

THE VISION THING



by Ralph Berry

When I saw the *Telegraph* headline. MATHS AT THE HEART OF PM's VISION FOR BRITAIN, I flew to my first edition of DOWN WITH SKOOL! (1953).

This is the masterpiece by Geoffrey Willans and Ronald Searle as written by Nigel Molesworth, which subverts to destruction the entire system of education imposed upon the young of the land. On pages 44-48 you will find Molesworth's epitome of MATHS MASTERS, which in itself heralds the failure of Sunak's noble project.

'You just hav to sufer so boo to fractions long div short div decimals' concludes Molesworth. He is right. The British population is convinced that it cannot do maths, an unshakable belief. I should know. After sitting the school certificate—necessary for university entrance—I was sure that I had failed maths. To my agreeable surprise, I learned that I had passed—just. Thereafter I could avoid the world of

algebra, for simple arithmetic had got me by. With a total memory command of the twelve times table, and a capacity to add, subtract, multiply, and divide, I knew enough. 'That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.' Later on the calculator made it even easier to know enough, even to do square roots, not that I ever felt the need to uproot squares. The upper regions of maths can safely be left to those who fancy that sort of thing. Sunak will oblige them by making some kind of maths available till the age of 18.

Against this massive, national belief-system the puny attempts of Rishi Sunak to change the nature of the country are doomed to fail.

For a start, where are the instructors who will guide the faltering steps of the young? If they're any good, they already have a decent job where their arcane skills are rewarded. Schools will therefore have to fall back on that standard resource, the P.E. teacher (like mine). These muscular assistants have their uses in filling up a timetable, but are not well adapted to expounding the mysteries of maths.

For a more serious reason for scepticism, consider 'algorithm'. I first came across the word in Robert Harris's novel THE FEAR INDEX (2011), since when it has passed into the general consciousness.

Harris gives a brilliant exposition of algorithmic trading (pp. 88-100) and its capacity for increasing the revenue of the company.

He is seriously well-informed about its meaning and uses. But when I consulted the dictionary I found only a gap where meaning would be welcome. Chambers gives:

'a rule for solving a mathematical problem in a finite number of steps; a system of instructions or steps designed to provide a method of solving a problem or achieving a result (comput); a step-by-step method of

solving a problem, often in the form of a flow chart'.

Yes, but what of the policy outcome of the algorithm? Was it broadly satisfactory? If not, where did it go wrong? What was the actual basis of the algorithm, and who signed it off? Is a technique suitable for day-to-day trading of any relevance to the complex, shifting issues of society at large? What exactly are those issues?

The debate on algorithms has moved on at pace since Harris's primer.

The use of social data is nudging us towards behaviours that profit commercially the creators or give power to the authorities to shape the direction of society. The work of Dr Hannah Fry at University College London is leading advanced study in the field. She is a mathematician.

The nursery slopes of maths are one thing. The upper reaches, where the air is thin and rarified, are of a different order. It would be good to pay more attention to the people who are programming algorithms, and their stated reasons. We are left with a cabalistic sign, designed to baffle inquiry and to protect the rulers. It is a defensive line that is part of the Government's strategy. So Sunak's plan, Maths For The Masses, is doomed to success of sorts. It will fail but will divert attention, and allow the Government credit for good intentions, leaving MM as yet another vision thing. My own judgment echoes Nigel Molesworth's, together with his phrase which really has passed into widespread media usage among the literate classes, as any fule kno.