

# Letter to the Archbishop of York

I have sent the following letter and await a reply:

Dear Archbishop

I was pleased to hear reported your view that there needs to be more recognition of England and Englishness to complement the recognition of Scottish and Welsh cultures and interests within the UK Union.

I was not however persuaded that you do understand the nature of the English view when you went on to propose the international and EU elite solution to the English problem, more devolution to regions. England has rejected EU/Whitehall proposals to create artificial regions with elected governments. Many of us resented the way the EU refused to put England on their maps but broke us up into unpopular Euro regions. We were relieved they allowed Scotland and Wales to escape whole and unscathed. We are now concerned about the EU's aggressive approach to Northern Ireland.

I would be happy to debate these matters with you to extend understanding of England and Englishness within the UK and to expose lopsided and unfair devolution. There could be an online debate or we could book a room at Westminster with an audience if rules allow.

Yours sincerely

John Redwood

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## Digital genius?

The digital revolution sweeps on. Much of it is miracle technology that makes lives easier and better. It is transforming shopping, entertainment, media and much else.

Parts of the public sector though are making technology into a misery machine to spy on us , infuriate us and thwart us. Let us take the NHS CV 19 app and proof of vaccination which we now have to show in order to attend certain events. We all have a perfectly good card with our name on it and the schedule of vaccines administered with dates on them. Why can't I just show that? When I came to print out the computer record as requested I found I could not read and check the computer record because it was encrypted in a scan code. I have no idea what it says and so do not know if it is accurate. I had to go through a duo access procedure which did not work at all on the first two occasions I tried. Eventually I was able to print out a scan code but the paper also then said it was only valid for two days although the

explanatory note said it would be for a month. As I was preparing diary items a week in advance it meant I had to go through the palaver the night before the event again! I dread to think how much we taxpayers had to pay for such a poor and pointless service.

The other day I had to park in a different Council area to my own in west London. The Council had blocked many of the streets permanently and several temporarily so it was difficult accessing the on street parking and I like most of the traffic had to spend a long time crawling and stopping in congestion on the main roads. When I eventually found a surprising three slots empty for two hours next to a ticket machine I was overjoyed, only to find the machine said it was not functioning. Like others I was too afraid of tow away and of high fines for not paying so I carried on circulating. Eventually I found a single slot. It said I had to pay by phone. I rang the number. I was told I had to download an app. I did so. That told me I had to register. I did so answering a range of questions about me and the phone. Then it asked me details about the parking. I supplied those. Then it told me I had not supplied details of the car so I had to go back to registration to do that. It eventually let me specify the parking I wanted to do. The guide to the parking was ambiguous about hours and prices. I guessed a time I wanted, only then to discover after 10 mins the parking would be free all evening. I ended up paying £1 for the ten minutes and had peace of mind that I had complied. All this had to be done on a tiny phone screen which was difficult to read in sunlight. It was so much easier when you simply put coins into a ticket machine.

Wouldn't it be a good idea if these public services thought more about the convenience of the users. Will you write in with your examples of bad service from the public sector?

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## A Levels and GCSEs

A few years ago I gave a talk to students in Cambridge. There followed one of those rare conference events when I was asked an unusual and difficult question that was not drawn from the spin and media commentary of the week. "Mr Redwood, do you think the A levels I gained were of the same quality as the ones you gained?"

I had never expressed a public view on exam standards. A series of traps flashed into my mind of how certain answers could in true BBC fashion be spun or misinterpreted against me. I decided on a safe answer. "I have no reason to think that the Advanced levels I got were of a lower standard than the ones you must have got. Do you think otherwise?" As I feared but had decided to dodge, he was sure his A levels were of a lower standard and he was worried about what he saw as the downwards drift. I tried to rally him and others in the audience by saying I understood that the Exam Boards were

very conscious of the need to guarantee comparable standards between years, and reflected that in the chosen mixture of the complexity of the papers, the severity of the marking scheme and the choice of grade boundary year by year.

This year some newspapers and commentators are asking the student's question again. How can it be, they ask, that 2021 has seen by far and away the best results in both A levels and GCSE s ever, when we are also told that the education of young people was harmed by school closures, a shortage of face to face teaching and by the imitations of the on line alternative. We are told that there can be no proper comparison and that this year's assessment is fair for the students involved given the difficulties lockdown created. It is also a year when some schools decided to teach the full curriculum for the exams and used new technology well to do so, whilst others felt more constrained by technology limitations or were delayed by slow deliveries of personal equipment to pupils in need. We are told the gap got bigger between different regions and income groups which is not a desirable outcome.

Next year will be a crucial year. Assuming that the remaining measures against CV 19 can be dropped as the vaccines work their magic the Exam Boards and teaching profession have to decide how to get back to public exams and how to calibrate the difficulty of papers, the breadth of the syllabus, the severity of the marking scheme and the grade boundaries anew. I do think exams are the least bad way to assess learning and achievement, and it should be easier to be fair between every student cohort if each year is examined to a similar standard on a similarly difficult and wide course. If too many get Grade A Advanced levels then elite universities will simply invent sterner tests to differentiate between the good and the very good. There are signs that some universities are inventing tests to do just that. I would be interested in thoughts about how the system should be re-established or reformed next year. There will doubtless be more arguments about the role if any of course work assessed by teachers, and the desirability or otherwise of students being able to take aids like dictionaries and smart calculators into exams.

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## University entrance

The emergence of many more higher grades in this year's A level results has produced problems for universities used to a higher failure rate to achieve required grades. Some courses at some universities are as a result oversubscribed and the Universities are having to make offers for the following year or encourage some other switching to try to resolve the difficulty.

I was a product of a different system for Oxford and Cambridge. Before or after A level Oxford and Cambridge set entrance and scholarship exams which

they used rather than A level results.

The advantage of this system was twofold. The Universities were in full control of how many places they allocated and who would get them. The student if successful could press on to prepare more thoroughly for higher level study. The Colleges made their own judgements. Later as a young Oxford university teacher I became involved in the marking process for the entrance exams. I was impressed by the system. We blind double marked the papers, held conversations about all the ones where we disagreed, and used interviews to expose the issues where we did disagree about the achievement and potential of the candidate. We also sought to redress any unfair imbalance between students who had been well prepared by expensive schools for the ordeal and those who had not.

It looks as if some top universities are tiptoeing back to relying more on their own assessment of students. They need to be sure that the people they take can cope with the rigours and the independence of undergraduate study and are the best of the many who now achieve a grade A.

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## A Level and GCSE results

Congratulations to all those who have done well and obtained the grades they wanted in the recent assessments for national qualifications. Schools in the constituency have produced good results, allowing more young people to move into the 6th Form in a positive spirit or to go on to the university of their choice. Well done to all the schools and teachers who have helped their students to a good outcome.