

August is a wicked month

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'Channel Tunnel delays - French to blame'. 'Vardy versus Rooney'. 'Savaged by a seagull'.

Headlines tell us it must be August.

The celebrated Irish author Edna O'Brien declared August the wicked month. Readers familiar with her novel of that name will know why. And this August is set to have its fair share of juicy tales as tribes Truss and Sunak exchange verbals. The 160,000 or so members of the Conservative party are going to have to listen to the rhetoric and bidding war on taxes and energy prices.

This is how we choose a Prime Minister in the UK.

But not all is lost. Newly appointed US ambassador to Britain, Jane Hartley, has declared that the UK's processes for picking a leader outstrip America's: 'Your system is much better. If you've looked at our primary system, you look extremely organised and efficient compared to what we do'.

Democracy stutters. In the memorable words earlier this year of social commentator Matthew Syed: 'While Xi Jinping was resetting the world order through his Belt and Road initiative and Vladimir Putin was recreating the Russian empire by annexing Georgia and Crimea, we were arguing over gender-neutral toilets'.

For most people involved in the rhythms of education, August is a month which faces both ways: reflecting on the triumphs and tribulations of the previous academic year; looking ahead to examination results and the opportunities that a new academic year will surely bring.

It is also a month for teachers and leaders, usually with a bit of personal space, to watch how others lead their lives. A good number of us are probably up close with cafes, pubs, restaurants and hotels. What are the takeaways?

Many years ago I came across an advert recruiting staff for a five-star hotel. Qualities needed were listed as follows:

- A desire to improve themselves in terms of skills, knowledge and experience
- Good organisational skills and high service standards
- Patience, a sense of humour and an ability to accept and act on constructive feedback
- An ability to work on their own initiative and also to be a good team player
- Excellent and pro-active communication skills
- An eye for detail and a willingness to improve all aspects of the service we offer.

Observing hotel and restaurant staff who enjoy their job, these qualities are much in evidence - and naturally make me reflect on the best schools and colleges I work with.

In these environments one encounters teaching and support staff whose attitudes, dispositions and mutual respect shine through, every day. Professional expertise is a non-negotiable. But beyond the educational talents, it is the enduring human qualities which mark out the best staff.

In common with hospitality, teaching is a people business, whatever the month.