PERtinence

The *PER* newsletter **No 180**

Bi-Monthly March-April 2025

Oh Dear, trying to deal with multiple uncertainties arising from decisions taken now in Washington DC is the principal skill needed today in the international corridors of power. And another source of uncertainty is the judgment being exercised by the DfE, headed-up, as it is, by Bridget Phillipson. Her curriculum team, led by Prof. Becky Francis, called for informed feedback about the kind of reforms which were needed in schools. Prof. David Scott (UCL) sent-in a considered, credible compilation of ten such suggestions[1] *... but we will have to wait to see whether the Starmer Administration is going to take them up. A lively Discussion Meeting was convened at Penderell's Oak on March 8th to mull over Scott's suggestions, and all kinds of variations and associated themes were aired: see pages 2-3.*

Meanwhile the Putin Administration in Moscow is both soft-soaping, and infuriating the Donald, and it is difficult to see how the war in Ukraine is ever going to end. Maybe the Putin Administration will end-up being the victim of its own economic collapse, provoked by the strain imposed by pointed rearmament in Washington and Brussels[2].

Meanwhile the gurus of Silicon Valley have provoked a seemingly irresistible bandwagon with their extravagant, over-hyped AI… and we may all eventually be the victims of a massive AI crash, when it suddenly becomes clear that you can't trust a high-tech widget which is prone to hallucinations. Nearer to home, the summer exam performances of sixth formers (A-levels) and undergraduates (in universities) may very likely deliver another painful shock. You don't get students to think for themselves, if AI is around to do it for them!

Meanwhile the historic discovery of Anti-Maths, may represent some Exceptional News for the third millennium, but it won't make much immediate difference if most of those capable of understanding it are disinclined to make the effort ---or indeed any other kind of effort--- now AI is there to take the strain[3].

REFORMING THE CURRICULUM

We can at least warmly welcome the new Labour Government's decision to stage a public consultation about potentially needed reforms in the school curriculum. It is a sign (though only a faint one) that there is some slight unease about the educational status quo in Great Smith Street. But today's downbeat cognitive climate is far too bad for any simple practical change to make much difference. A dark, all-pervading, cognitive gloom is hanging over

---

[1]Accompanied with the underpinning reasoning and evidence.

[2]An unexpected *Deja Vue*, because a similar outcome happened with the old USSR, when Ronald Reagan pushed the Pentagon into rearming in the 1980s. Although the Russian Federation is supposed to have thrown-off the gross inefficiencies of the former Soviet era, the reality seems to be that it is still trapped in a similarly muddled mindset.

[3]The earlier disarray in maths, caused by eight blunders made by the mathematic establishment in the 20th century doesn't help. I highlighted it in my essay in the *New English Review* in September 2022.

schools, inevitably generating mental health problems, ones far greater than the system was ever expected to handle[4]. The overall description of today's approach as "instruction" already implies that this gloom is all-pervading. What has happened to negate the hopeful aspirations of yesteryear? Young people have always been associated with hopefulness. Parents have tended to be associated with (often patently unrealistic modes of) positivity… projecting onto their children some of their own original idealism which they lost during their somewhat disappointing careers.

So what is the essence of this former hopefulness ---which has now, all-too palpably, gone AWOL? What should we look for, if we are trying to rediscover and renew it?

Well, it is the assumption that baffling things are going to get easier to understand[5], and that people generally ---empowered by this brighter perceptivity--- are going to behave better vis-à-vis each other[6]. Merely to remark in such terms about the prospect we face today sounds naïve to the *n*th degree. Young people themselves inevitably reflect this downbeat switch of expectation. There are even signs that some of them are becoming stoic, turning away from the kind of slick hedonism which has visibly turned sour for their parents' generation!

The P E R Discussion on March 8th at Penderell's Oak

Chris introduces the discussion and tables an initial Hand-Out which tries to stand back from the nitty-gritty of specific practical putative reforms of the kind listed in David Scott's submission. The Hand-Out seeks to air a woefully missing overall tone… and some crucially missing "commongood" sentiments, which surely need to be uppermost, if school is to be experienced by most children as genuinely <<lifelong educational>>.

A Hand-Out, Tabled at Penderell's Oak

<<There is a severe existential crisis looming, because Chat GPT use among students is out of control, and it is disguising a likely chronic failure of students to consolidate their understanding[7]. More than 40,000 teachers gave up teaching in mid-career and switched to other jobs last year.

HMG spends £116 billion per year on education. This is a colossal sum. We need to ensure that it is being well spent.

