

Sleeping In Class

Isolation Room, Queen Elizabeth's Academy, Tuesday April 12th. The Behaviour Manager looks up at the clock; another hour before he can dismiss his charges. He scans the backs of their heads as they sit slumped in their booths. Five students are here for refusing to follow instructions, three students for wearing incorrect uniform, a further four for failure to attend detentions the previous day, fourteen for using mobile phones in lesson, six for being rude and disrespectful to staff, three for throwing food in the canteen, two for homophobic comments, and one, Archie Wise, for sleeping in class.

Behaviour Manager – Well, well, well, if it isn't Archie Wise back again. What is it about the isolation room you love so much, I wonder: the privacy of the individual booths, the heady aroma of hormonal secretions, the sympathetic staff; no wait, you're looking for a quiet place to get your head down.

Archie Wise – It's not just sleeping; it's a protest. I'm striking. When Greta Thunberg did it, she got a Nobel prize; I get another day in iso. It's just typical of this country's attitude to protest. What can those Tory puppets possibly teach me?

BM – Everything you need to pass the exams. What else is there to know?

AW – Is that what education means to you? Answering a series of arbitrary questions according to a series of rigid, pre-ordained, unimaginative answers?

BM - What it means to me makes no odds. I've got a job. The question is, how are you going to get one, carrying on like this?

AW – Wouldn't want your job, that's for sure. Behaviour Manager – it's just corporate sector jargon for school Stasi. I'd rather starve on the streets than work for the State. Where's your self-respect?

BM – What do you know about respect?

AW – What does anyone really know about anything? Isn't it supposed to be an inherent British Value?

BM – Supposed to be? This country is built on that most basic of principles. You wouldn't be allowed to speak to me like this if it wasn't.

AW – Is this where you tell me about some less enlightened age when my pluck would earn me twenty strikes of the cane?

BM – Ah, those were the days.

AW – And was that respectful?

BM – It was a means of establishing respect, yes.

AW – Really? You believe that it's possible to thrash a reprobate into respecting authority?

BM – They would at least act in a more respectful manner. And that's what is needed for a peaceful, functioning society.

AW – Can it be called a peaceful society if beatings are required to establish peace?

BM – Sometimes the ends justify the means. I'd have been court martialled in the army for less than you get away with on a daily basis. Being AWOL - that's truancy - is a court martial offence. Insubordination - that's arguing with teachers - a court martial offence. Malingering - pretending you feel sick - a court martial offence. Conduct prejudicial to good order - shouting across the room and throwing stuff - a court martial offence. As is ill-treating subordinates - picking on the saddos and losers.

AW – And you escaped being court marshalled by avoiding these behaviours?

BM – Order in the military relies heavily on self-discipline.

AW – What is self-discipline?

BM – Self-control.

AW - Are they the same?

BM – Of course.

AW – Let's apply this, using scenarios: number one, you are wearing your best white jeans and you soil yourself in public; number two, you grab me by the throat and attempt to physically shake sense into me. Are these similar in nature, in severity?

BM – No. They cannot be compared in either sense.

AW – What would be the consequences of the two infringements?

BM – Firstly, allow me to change out of those white jeans. I didn't attend the George Michael school of fashion. Let's say I'm in my holiday chinos when the unthinkable happens. It would cause a great deal of personal embarrassment (mine) and provide countless hours of amusement (for others). The second would cause physical injury (yours) and loss of freedom (mine). In the long term, I would doubtless be prohibited from working with young people ever again.

AW – And when you wait for a suitable moment to empty your bowels, would you say this was an example of controlling yourself or disciplining yourself?

BM – It is merely self-control.

AW – Merely. So lesser in some way than discipline?

BM – I suppose. The point I was trying to make is that if schools were run more like the army, then there would be a lot less mutiny and a lot more learning. Look at China: up to ten hours schooling a day. Plus, there's Saturday school, private tutoring, and cram school on top of that. It's yes Sir, no Sir, three bags full Sir. They wouldn't dream of questioning an instruction; teachers are regarded as fountains of knowledge who constantly replenish the empty vessels of their students.

AW – Are you familiar with Socrates?

