

Side track three

HIGHER EDUCATION – IS IT A HUMAN RIGHT?

The protests last week against the imposition of high fees on university students raise a number of fascinating issues for all of us on www.therightsfuture.com.

IS ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY EDUCATION A HUMAN RIGHT?

The answer this project gives is ‘Yes if you make it so’. Here we don’t believe that there is some set of human rights that are set in stone and which can be accessed by the great and the good through the exercise of their mighty capacity to reason.

Instead human rights flow from [struggle](#), from [protest](#) and from not being prepared to accept that the powerful know best: it’s a radical subject and an emancipatory one, and we know it is making progress when it is [despised](#) by those with lots to lose. So yes in today’s Britain, a place of vast wealth and even vaster inequality it is truly a human right because we insist that it be so.

Britain must never be a place where access to university is only for the very well-off, the 7% or so whose parents have got used to paying private school fees and whose bank accounts won’t notice the transfer from school to university.

Neither should Britain become a country where university is a prep school for profit-making – this is the vision the government seems to have and it must be resisted.

There is more to university than turning yourself into a profit-zombie.

Maybe this is the vision of the world to which the coalition and the ex-oilman [Lord Browne](#) want to commit the country.

But the human rights vision of education is different: it stands for personal growth, for the expression of yourself to the best of your abilities, for learning and for broadening of your horizons. If each university achieves this for the students who enter it, then the culture and sanity of our society will be guaranteed.

And how to pay? The tax that dare not speak its name, the fairest and most equitable of all, the tax that tracks income and, while permitting wide variations, insists that all of us contribute to keep society going in accordance with what we can afford, no more but certainly no less – yes not a graduate but a graduated income tax.

IS HUMAN RIGHTS ABOUT EMPATHY AND GENEROSITY AS WELL AS ABOUT STRUGGLE?

Again this project answers an unequivocal 'yes' to both. The beauty of human rights, its power and influence, lies in how it combines *both* giving *and* taking – see two of our main tracks, [track two](#) and [track four](#). The recent protests have been a tremendous example of each – the university lecturers are concerned – and rightly concerned – about their own rights, to work, to care for their families and to plan for their retirement. But today's students are fighting hard for the next generation – they are not affected by the Coalition's plans but have not been bought off.

All school students should raise a salute to the bravery of the young adults who are taking great risks to help secure their future; altruism with a cutting edge.

CAN HUMAN RIGHTS EMBRACE VIOLENT PROTEST?

Yes: [Track two](#) – but no, not here – violence is not justified. Mild violence against property might be excusable but violence against the person is in the circumstances of Britain today neither justified nor excusable. That fire extinguisher which seems to have been thrown from the top of Millbank tower could have extinguished not such an innocent life but the whole cause as well. Violence for political ends only rarely works and should not nor cannot hope to do so in Britain today.

But what can succeed is protest: the targeting of MPs for defeat who renege on their promises with regard to university fees; direct action; general noise; alliances with the trade unions – anything that pushes the topic to the centre of the news agenda without alienating the public through the means used to get it there – imaginative, insistent protest should be the new way of engaging in defensive democratic politics.

THE FUTURE?

In a democracy protest can succeed when it is in a just cause, is executed intelligently and backed by reason.

Student opposition to university fees ticks all these boxes.

And if the students do win, maybe others will take heart: the very poor, the soon-to-be-homeless, the school pupils deprived of sports and decent buildings, the pensioners, the unemployed. The message the students will have sent out will be simple:

there is no inevitability about what is being planned unless our docility makes it so.