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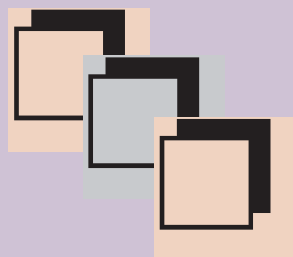
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Comment

It is tempting to open this with: 'Relax guys, Andy's on the case,' but I am not sure that Andy has really got a grip of the problem. A year ago I wrote about the replacement window industry's long decline from the heady days of the eighties, when we first heard the phrase 'double glazing', to now when we have an over subscribed, overcrowded industry with the technology to make high performance windows efficiently and in great numbers.

The problem is that there are not so many people wanting them. Customers are more canny, more selective and more inclined to do the research. Not only to ask the awkward questions but also to know the answers. Every day I receive a myriad of press releases and offers of articles with the theme 'we're doing great – in spite of the market being rubbish'. I am paraphrasing but you get the gist. The one thing we do seem to have brought with us from the eighties is the optimism.

Anyway, Andy is on the case. He is going to build – I'm not sure exactly how many, but lots anyway – of houses. Which means lots of windows and doors. Andy, of course is mayor of the UK. Super Mayor, if you will. And he is going to stop local council planners from denying builders permission to build. He will do this by giving all of the other mayors the power to overrule local authority planning departments. Not sure what happens if an area doesn't have a mayor but I feel sure that bridge will be crossed at some point. Another local election anyone?

Then there is the question of who is actually going to build the houses. The other thing I get from all of my press releases is the shortage of skilled people. Now apprenticeships sound fine in theory. Having started my career as an apprentice they are something I always veer towards but (courtesy of a conversation I heard on Times Radio) they are apparently hard to come by with many more applicants than jobs. They are also expensive, especially for employers and, as always, you train someone and they may dash off to work for your competitor. In the UK we have the added problem of our education being geared towards academic achievement not learning practical skills. Super Mayor has a plan here too. He wants to change our education system to promote practical subjects not just get everyone off to university. There has already been a kick-back from the education establishment: '...young people allowed to follow dreams...still earn more in the long run...ignore the debt, they won't re-pay that until they are earning enough...'.

I have no doubt that our education system has become too narrow. In the seventies it became focused on degree education. Nothing else mattered. Harold Wilson started the Open University and talked about "Everyone's right to have a degree." Let us hope things turn around and we are back in a place where education covers all skills – practical as well as academic.

PS: Before you say anything, I can see AI creating the plans and programming, even running the machines. Actually writing this column (which it didn't by the way,) but I don't see it actually laying bricks or installing windows...although the Chinese are making great strides with robots, I hear.

John Roper

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