

## Letter From England

by *Christie Davies*

### Our Shortsighted Rulers



Laser beam surgery has now made it possible to correct many common eye defects caused by irregularities in the shape of the lens of the eye relative to the size of the eyeball. For those with severely impaired eyesight, this means a welcome escape from a serious handicap. However, for children who are only mildly shortsighted, the operation could cause problems as well as benefits, for myopia is a source of success and social mobility. Some have argued that there is a correlation between myopia and innate intelligence, which are simultaneously caused by two related patterns of genes. It has even been suggested that the manifest success of spectacle-wearing peoples such as the Japanese and the Jews and the relative failure of members of ethnic groups with good eyesight merely reflects this correlation. Whether this hypothesis is true or not may never be determined, for it is far too politically incorrect a theory to receive the research funding necessary to test it.

Rather, it is generally assumed by those who hold power in the health, education, and welfare bureaucracies that the link is an environmental one. For most of human history the myopic were failures and doomed to the early death that was the fate of those who could not see a charging mammoth, an enraged hippo or a horde of scimitar-waving Mamelukes until it was too late. In the modern world, by contrast, success goes to those who concentrate all their attention on objects next to their noses—a computer screen, a microscope, a balance sheet, or a legal loophole. That the world beyond is a blurred penumbra visible only through a lens of glass or plastic is a very real advantage, for it cuts out the distractions of sport, sex, and scenery that lead most of us astray. For the perfect-sighted, the publicity given to the rise of the myopic has confirmed their worst secret fear: that old four-eyes, the squat-faced swot, whom they hated

at school, really has overtaken them.

For the lower classes myopia and the wearing of spectacles assist those who are reasonably intelligent to rise in the world through entrepreneurship or education because they decisively block off such queer routes to mobility as football, crime, the entertainment industry, or marriage to a rich spouse. Men never make passes at girls who wear glasses, nor do pebble-lensed football players masquerading as stars. Since the chances of any particular lower-class individual making it to the top through male agility or female beauty are very small indeed, those who know from an early age that they are shortsighted and unsightly are saved from a dangerous delusion and are motivated to seek more reliable ways of bettering themselves. Shortsightedness breeds farsightedness while those who dreamed of stardom end up where they began, at the bottom of the heap.

The discovery of the link between myopia and success has created deep ideological divisions among socialists comparable to those that led to the collapse of the Labor government in 1951, when Harold Wilson and Nye Bevan resigned over the crucial issue of whether the state should provide free eyeglasses and false teeth as part of the National Health Service. The cabinet decided that there was no such thing as a free lunch, but its left wing disagreed, and the government collapsed and then lost the ensuing general election. In other countries politics is spectacle; in Britain spectacles are politics.

The old guard of the British left still proclaim that everyone has the right to perfect eyesight, if not better, and wants eyeglasses, contact lenses, and laser surgery to be provided free by the state. The revisionists, however, feel that it is wrong to deprive myopic lower-class children of a defect that would enable them to rise in the world. Accordingly they argue that spectacles in the good old-fashioned National Health Service frames (you can have any shape you like provided it is round) should be free to all, but that the laser beam correction of myopia should be left to private medicine, which the poor can't afford. The vanity of the rich will ensure that their children's poor eyesight, like their crooked teeth, will be operated on, regardless of

cost, but an unintended consequence of this will be the loss of an important part of their good start in life. Somewhere below them the bespectacled sons and daughters of menials will be steadily climbing up the ladder while they fall down the snake. For those radical socialists who believe in massive positive discrimination, even this is not enough. Equality demands a radical redistribution of myopia in a way that favors those disadvantaged by social class, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, or stupidity: they have a right to shortsightedness that must be provided by the state for those not so favored by nature. If laser surgery can cure myopia, it can also create it. In this way, they argue, bourgeois concepts of health can be subordinated to the higher goal of social equality, much as has long been true of education, welfare, and religion. In the coming socialist utopia, visible only to those with the correct radical astigmatism, myopia, like abortion or the removal of unsightly tattoos, will be not only a medical right but a social necessity.

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## Letter From Zanesville

by *Jeffrey Michael Kane*

### Stupid but Secure



Last year, the Board of Education for the Zanesville, Ohio, City School District was handed a hammer capable of striking a blow for the forces of good in the battle over the direction of public education. Unfortunately for this community, the board dropped the sledge squarely on its foot, seeking immediate relief by planting the appendage squarely in its collective mouth.

The issue involved an attempt to increase the minimum academic standards that students must meet before partic-

ipating in athletics or other extracurricular activities. To her credit, board member McFerren deemed the current standard—at least a cumulative “D” average before the start of the academic quarter—insufficient to warrant a pupil’s participation. Under the terms of her proposal, this cumulative standard would be raised one letter-grade, to a “C” average, and the student’s performance in each class would be monitored weekly during the quarter of participation. The student’s eligibility for participation in the activities of the subsequent week (team meetings, practices, and games) would be contingent upon the maintenance of a “C” in each class. *Below average* performance in any subject, according to her plan, would require the student to sit it out until these minimum standards were once again met.

