

‘Higher Education Cuts, Students Protests and Media Misrepresentation’

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At the end of 2010, tens of thousands of university students have demonstrated in central London and all over university campuses in the UK, against the coalition government’s proposals to raise tuition fees up to 9,000 pounds. Government and Media coverage of the protests has focussed primarily on two factors – the violence of a minority of protestors and the apparent ‘privileged’ profile of a few student protestors. ‘Rich rioting students’ was just one of the headlines describing the demonstrations. A panellist on BBC’s Question Time described protestors as ‘just a bunch of middle class students’. Michael Gove, the Education Minister, defending the planned increase in tuition fees posed the question: ‘Is it fair to ask a miner to subsidise the education of someone who can go and become a millionaire?’ The irony of this analogy can surely not be lost on those who remember how brutally Gove’s Conservative Party, in its previous incarnation, destroyed the heart of British working class mining communities.

One of the most passionate, but misguided, commentaries on the recent student protests comes from Julie Burchill (the Independent, 16 December), who made a plea to the public to ‘spare us these pampered protestors who riot in defence of their privilege’. Focusing on one student, Charlie Gilmour, who has been singled out by almost all the British media because of his connection to a famous rock star, Burchill vents her anger at so called ‘middle class’ protestors at the same time as dismissing

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university education as a wasteful time of 'boozing and bullshitting funded by the taxes of people who had the actual gumption to remove themselves from the playpen of education and get a job as soon as legally possible'. She goes on to suggest that for many working class youth, university education has made little difference to their prospects of getting a job.

Burchill is right to question the success of government-sponsored schemes such as widening participation which critics argue has done little to equalise educational outcomes. All the research suggests that while working class students are more likely to attend university than they did 10 years ago the class gap has not necessarily diminished. Working class students are more likely to attend newer universities, to be part-time students and to study for more vocational subjects. But to dismiss university education for the masses as completely irrelevant is surely wrong. Burchill is also wrong to dismiss the current protests as entirely middle class-led. The fact that some students from middle and upper class families join the student protest does not make the whole student protest an action of the privileged few in defence of their privileges. University students, whatever social class their parents are from, historically tend to act together as 'students', and for most part for progressive causes as in the case of the 1968 student protests. At first in 1968 too, the governments and media also sought to portray the student protests as work of radical students and small groups of middle class troublemakers.

The protests over the last few weeks have seen large numbers of working class students (some of them school students) protesting because it is they who have the most to lose from the proposed public spending cuts. Further, to get so hung up on the notion of a so-called middle class-led protest serves to support Gove's and the coalition government's attempts to create an ideological standpoint, presumably on the side of the ordinary working people, from which position to launch a wholesale attack on all the social and economic achievements of the previous generations, like the universal child benefit, housing benefit, disability benefits and similar other measures.

The current representation of the protestors as middle class serves a deeply ideological and manipulative function of deflecting attention away from the stark realities of the public cuts and their real causes. Many people who oppose the cuts simultaneously accept the argument that there is no alternative but to sacrifice education and other public services in order to save the economy. Further, a large section of the British public and media appear to have accepted the line presented by the government that the total package of cuts worth £128 billion by 2015-16 was 'unavoidable' because of previous administration's careless spending, and almost self-made huge deficits. Until the financial crash of 2008, however, the Labour governments had succeeded in keeping national debt below the 40 percent of GDP target that they set themselves. In 2006/07, public sector net debt was 36.0 percent

of the GDP. In 2008, it rose rapidly primarily because of 'financial interventions' to bailout of Northern Rock, RBS and other banks, because of lower tax receipts, and because of higher spending on unemployment benefits, all caused by the global recession. The current deficit was caused primarily by the recession not by previous administration's pre-crash careless spending. It currently stands as 63.7 percent of National GDP, and was projected to peak at 74.9 percent in 2014-15.