There are certain massive preliminary issues that should be secured before we start talking about details. These are "Huge Emotive Truths" (HETs) …absolutely essential truths, which are not being effectively transmitted to pupils. They should be the minimum HMG gets for its annual £116 billion of taxpayer's money. There should be occasional shots in the school day entitled "Intense Attention Slots" which

---

[4]A full list of social crises probably brought-about mainly by dysfunctional education includes: (a) a failure to infuse average school leavers with a satisfactory range of basic skills ---this being all the more inexcusable because the change away from the earlier humanities-based curriculum was pitched as one which would be a "long overdue Skills Revolution" which would "Empower the learner"! This is so crass that it would be hilarious… if it wasn't so reprehensible. It appears that the Bloomian Instructionalists who took over schools in the 1980s didn't understand what implanting skills consisted of , (b) abysmal levels of poor mental health, including disconcerting mental effects resulting from exposure to all kinds of violent, morbid and disgusting adult angst… plus immature peer spooking, (c) record levels of truancy, much of it resulting from an intense dread of the school experience, (d) nearly a million NEETs many of whom may be condemned to living their entire adult lives without a job, (e) gang culture, teenage knife crime, on-line fraud and brazen shop-lifting. This is a truly damning list, which ought to be prompting a widespread urgent search movement aimed at finding out what has caused this unwanted catastrophe.

[5]And more, not less, comfortable: that work will become more satisfying, not more challenging… that expendable money will become more common, not scarcer.

[6]In a word, cognitive, social and moral progress. The simplistic Victorian notion that human progress is inevitable has, of course, long since expired. Nevertheless supposed recipes for progress such as the "Progressivism" of the 1960s attracted large numbers of enthusiastic supporters. It would be difficult to match such a level of total commitment today.

[7]Chat GPT offers students ready-made wordy answers: thus removing most of the graft needed to internalise concepts.

vividly put-forward the unnegotiable imperatives which every person must accept if they are to be fully welcomed into a successful open society such as the UK. Some examples:

1 The UK is a long established society with a proud record of (gradual) emancipation, commonsense and facing facts. Every child in school should be made aware that they are expected to contribute to this society at all times, and, if necessary, to defend it.

2 We are all sentient beings, and we are accountable for the way our actions impinge on those around us. Every child in school should be made aware of this 100% accountability… they need to be seen by others as reliable.

3 'Truth' is the special term we attach to opinions which are on a "consolidation curve", that is, statements getting more and more secure as time passes.

4 To have a satisfying life everyone needs to understand as much as possible about the world around them. Today's world is full of pitfalls, which can trip anyone up. Getting aware of these pitfalls, and understanding how to avoid them (as well as wonderful opportunities), is what education offers.

5 The UK has a proud record of producing world geniuses like Shakespeare, Harvey, Newton, Dr Johnson, Harrison, Dickens, Darwin, Boole and Turing. None of these famous figures were from the "ruling class". They were average, talented citizens who worked extremely hard, and brought new kinds of priceless common understanding into the national awareness.

6 Historically the UK cultivated a commonsense version of Belief, and though much of the antique metaphysics which went with it has now faded, its main strictures still offer an essential form of sensibility, often called 'emotional intelligence'. It includes being reliable in the eyes of others and a 100% aversion to masculine violence against women and girls[8].>>

The meeting at Penderell's Oak was intended to critique David Scott's submission to Prof. Becky Francis' DfE call for submissions about reforming education. (A shortened three-page version of the document had been circulated to participants before the meeting.) The actual discussion at the Oak turned out to be fast and furious, mostly centering-round issues arising from Scott's first page. All those present made forceful, useful contributions to the debate, but it is difficult to pinpoint features which enjoyed consensus support.

The plan was to ask each member who attended the event to say which reform items on David Scott's list they supported (either strongly or moderately), and which they disagreed with (either strongly or moderately). The consolidated results of this questionnaire would provide a statistic which could be subsequently shared with readers of PERtinence.

Unfortunately only approximately half of the attenders have managed, so far, to get round to sending their responses in, so we are at present unable to present the overall result in these pages.

An interim Report has been issued quite recently by the DfE setting out the view likely to be propounded in the final version. It can be accessed via Google: Interim DfE Report www. Gov.uk

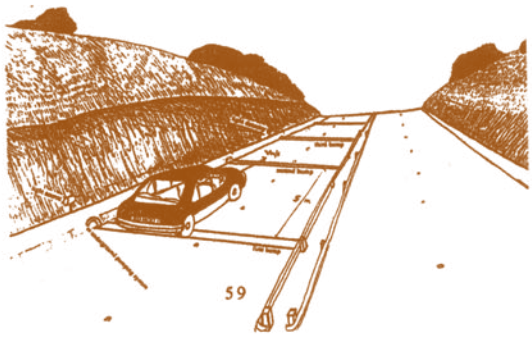
It would be difficult to imagine a more complacent, underwhelming account of today's educational status quo. The document's authors seem to have overlooked the abysmal failure of today's so-called "instructional pedagogy" to enthuse or inspire young people. This is quite damning. In schools all over England pupils are sitting in drab classrooms being expected to absorb dull factual and process messages which evoke very little youthful interest, which fail to build a sense of cultural identity, and which almost wholly ignore the centrality of "the commongood". It is evident that a form of denial-amnesia and panglossian groupspeak

