

How the world works

Ron Rose

At the time of the Warwick Files Affair, Ron Rose was a third year undergraduate reading English and American Literature. He is a professional scriptwriter with many television, stage and radio credits. He was the whistleblower in the Donnygate local government scandal in Doncaster which resulted in more than 80 arrests, with consequent prison sentences, fines and bans.

I was the first member of my family to go to University. I chose Warwick because it was the only university English Literature course in the country that did not have O-level Latin as a condition of entry.

My A-level results were crap. But I had been interviewed by George Hunter, the Glaswegian professor, and he must have liked me because he wrote and said they were oversubscribed but if I still wanted a place the next year, get in touch. I did, and there was.

I was northern working class. My dad drove a meat delivery van for the Co-op. He voted Conservative. It was so cold at home I once set my pyjamas on fire trying to read by candlelight. My grant was twelve quid a week. Paid to sit in a warm library reading books. My dad got eleven for a 48-hour week. I'd gone to the TUC while competing in the National Swimming Championships at Blackpool, and heard Clive Jenkins and others talk about low pay, and made the connection that had eluded the rest of my family.

There were posh kids at Warwick with weird accents. One lad was so strangulated that I followed him around for days waiting for the pretence to slip. It didn't. He really was like that.

Hunter's ferocious introductory lecture informed us that, whatever illusions we might be entertaining, we were there to work. My personal tutor was Germaine Greer. My mum had not prepared me for that. My consciousness desperately needed raising and embarked on a steep and rapid learning curve.

Politics was conducted by people who talked about the working classes with an 'r' in it; a 'class' we Northerners did not recognise. And for the first and probably the last time there were quite a lot of us at Warwick.

Comparatively unsophisticated, we nevertheless arrived on the back of sixties cultural influences: of television satire; of American music protest – Dylan and all the rest; of emerging investigating journalists and *Private Eye*. Viscerally, if we were leaned on, our generation leaned back.

The strength of the Warwick Files protest was that it involved the overwhelming majority of the students. The most surprising people turned up every night to meetings. At the next graduation, only a handful of English graduates collected their degree after a departmental vote in favour of a boycott.

What we experienced during the Files Affair was an education about how the world works. Subsequently, a significant proportion of us became writers, journalists, teachers. The awkward squad. The grit in the machine. We didn't halt Capitalism, but we did irritate it. We reminded them that we were here. Many of us still do.

I couldn't have contemplated the level of debt you need to take on to get a degree now. And the boy I was then would have found the current social mix at Warwick very uncomfortable.

You win small battles. Some not so small. There were no women on the Committee of Seven: wouldn't happen now. Universities are ranked in order of academic excellence. The struggle continues.

E P Thompson wrote in a letter some years later: 'It's good that so many of that Warwick period remain politically active and sane.'

Active, anyway.