Massive cuts to the NHS, local government, and education budgets are not the inevitable solution to national debt. During the Second World War, the UK national debt reached much higher figures of up to 150 percent of the GDP. It is not uncommon for countries to borrow more during the time of serious national and international crises, like wars, or economic upheavals like the one currently affecting the world, and to pay back the debt over a period of time once the economy starts to grow again. In this sense, budget deficits can be an effective way to deal with shocks such as wars, financial crashes and deep recessions. If anything, the problem of low economic activity is the real, and more urgent, issue than the fiscal stability.

David Cameron's 'Big Society' programme offers an ideological justification for the massive public spending cuts which are about much more than just deficit reduction. The pretence of 'there is no alternative' offers a means for the Conservative project to radically transform the state and to transfer more services and money from the public to the private sector. If the real intention was to take the British economy out of the crisis, then such massive cuts would not be the answer. There are alternatives: we need to find a fair and sustainable path out of crisis. Budget deficits will more or less automatically heal with the economic recovery. Trying to cut the deficit quickly, in the midst of a serious recession, will damage the economy and extend the crisis. The government instead should concentrate on growth and allow growth to reduce the deficit. Cuts will not reduce the deficit, investment will.

Recently, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) announced that it expects economic growth in 2011 to be much slower than previously predicted. A much weaker consumer spending, resulting from massive unemployment and lower wages in 2011, is described as the main reason for this. Cutting too far and too fast will mean more people out of work, fewer jobs in the economy, lower level of taxation from workers and businesses, and more people on unemployment benefit, which will cost the government more. The real challenge is to introduce constructive ways to restructure the national economy so that it can deliver strong and consistent growth. The current crisis and the way some other parts of the world economy have been dealing with it successfully, and all social and cultural legacies of this turbulent process have highlighted, like never before, the crucial role of education. The financial and economic crisis has had a particularly strong impact on young people with low levels of education. Investments in education pay large and rising dividends for individuals, but also for economies. On average, a young person with a university degree will generate £77,000 more in income taxes and social contributions over

his/her working life than someone with a high-school degree only. Even after taking the cost of university education into account, the net public return from an investment in tertiary education is £56 000 for a male, in generated income taxes and social contributions over his working life. Enhancing tertiary education attainment can therefore help governments increase their fiscal revenues, making it easier to boost their social spending, in areas like, for example education. As the global demand for jobs shifts up the skills ladder, it has become crucial for countries to develop policies that encourage the acquisition and efficient use of these skills to retain both high value jobs and highly skilled labour. Burchill is right to suggest that 'clever working class youth of this country [have] been socially and spiritually 'kettled' – hemmed in, suffocated and stifled' historically by 'the privilege and entitlement' of the likes of elite. But does the answer really lie in cutting away higher education for working class students altogether?

Britain's total investment in higher education, even before the current cuts of the Coalition government, was 1.3 percent of the GDP which is behind the OECD average of 1.5 percent. Despite the student numbers rising by approximately 25 percent in the last 15 years, the UK has slipped from third to fifteenth position in numbers graduating among industrial countries because investment in higher education has risen much rapidly elsewhere. Within Europe, the UK is already falling behind France, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Portugal and Netherlands, among others. Other Western governments, most notably the United States and Germany, have viewed the global financial and economic crisis as a sign not to retrench but to invest in their higher education systems as a necessary part of investing in the skills that will be needed for recovery in near future. In the UK, however, it was education that was first in line for cuts in spending: the cutting of the Future Jobs Fund, the cancellation of school building and refurbishment, the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance, and now funding cuts in university teaching budgets, fewer university places and a massive increase in university tuition fees. All these draconian measures will ensure that talented people from working class backgrounds will not achieve their full potential. The poorer you are the more scared you are by the prospect of tens of thousands of pounds of debt. It seems this is exactly what the Coalition government wants- to keep education for the rich and privileged. And this is what tens of thousands of students are protesting against. If we want British economy to recover and take its place in a much more competitive world, if we want Britain to be 'open for business', we should make higher education available for everyone, regardless of their social class. The more skilled people we have, the more likely companies will be willing to invest in the UK.