

# Oddments

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## Golden Oldies

Doom and gloom all round. In twenty years time there will be twice the number of 85 year olds in the U.K, and even now regularly we are really not giving reasonable care to elderly infirm people. Note – we said "reasonable" not "excellent". Fortunately, age does not always mean infirmity. A recent obituary of a canon that died in his 90s included the charming comment that he had lost his hearing aid while dancing in the moonlight in a hayfield. This wasn't the cause of death – just a little comment that suggested that if he wasn't dancing in the moonlight, he'd be singing while he slid down those tubes that finish up in the swimming pool or something like that! Then – he died - a true re-cycled teenager, or RCT.

## Entertainment

A recent signed letter in *The Times* came from a man of 58 who had attended a massage parlour two years previously and paid for sex. He has been again several times. He said that his marriage was satisfactory in every other way, but his wife (of the same age) didn't want sex. So what should he do? Force himself on her? Dump her and find another partner? Unkind, expensive and difficult – and he didn't want to do it. Or go in for a bit of porn? The recently proposed laws, we think, will make it illegal for anyone to seek paid sex. In the above case, the man and his paid partner were both consenting adults – and she said that she employed an accountant and paid her taxes. His desire may continue for another ten years or more – the problem won't just go away – think of all those RCTs!

Now consider this: a man recently entertained some older women for an hour in the dark. They paid him a fee and some of them liked what he did so much that they paid him extra. Is that all OK? Or is that sailing just a bit too close to the wind? They said they wanted him to come

again – soon. And yes, he employs an accountant. Still OK or have we gone too far? Sure?

Well, the man concerned was John and the ladies were all members of the WI, and the entertainment was a talk with slides of mountain flowers – hence the dark room.

We don't like the idea of young girls funding a drug addiction by theft or prostitution, nor do we approve of the trafficking of girls from abroad into the sex trade. Why? - Because both of them are degrading and often result in the spread of infection.

So we have to be careful – a new law might not work and might cause some problems for innocent activities. Worse still, it may lead to the feeling "we've dealt with that", when in fact the problem has just been pushed off the stage into the wings.

## Schools

A recent report in *The Times* said that almost one fifth of Britain's state secondary schools had failed to reach the Government's minimum target of 30% of pupils achieving grades of A\* to C in the GCSE. The actual figures are 639 out of 3000 schools. The Prime Minister is reported as vowing that schools that did not reach the minimum level in five years time would be closed or taken over. The Schools' Minister enlarged on this, saying that the Government would investigate whether to close the schools, or "federate" them with better performing schools or turn them into academies that are independently run. (Are these academies to be private schools or simply state schools under another name?)

So we have another problem. We're offered some treatment, but we haven't got a diagnosis. Why do the schools perform badly? Let's imagine we close the schools. Presumably the land can be sold to a supermarket or for building. No

problem there. Just like selling off playing fields and nurses homes in London. Where will the children go? Are there really state schools nearby with the spare capacity of teachers and rooms so that classes don't get too big?

Another report from the same Education Editor points out that the number of supersize schools with 1,500-2,000 pupils each has increased over the last ten years as have large schools with 1,000-1,500. Not surprisingly, the number of schools with less than 1000 pupils has fallen, from 2,400 to about 1,600 over the same period. And some 47,540 children attend schools with more than 2,000 pupils. Sheer size does not always mean poor class discipline but the article reports "All the evidence is that some of the toughest problems with discipline are found in the larger schools."

Are schools a bit like surgery? If a surgeon has a high post-operative death rate, this does not necessarily imply poor surgery. It may mean that the surgeon is so skilled that he is willing to attempt operations on patients that are so seriously ill that any long-term survival is a bonus, as without the attempt the patient will certainly die. There are many questions.

Does a school perform badly merely due to poor teaching? Our grand-daughter tells us that her class is grateful when the a few disruptive pupils play truant; then everyone else can get on with the work.

So, injecting a stream of children from a poorly performing school into a "better" one might help the poor performers – might – but it might not, suppose the "better" school offers the same as the "poor" school then the merger might just drag everyone down.

*The Times* quotes "an estimate of 20,000 non-English speakers in the school system." This could mean children who speak no English at all – probably there are many more who only speak English as a second language. Tricky – who can help them best? Where will they cause the least difficulties?

What if the children see no future? – They may have never seen their parents in work – if indeed they see both parents. Do poorly performing schools occur in particular areas of deprivation or social need? If so what? How about binge drinking? How do you measure "good" and "poor"? – And poor reading skills, is it the secondary schools fault or is the problem really in the primaries? And so the questions continue.....

### **Conclusion**

Our point is that schools don't operate on a level playing field and so it is very difficult to decide what to do. Remember Kipling's *Six Honest Serving Men* – their names are What, and Where and When; How and Why and Who.

All six prompt questions that can be applied to any problem – including the ones above, but they are often difficult to answer.

It isn't what the Prime Minister said that is so worrying – sometimes one does have to make a decision without all the information. Many people have to do so regularly. However, when there is a forced decision it is usually wiser to set up a pilot study or trial and see how things actually work out. The results may be not all that was hoped for, may prove to cost more than expected and to have unintended side-effects. If so, there is the time and chance to think again.

### **Finally**

A few weeks ago we were doing a talk to a very appreciative WI audience in Hemel Hempstead. At the finish John asked for a show of hands "How many of you have grand-children?" All did and several had great-grandchildren. "How many of you believe that climate change should be tackled now?" All the hands went up together.

Perhaps we should move Westminster to Hemel Hempstead now and give more power to the RCTs!