Pretty reasonable, I think. The more benighted members of the board, however, thought otherwise. Despite overwhelming public and parental acceptance, the board voted instead to maintain the lowest possible standards allowed by the state. In an attempt to jettison academic principle for the more popular cargo of equity, board member Grosshandler served up this grammatical gem: “[Stricter standards] would not be fair to students who genuinely try and whose main reasons for attending schools was [sic] to play sports.”

This refusal to implement higher standards merely reflects the wholesale shift away from objective, quantifiable measures of student—and, by extension, teacher—performance. In the absence of such measures of their ability and conduct, the educrats can issue rosy public statements that effectively deny the reality of an *incompetence* that has become endemic to public education. Consider the unrelenting outcry from the Ohio Education Association to the state mandate requiring all high-school students to pass a standardized *ninth-grade* proficiency examination (PE) as a condition of graduation. “Unfair,” “insensitive,” “racist,” it wailed. “Regressive,” it whined. Indeed, it is unfair, regressive, and insensitive. It is unfair to employers seeking competent high school graduates to have an applicant pool whose communication and clerical skills are scarcely beyond that of an eighth-grader. It is unfair to colleges and universities, which must design and fund remedial way stations to elevate the mathematical and grammatical competency of these

youngsters to the 12th-grade level. It is regressive because it imposes upon the market increased prices due to added production costs in the form of training and reeducation of workers, which often involve teaching them how to read. Finally, it is insensitive not only to employers, collegians, and consumers but to the student population, which is receiving the short end of the education stick.

Yet to the educrats, it is unfair because it demands accountability. The scandalously high number of students who fail the PE on their first try can easily be blamed on incompetent instruction. The inability of several thousand students to pass it after a second or third sitting can be blamed on poor curriculum content and design. Educators used to shift accountability for their pathetic instruction through grade inflation and the elimination of the “F” and all other marks indicating “failure.” If, in a class of 30 students, 25 received A’s and B’s, the teacher must be pretty good. Put an apple on his desk and dole out part of that union-guaranteed annual pay increase. But the PE cut him off on the way to the bank. If those 25 students achieved marks of “B” or better in his English composition class, then presumably they should breeze through the verbal portion of the PE. But on average, 40 percent of these 25 did not. As a result, the obvious question emerged: How can a student receive an “A” in senior English and subsequently fail the verbal half of a ninth-grade proficiency test?

But he can if the school system lacks money, said the education establishment. Enlisting their conventional justification for any problem plaguing their realm, they enlightened us to the fact that such pathetic test results were the product not of a lack of instruction, but of a lack of resources, most of them financial. What followed was a torrent of emergency funding initiatives and ballot measures designed to raise the cash necessary to bolster up the PE scores. Overnight, signboards reading “Levy or Armageddon . . . You Decide!” sprouted on the lawn of every teacher in the district, followed closely by appeals to “Save the Kids.” Yet they saved the best for last. In what will long be remembered as the most outrageous piece of showmanship in the history of public education, those Ohio school districts boasting the poorest performance on the PE filed suit, with the assistance of the farcical ad

hoc Coalition for Equity and Adequacy in School Funding (CEASF), against the state of Ohio for, among other things, the “necessary [money] to provide students [of these districts] academic realities which [sic] translate more readily with those of students from districts facing less challenges.”

Such solicitations, of course, are nothing new. Over the past four decades, educrats have perfidiously convinced American parents and legislators that any hiccup in public education could be cured with additional funding. From 1950-1989, despite hundreds of studies showing absolutely no correlation between spending and educational achievement, average per-pupil expenditures rose in real terms from \$1,333 to \$4,931. This fourfold increase in real spending, however, has brought no academic improvement, but significant decline. Indeed, from 1963 to 1990, combined SAT scores fell on average 95 points from 980 to 885. Over this same period, statisticians have labored furiously to build subfloor after subfloor to accommodate American students in the academic performance house of industrialized nations. In an international study conducted last year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, only 20 percent of American college teachers surveyed felt that American schools had adequately prepared college enrollees in writing and speaking skills, while a mere 15 percent saw adequate preparation in math and quantitative reasoning, results which placed Americans last among the field of 14 countries. Curiously, across the street in the financial house of industrialized nations, where one’s digs are based on the average per-pupil expenditure for education, the American kids are in the penthouse and swimming on the roof.

Fortunately, such evidence does not appear to have been wasted on the voters, whose patience with the “inadequate funding” argument is wearing thin. Since November 1993, Ohio voters have rejected eight of the ten balloted school tax levies, increases, or renewals—some failing by as much as 40 percentage points. This response is tantamount to a referendum against throwing good money after bad or rewarding nonperformance. Casting further light on this shifting sentiment has been an exponential increase in the incidence of “bright flight”—the transfer of the most intelligent (and often the most mon-