BM – He was Greek; you mean Confucius.

AW – Never mind. Never thought I'd hear a veteran of the British armed forces holding China in higher esteem than his own country. Do you approve of their re-education camps and the reunification of Hong Kong as well?

BM – Of course not.

AW – So, you accept that discipline can go too far.

BM – Yes.

AW – What point is too far?

BM – When discipline comes at the cost of the basic respect of another's values or identity. You can't force someone to unlearn their own history.

AW – The slave trade had a damn good go.

BM – Exactly.

AW – Is miseducation as bad as no education?

MB – I would say it might even be worse.

AW – Elaborate. How might it be worse?

BM – Well, if a person had never been taught anything, their manners would be lacking, as might their personal hygiene. They would be unable to hold a conversation or hold down anything but the most menial of jobs. They would be of little worth to society. On the whole though, they may still remain relatively harmless (assuming that not committing the most heinous crimes, such as murder, does not require any formal education). They are an ignorant oaf. Miseducation might result in a far more dangerous outcome. This person could be schooled to despise a particular race or religion. Might be indoctrinated to regard their own neighbour as somehow a threat to their very existence. Might learn that loyalty to a cause is more important than life itself. In short, stop seeing themselves and others as human beings at all, placing The Cause above all else.

AW – And who decides if the schooling is education or miseducation?

BM – Well, it cannot be the teacher; they would have to believe wholeheartedly in their lessons in order to deliver them in any convincing way. What is a teacher, really, but a sort of politician, persuading others that what they say is right? But it cannot be the student either; they are ignorant of the knowledge the teacher is assigned to impart. It must be the government.

AW – But what if the government is corrupt? What if the government was miseducated? I refer you back to China: the camps, Hong Kong. The Chinese population are being taught to accept these violations. They may be literate, but are they educated? Wouldn't it be better to have a lower literacy rate and not have discipline at the cost of the basic respect of others' values and identities?

BM – The issue lies with the nature of government: only a democratically elected government can be trusted with the education of its people.

AW – And who democratically elects the government?

BM – The people, of course.

AW – Are the people educated in the election of the government?

BM – Comprehensive schooling should include lessons in politics, yes.

AW – And who educates the teachers in the delivery of such lessons?

BM – That would be the government.

AW – Might said government act in their own interests when giving guidance on this matter?

BM – I'm sure that the guidance is for teachers to remain impartial; not to prioritise their own political allegiances. In the same way that religious teaching should not promote one belief system over another.

AW – Are you familiar with Nadhim Zahawi's Guidance on Political Impartiality in Schools?

BM – No. Enlighten me.

AW – It states that teachers must avoid using resources that take an extreme position vis a vis the Fundamental British Values (that is to say, democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance). How long have these been considered "Fundamental British Values"?

BW – As long as I can remember. I started here in 2014, thanks to the Commando Joe Project. They recognised the skills that veterans can bring to the classroom and wanted to use those skills to instil character and resilience in pupils.

AW – 2014, the very same year the Coalition government introduced the four values. Round about the same time that Lord Nash, or Baron Nash, or whatever he titles himself these days, helped set up the Academy Ambassadors Programme. A programme that connects schools with the corporate sector. The idea being, that schools should be run more like businesses. Do you know what Nash did before he was made Secretary of State for Education?

BM – No. But I have a feeling I'm about to find out.

AW – He was a venture capitalist. Just have a moment to take that in: a venture capitalist. He had his own firm, Sovereign Capital, and he was the former Chair of the British Venture Capital Association. Would you say that a basic requirement for being a venture capitalist would be believing in the basic principles of capitalism? As in, the right to private property, the primary motive to make a profit, and a free and competitive market?

BM – I would say the clue was in the name.

AW – Right. So, the core principles that underpin British education, were invented by the reigning government. The same government that sets guidelines for curriculum content. The guidelines state that curriculum content should reflect the values. Is this democratic?

BM – Yes. The government was democratically elected. There have been two general elections since 2014. Both won by the Conservatives.

AW – And of course, future voters have been educated in readiness for the next one.

BM – Indeed they have.

AW – Can students question the validity of the values?

