

Before Coronavirus (BC)... After Coronavirus (AC)

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There was a time **Before Coronavirus (BC)**, though it already seems months ago. Lenin got it right when he said: 'There are decades where nothing happens, and weeks where decades happen'.

We are all armchair critics and soothsayers now. None of us can be right or wrong because nobody has the answer – at the moment. There is no doubting the gravity of the situation as nations act locally and think globally.

Some pundits are arguing, maybe correctly, that the cure is worse than the problem. Infamously, the President of Belarus says tractors and vodka are the unique survival recipe - and top flight football is still being played in the country.

To date, Sweden, Singapore, Taiwan and some Australian states are keeping their schools open. Are they right to do so? What is the trade-off between herd immunity and premature deaths? Sweden's state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell commented: 'We all know this is going to go on for months. You can't keep schools closed for months.'

In this country the school system has more or less shut down, apart from the vital care provided for vulnerable and keyworkers' children. Parents speak of a mixed picture of engagement with on-line learning (PE guru Joe Wicks apart), though so much is being learned in a compressed period of time about distance learning.

And what are students doing and saying? One headteacher in the north east reports that 'the boys have gone underground, or stayed under their duvets, while Year 11 girls are polishing their history essays'. As so often, we are not hearing from the many thousands of disadvantaged and dislocated students for whom school matters so much.

Talking 'distantly' to children of friends and neighbours, I detect that there is a palpable resentment amongst many 16 and 18 year-olds that they have been denied the opportunity to show what they are really capable of: 'I know I can get an A but my assessments show only a B' is typical of A level students who have dedicated eighteen months to their studies.

Teachers have properly reassured A level students that universities will take an understanding approach to admissions this year; the sector, with usual self-interest, will open its doors to all those who want to enter in October.

Equally, education leaders have reassured GCSE students that Ofqual will deliver fair, moderated assessments and award grades accordingly. We are fortunate to have an internationally respected examinations framework in which students and parents can be confident.

So much for the present. What about life **After Coronavirus (AC)**?

In 2014 I made a programme for BBC Radio 4 celebrating the 70th anniversary of the 1944 Education Act. I recounted the tale that in March 1943, Rab Butler, the young president of the Board of Education, went to Chequers to see Winston Churchill.

The meeting with Churchill – leaning back on his pillows in a four-poster bed, night-cap on and with a large cat at his feet – was an unlikely beginning for the most fundamental reform of the English education system, but that night the prime minister signed off on what became the 1944 Education Act.

Conceived during the Blitz and the Normandy landings, it is remarkable to think that civil servants and ministers were focused on post-war reconstruction in order to build, as they saw it, the new Jerusalem.

Last year I chaired *The Forgotten Third*, a national commission for the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

[The Forgotten Third: full report](#)

We recommend fundamental reforms to GCSEs, in particular to how English Language and mathematics should be examined. To take the example of English, we advocate the inclusion of 50% oral and written coursework, alongside 25% online testing, with 25% for a final examination. How might such an arrangement have been of value this summer, or for any future year when terminal examinations are interrupted?

Further, we recommend a new approach to examining language and maths at the end of the primary years (SATs), and a radical rethink of current accountability systems in the best interest of all students. The regulator Ofsted will be a key player here.

Without wishing to draw unlikely parallels between the Churchill-Butler partnership and the Johnson-Williamson pairing, what might the current Secretary of State for Education set in motion during the months ahead? He could then take some landmark decisions.

In the eye of the vicious virus storm, leaders across our social, political and health systems are rightly focused on preserving precious life 'at this moment of national emergency'. In turn, our children are watching leaders learn great lessons.

There *will* be renewed life After Coronavirus. There will be a vibrant and changed society ahead, perhaps with a different values system.

In education, as in many aspects of life, we should begin to give thought to what that 'levelled up' change could look like - not least for our young population who are missing their teachers and their daily school lives.

Roy Blatchford's latest book is ['The Three Minute Leader'](#)
