

'EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION'

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Ex-Foliations Over the years the idea of the inevitability of tuition fees has been creeping in rather quietly in this country. Fees were never popular with students but the widening participation agenda embarked on in the 1990s seemed perhaps to justify the need for participants to contribute to the costs of the expanding system. Yet the current plan to move to a high fees system, coupled with the withdrawal of funding for arts and humanities, has pushed the issue over the edge. Let's reconsider the significance of education in society, and the position that young people find themselves in growing up today.

Despite the rhetorical exhaustion of the notion that 'education, education, education' matters, the fact is, it does. Not just to the well being of future graduates, but to all of us, including those on the front and the back benches of the coalition government. We all need and depend on lawyers, doctors, nurses, midwives, scientists, well educated managers, bankers, civil servants, artists, journalists, soldiers, social workers and many more. In fact, education matters so much because we have, as a complex, largely post-industrial society made it over the last 250 years virtually impossible for a human individual to thrive without it. Education is not a choice or a luxury. It is an obligation; a mutual obligation between society and the individual.

Through a chance of birth we are thrown into a system that none of us has created. In it, our survival skills are no longer (sadly) about our environmental awareness in terms of food and shelter production, and more about co-operation only with our immediate community and natural environment. Our survival now depends on very slowly accomplished skills of living in a literate, urban society, with complex rules and a highly developed division of labour. Childhood as a state of dependency lasts so much longer today, not because we infantilise our children but because our social and

economic system demands that adulthood now involves having educational emotional and social skills which were not needed before. Young people need to navigate not just a choice of career which they are told they might need to re-think more than once when conditions change. We all need to cope with other complexities of contemporary living; fast changing communities, new professions, new information, institutional changes, withdrawal of much of the welfare state infrastructure (so familiar to the post-war generations). All this, after a period of unhindered consumerism still enticing our desires daily from larger, clearer and more sophisticated TV screens which many have bought with credit cards... Our society has created a very confusing picture for young people today. And yet, for this very system not to collapse, we absolutely need to carry on educating people to a very high standard.

When the 1870 Forster Education Act came in, the British state, as one of the last in Europe to take on the responsibility for mass education, and gradually, for the welfare of children, changed irrevocably. State education and investment in children's lives became necessary from then on. It was necessary for the modern society and state in the making, for democracy to survive, and for individuals to be able to participate fully in the lives of their communities. The sad legacy from that period is that, as the 1870 Education Act was about securing elementary education for the working classes, William Forster reassured the Parliament that new state provision was going to 'to fill up its gaps at least cost of public money'. This was in line with the earlier postulate from Robert Lowe, who following the report from the Newcastle Commission of 1858 investigating the cost of education, announced a system of payment to schools by results in order to limit the amount of public money spent on education. His promise in 1862 about education was: 'If it is not cheap, it shall be efficient, if it is not efficient, it shall be cheap'. Thus in the history of state education we have, from the beginning, preoccupation with value-for-money, and a suspicion that money spent on education needs to be watched.

In today's financially dominated discourse we are constantly made to forget that we have no choice but to be educated. Politicians talking about 'costs to the taxpayer', or 'benefits to the graduate', obscure another dimension: our law (quite rightly) demands that we educate everyone to a minimum standard. So in the 21st century Western society the issue of funding education cannot be a matter of private investment in a private future. When politicians steer us into envy politics, saying that graduates earn more therefore we should

tax them more (in whatever form, in order for them to pay for their privilege), let's not forget that spending additional years in demanding education or training courses is hard work; and that, for some, it is more than they can manage. So higher education is gained with much personal effort and dedication before it becomes socially as well as personally profitable.

Human learning demands are always linked to the kind of social system we live in. Privatising educational decisions is nonsensical from the point of view of our collective interests. To talk about benefits of higher education because of better earnings in the future is to misunderstand why we educate ourselves and others, in the first place. We have no choice. We live in a highly sophisticated material culture, with complex social and economic structures underpinning it, and we need members of our society to be able to carry on the job of maintaining what has been created over the centuries, and to be able to resolve new problems in the future. State education systems need to be seen in terms of collective benefits. Talking about the gain from higher education in terms of higher earnings of individuals is to mislead us into thinking that education is a private affair, with only private gains. This can only be done at our peril. Can we imagine social and human (rather than purely financial) costs to a community which failed to 'produce' doctors, teachers, artists, etc?

It is really shocking that 66 years after secondary education became free in this country through the 1944 Education Act, when it was accepted that education to a primary level was no longer adequate for the post-war society, UK governments are now turning higher education into a privilege. Given the shifts in technology, globalisation and a widespread recognition of the importance of knowledge in society, instead of removing tuition fees, and helping with maintenance costs the government continue to make higher education more and more expensive to students.

Conservatives with the Liberals seem to have got their power to re-structure our social finances, let's not let them determine how to think. Out of the ashes of the Second World War, with a much greater public finance problems, came the political will to implement the Beveridge Plan to create a more civilised and so more viable social order. It is not a revolutionary, but an ordinary, European in character idea, that higher education should be, like the NHS, free at the point of delivery. What we deem important is not determined by the state of finances. If that were the case, it would be unthinkable to ask a student from a modest background to stay on

at school beyond sixteen dependant on their family for a few more years. It would be unthinkable to create the Welfare State in 1944; it might even be unthinkable to provide state pensions to unproductive members of our society. What is important to us depends on our priorities, our moral judgement and on our long-term vision. An investment in the country's ability is worth making particularly at a time of crisis.

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