[8]This is a slightly edited version of the Hand Out which was tabled on March 8th.

dominates in Great Smith Street. Education seems to be treated here, as it is in the media, as being essentially an institution aimed at "training young people for commerce and industry"[9]. CPO

NARRATIVE MATHEMATICS No 15

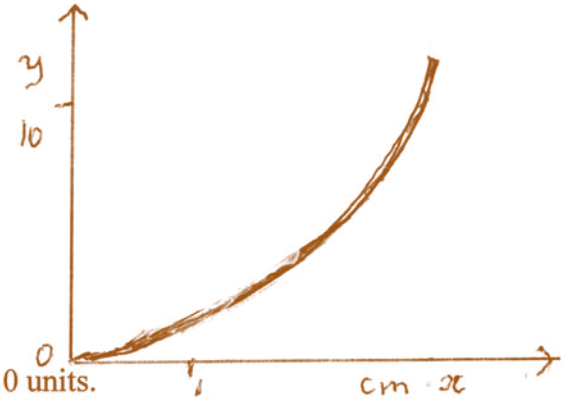
How can motorway traffic be slowed-down in fog?



We know that sudden upsurges of fog on motorways can be dangerous. Drivers who have been blithely batting along at 70 mph, suddenly find that they can't see the car ahead. It only requires a slight change of some driver's behaviour to provoke a violent pile-up.

Numerous drivers typically end-up as victims of such events. 30 or 40 vehicles are often damaged or written-off.

To cope with this problem, a scheme has been proposed which involves setting rubber sections in the road ---bars which can be inflated quite quickly when the fog appears, and deflated quite quickly when it departs. These "inflatable bumps" will, it is thought, fairly effectively slow down the traffic, and also alert drivers to the need for extra care. The effect of inflating the rubber bumps in the road is shown in the attached graph. When the height of the bumps is x cm the total "agitation effect" —-which combines the nervous strain of the bumpiness on the driver, and the probability of mechanical harm caused by the vibration of the vehicle is defined as y units. It is considered unsafe to let $y > 10$ units.



QUESTION: Draw a sketch graph to show the way y changes with the time t seconds after the bumps begin to inflate, assuming that x is $t/100$. If the pumps stop increasing the pressure inside the bumps after 2 minutes, will there be a danger of y exceeding 10 units?

NEWS ITEMs

The next 2025 PER Discussion Meeting will be on a theme suggested by Neville Grant ---the extent to which we can get *youngsters wholeheartedly immersed and involved in thinking about concepts and puzzles*. It will be hopefully staged in May, but we have not yet finalized the date.

The sudden disappearance of the US Department of Education The Donald ---who is said to be sceptical about the work and influence of the US Department of Education--- is reported to have used one of his Executive Orders to actually abolish it! This may sound like an over-reaction, but most "education" in the USA is organised at State level, not by the Federal Government. So discontinuing it may mean little more than Keir Starmer's dramatic decision to abolish NHS England.

An Essay in *The New English Review* The Editor has had an essay (his 20th) published in the Review (March 2025) with the title 'Neglecting Rhyme and Reason'. In it he points out that looking for "Rhyme and Reason" used to be widely practiced and enjoyed ---by scholars obviously--- but also by average, lively, intelligent teachers. Today there are signs that this quest has lost all, or most, of its former lustre. It has, in fact, virtually disappeared, drowned by a misguided quest for memorizing (only mark-guaranteeing) "facts" and "skills"... Nothing can take the oomph out of education more savagely, or more demoralizingly, than this total dearth of understanding. Pupils are stuck in their classrooms. They often sit on hard chairs in a dull environment… being addressed by average adults not unlike their own parents. The only "joys" which can genuinely enlighten this intrinsically lumpen scene are teacher humour and an acquired taste in searching for "rhyme or reason". Lively humour often keeps pupils momentarily onside ---if it is delivered with panache and surprise--- but it's contribution to "educating" them, is unfortunately, small. Genuine education, by contrast, is intrinsically enlightening… but it is difficult to rekindle this enlightenment, in a world which is gradually ---noticeably--- darkening. The essay ends with a reminder that absolutely extraordinary new vistas are now begining to open-up (using anti-maths), and that a path is beginning to emerge which can lead us back towards sanity and properly civilised standards. *PER News 180* April 2025 Editor Chris Ormell, The PER Group, Box 16916, London SE3 7WS. Tel: 020 8858 3364 email: per4group@gmail.com. Websites: PERtinence.co.uk philosophyforrenewingreason.com mathsforrenewingreason.com
Copyright © 2025 The P E R Group

[9]We hope, as a by-product, it will produce skilful individuals: but its prime purpose should be, and should be seen to be, to *educate* them.