BM – They have individual liberty, which should allow for respectful scrutiny. But, the word fundamental, implies they cannot be argued with. Tricky one.

AW – Let me help you out: Zahawi's guidelines state that educators must ensure that the four values are not undermined; this would surely include any criticism from students. Furthermore, schools must not use materials that take extreme positions on the four values, specifically including the "desire to violently overthrow capitalism".

BM – Well of course, violence can never be condoned.

AW – Never? Not even when the ends justify the means? As an ex-serviceman you must be familiar with the idea of war as a necessary evil.

BM – Idea? It's fact. The defeat of the Nazi regime is all the proof you could ask for.

AW – Might force-feeding be considered an act of violence?

BM – Undoubtably anything requiring force could be deemed violent.

AW – When the suffragettes were force-fed as punishment for hunger strikes, did they not have justification to repay violence with violence? They won the right to vote, otherwise known as democracy – number one in the British Values – only after resorting to bombing, arson and chemical warfare. Should they have remained peaceful and accepted their lot? As a man who has served in armed combat, did you not celebrate the violent deaths of Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi and Bin Laden, along with the press of the Free World? Be honest now, if you were Black in 1960's America, would you have staged a sit-in, or used any means necessary?

BM – As I already said, sometimes the ends do justify the means. But there's a big difference between oppressed sectors of society fighting disgusting prejudice, and some kid with a chip on his... or her... or their shoulder taking objection to the basic rules.

AW – So it's OK to protest some rules, but not others?

BM – The vast majority of people agree with the British Values.

AW – There was a time when the vast majority of people believed in white supremacy. Otherwise, there would have been no need for the Race Relations Act of 1965. There was a time when the vast majority believed that same sex relationships were abhorrent. Otherwise, there would have been no need for the Sexual Offences Act of 1967. Until 1992, a wife's matrimonial consent meant she could not contest her husband's sexual advances; the vast majority believed rape did not exist within marriage. Let's go back to China – who is right, the majority who support Xi Jinping, or the minority being brainwashed in the education camps?

BM – But China isn't a democracy. You're not comparing like for like.

AW – You make a fair point. In a true democracy, like the UK, we should have no need for protest, because we all share those same values. And those who don't, well it must be due to some fundamental flaw within their character. No wonder the government place such importance on the notion of character. And who better to shape it than fine upstanding members of society, like you, who, having risked their lives for Queen and Country, must surely have the interests of Gen Z Brits at heart. But does all this really ring true with the values themselves? Doesn't the very idea of not challenging the values fly in the face of democracy and individual liberty? And respect and tolerance, for that matter? Why single out anti-capitalist ideology? Is capitalism really so compatible with the values?

BM – Of course. The idea of free markets – what is another word for free? Liberty!
The idea of private property – again, individual liberty.

AW – And what about profiteering?

BM – Again, we all have the right to put our own interests first. That's the beauty of it.
We can all achieve; we can all climb to the top.

AW – And competition means inequality, of course.

BM – Yes. We can't all be billionaires.

AW – So we can't all climb to the top.

BM – The top is different depending where you start, of course.

AW – I see. So, Nash, back to him, he gets to run Academies, while I just have to follow their rules. Nash comes up with "related party transactions" that allow academies to funnel government funding into the coffers of their private sector friends and family, while teachers are traumatised by the notion of performance related pay. But, that's OK because those teachers can exercise their individual liberty by leaving the profession. Just like the Academy CEO's get the liberty to choose who they dish out contracts to. All's fair in love, war, and education. Remind me, what makes us a democracy and China not?

BM – When we have elections, there are multiple parties on the voting slip. In China it's a one-party system: it's Communism or bust.

AW – Who are the parties I can choose from, when I'm old enough to vote?

BM – Well, there's the Big Three, of course: Tories, Labour, and Lib Dems. Then there's all the little ones who have no hope of ever getting into power, but for some reason, keep fighting against the odds. Like the Greens.

AW – But I can vote Green if I want, right? That's democracy.

BM – Exactly. If you want to throw your vote away, go right ahead. Might as well spoil your ballot paper, but...

AW – It's important for me to vote though, right?

BM – Right! People fought for it. Millions have died for it.

