

Love of learning

Students lead the way

Jeremy Corbyn MP

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Helmeted riot police, shields and batons drawn, welcomed the education protesters in Whitehall in December and ushered them into an immediate kettle. The same picture was mirrored in Parliament Square and Embankment where the National Union of Students (NUS) and University and College Union (UCU) had hoped to rally to express their disdain.

Six hours later, the students and their unaffiliated supporters emerged shocked, distressed, exhausted and entirely unempowered in the decision-making process which will determine their future and those of their children – if they can afford to have them.

From the comfort of the House of Commons, Business Secretary Vince Cable – having turned from economic saint to monetarist ogre in seven months – calmly told the house that state support for higher education teaching would reduce from 60 per cent to 40, and that the rest would be ‘made up by the private sector’. This actually amounts to wholesale privatisation and an increasing loss of academic independence. And in the case of arts and humanities, the cut is 100 per cent – effectively closing those courses to ordinary people.

The last decade has seen increased access to higher education and a much more socially and ethnically diverse student population. Tens of thousands of those among the current student population are the first of their family ever to get to university. Tragically they could be the last. Access to universities is not just determined by the level of fees but also by enabling 16-year-olds to stay on at school or college.

This has been made possible mainly because of the education maintenance allowance (EMA), which has given students some limited support on the road to university. The Coalition Government now plans to take this away too, removing the opportunity for the next generation to have a chance of even getting to the foothills of a university course.

A 2008 National Union of Students' survey of 1,205 EMA recipients – conducted four years after its introduction – showed that 61 per cent felt they would have been unable to continue without it. This was when the banking crisis was encouraging 'thinking the unthinkable'. To its credit the Labour government maintained the payment. In the run-up to the 2010 election, nobody said they would abolish it – indeed the Tories specifically said they would keep it.

The Coalition Government's massively unpopular decisions will force the next generation of students to either walk into crippling debt or to not pursue higher education at all.

The last time this issue was voted on, in 2004, the Tories and Lib Dems voted against raising fees to £3,000. On that occasion – and on the first introduction of fees in 1998 – Labour left MPs voted against it. In December 2010, all Labour MPs voted against. The only consistency in all this has been among those who believe in fee-free higher education.

There is a pattern to the Con-Dem plans for education, which will take Britain back to the 1950s. They constantly assert that 'we are all in this together', and at the same time make the largest cuts on the most socially useful areas of spending such as support for higher education, keeping students in school, or helping them into work through the Future Jobs Fund. On top of this, the huge cuts in local government spending will cost jobs, deepen the recession and throw the floodgates open for reckless privatisation.

We need look only to Greece and Ireland for confirmation of where this leads. And, as in Greece, the actions of tens of thousands of students have changed the face of British politics.

The optimism and determination of the current generation to make sure the next has the same opportunities is an inspiration. In the first student demonstration the police and Parliament's authorities were surprised by the numbers. In the second there was the introduction of kettling and, in December, 3,000 police were deployed to 'control' the outcry. In Parliament, coalition MPs indulged in an orgy of self-righteous indignation about the problems of disorder that followed. Only a few MPs touched on the highly questionable tactics of imprisoning students and children on the streets without charge for many hours. Home Secretary

Theresa May claimed that anyone was able to leave the cordon if they wished, while outside the reality-distortion bubble of Parliament many were forced to spend a freezing afternoon on the streets, unable to get anywhere near to lobbying their MPs.

Labour's Dennis Skinner pointed out forcefully to May that, after only a short time in power, the government had already deployed vast numbers of police to try to suppress protest, creating scenes starkly reminiscent of the poll tax demonstrations 20 years ago, or the miners' marches five years before that.

The Lib Dems, having campaigned so assiduously for the votes of students and their parents by promising the abolition of fees altogether, have suffered the biggest backlash. However, we should not forget that it is a Tory-led government. The mean-spirited, divisive and uncaring attitudes of Thatcherite Britain are coming back. While the education vote resulted in a coalition majority, it was a hollow victory. The education protests are far from over.

The coming battle over educational maintenance allowance will bring more unrest, the weight of which will be bolstered by others equally determined to defend public services such as post offices or hospitals. Cuts are unnecessary and the attack on services and public employment is nothing less than vindictive and brutal. It is now up to the Labour Party to learn the lessons of the election defeat and develop policies that maintain full employment and the welfare state. This means that the yawning gap between the richest and the rest has to be addressed and wealth must be redistributed. The whole labour movement is obliged now to reconnect with its history and remember the need to speak out for basic principles.

Our young protesters are leading the way.