the system into chaos as pupils, their teachers, parents and employers struggle to come to terms with this new Tomlinsonian world of ‘interlocking diplomas’.

Woodhead explains that the state regulation of the curriculum and exams has failed. What is now needed is not further regulation or even, as some suggest, a single state controlled exam board. Instead what is needed is a market in exam boards for both the academic and vocational paths. *For the academic*, the best universities and schools should use the freedoms he proposes to develop their own exam.' These exams would identify the academic elite which would very rapidly secure their reputation within the market place. Other less demanding examinations would be developed in order to meet different needs. Why not?

On the vocational front a similar approach would allow employers to develop courses and qualifications that met their particular needs.

But the final stop must be for the Blair Government to reject these proposals outright and prove its commitment to education is more than a rhetorical mantra.

* *How To Lower School Standards: Mike Tomlinson's Modest Proposals* will be published by Politeia on Monday 5th July 2004, and is available from Politeia, 22 Charing Cross Road, WC2H 0QP at £3.00* **The text will be available by e mail in advance to journalists on application by response to this message.**

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