AW – Doesn't quite work like that though, does it? Because there is no Green candidate round here.

BM – Well, that's just tough. If someone felt strongly enough, there would be a candidate. Must just not be an appetite for Eco-politics in this neck of the woods.

AW – Say there was, but no one had the experience or the confidence to put themselves forward. Say they'd been led to believe that little parties have no chance

of ever getting into power, so, not wishing to waste the vote that millions died for, they opt for one of the Big Three.

BM – Well, that's generally what happens. In most places.

AW – What if there were a thousand people? Around here, who, given the chance, would vote Green. Still sound democratic?

BM – I don't think it's that many.

AW – If all those people vote for a different party, or spoil their vote, or don't vote at all – how can we maintain that every vote counts. Some don't, do they?

BM – What can I say, everyone can't be on the winning side.

AW – But what if the system is rigged? By the winners.

BM – Now you sound like Donald Trump.

AW – I don't mean rigged like that. I'm talking about all votes not having equal value when it comes to seats in the House of Commons. In 2015, the Greens got 3.8% of the total vote. There are 650 seats up for grabs, right? 3.8% of 650 is twenty-five. But they didn't get twenty-five seats, they just got one. No wonder people don't vote for them. A party can have 35% of the vote in a particular constituency – not a bad result, right? That's significant numbers. But say the main opposition got 40%, they lose outright. All those votes mean nothing. That's why you get tactical voting. Which skews the whole process.

BM – Look, I'm not saying it's perfect, but at least it beats North Korea, where power gets passed down through the family. Gone are the days when the Monarchy interfered in politics. At least our politicians are qualified to do the job, not just inheriting the right to lord it over the rest of us.

AW – Well, since you mention lords, what about the House of Lords? How does that fit in with your idea of democracy?

BM – If anything, they make it more democratic. They check up on the other house – make sure they don't pass anything too extreme.

AW – But what gives them the right? Have they been elected, are they qualified to do the job?

BM – I think most of them are ex-lawyers or judges; that would make them pretty qualified, I'd say. Or are they appointed by the monarch? Obviously, they have to have a title, so it's not like just anyone can blag their way in.

AW – Ever heard of Baron Lebedev?

BM – Sounds like a Bond villain.

AW – Oh, he's real. The bone fide son of billionaire Russian oligarch and former KBG agent, Alexander Lebedev. Sound like the sort of guy you'd trust with scrutinising British law?

BM – With KGB connections? Not likely.

AW – He was elected into the House Of Lords in 2020.

BM – By who?

AW – Boris Johnson. Against the advice of the House Appointments Commission, senior Tory MPs, and of course, the Labour Party. Any idea why Johnson might have been so keen to put Lebedev in the second chamber?

BM – Is it anything to do with Roman Abramovich? Or no, wait, he's mates with Dominic Cummings!

AW – More like mates with Boris, I'd say. He donated £450,000 to the Tory party during the 2019 election campaign. Another reason might be that he owns the Evening Standard and the 'Independent' newspaper.

BM – So one way to do it is buy your way in.

AW – The other way isn't much better, I'm afraid.

BM – Go on.

AW – Lebedev – he's a Life Peer. Life Peerages are awarded by the government. Boris Johnson made over 100 new peers in his time in office, and he put Harry Mount, fellow Bullingdon Club member and author of, *The Wit & Wisdom of Boris Johnson*, in charge of overseeing his selections. Which is like putting a seasoned smack-head in charge of the Vice Unit's evidence room. The other kind, the Hereditary Peers, well, that speaks for itself, doesn't it? They're born into privilege, they inherit the 'right' to their seat. In 1999, Tony Blair tried to remove all hereditary peers with the House of Lords Act. He only managed a watered-down version of the legislation, and I'm sure you can figure out why.

BM – Well it would be like turkeys voting for Christmas, wouldn't it. Talk about cronyism.

AW – Is this what you meant by a 'democratically elected government' entrusted with my education? Personally, I'd rather sleep through any lessons this system has to teach me.

BM – Well, it's almost three; you can go home and sleep in comfort.

AW – Sleep? At home? That's where I get my education!

