

Image and reality:

How Britain's Blair government denies university education to working class students

Simon Wheelan
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No sane person would consider making an attack on the Labour government of Tony Blair for waging a class war against Britain's privileged elite. It is, after all, the most "business-friendly" administration imaginable and boasts of its break with social reformism at every opportunity. Yet recently much of Britain's media have portrayed the Blair government as a bunch of closet crypto-communists intent on destroying the very foundations of British society.

The occasion for this hysteria was Labour's pledge to create an "access regulator" for Britain's universities, to encourage them to accept a higher proportion of working class students. This innocuous measure was little more than window dressing meant to disguise the actual impact of government education policy, which has served to deny a university education to ever-broader layers of working class children.

In particular, it was meant to sugar the pill of announcements that university tuition fees would be allowed to rise dramatically in the next few years. After the abolition of student grants and their replacement with a loans system, the decision to charge tuition fees had created widespread anxiety over higher education becoming unaffordable. The government had answered its critics by claiming that the standard payment of £1,100 per year, per student was affordable and could be paid back easily from future earnings.

Now, however, the set minimum is up for amendment so that the elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge can charge thousands of pounds to courses, supposedly to enable them to compete on the global education market alongside Harvard, Yale and other prestigious bodies.

Not content with the overall discriminatory and elitist thrust of Labour's policy, the press have attacked the one measure that—despite Blair's best intentions—was aimed at ameliorating the worst excesses of class bias within Britain's education system.

Matters were made worse when Bristol University, traditionally a preserve for the privately educated upper middle classes who cannot get into Oxford or Cambridge, announced it was changing its admission policy.

Bristol announced it would in future attempt to enrol students

with the most educational potential, rather than simply those with the best entry qualifications. The university declared this would favour state school educated pupils over their privately schooled counterparts. The university funding council said it was satisfied that the university's proposed change in admission policy was fair and equitable.

Bristol was acting not out of a newfound belief in egalitarianism, but partly to deflect criticism of its past elitism and also in order to raise its standing as an educational institution. Privately educated students currently make up 40 percent of Bristol's yearly intake. But while possibly achieving lower A-level grades—the examination required for university entrance—state school students often do better in higher education than the privately educated. The latter benefit from intensive personnel tutoring in their early years, but frequently fall behind other state educated students once they start university.

Research by Warwick University examining results between 1985-92 concluded that private school students have an eight percent lower chance of a first class honours or upper second class honours degree grade than a state school student with similar A-level results. The reason for such disparities, suggest the researchers, is that the fee-paying schools specialise in intensive coaching of their less able students, which gives them an important but temporary advantage.

Another study by analysts at the Higher Education Funding Council for Britain discovered similar trends. They found that state school students did better at university than their privately educated counterparts with the same entry qualifications, the difference being as great as the equivalent of two A-levels grades.

For a multitude of hack journalists, any discussion of class privilege is not only an anathema politically but a personal attack. For it was the ability of their own sons and daughter to buy their way into the higher echelons of society that was being threatened.

The *Daily Mail* led with the headline "Insidious social engineering destroying merit and aspirations" while the *Daily Express* declared, "More students being turned down for being

middle class”.

A number of private schools expressed their intention to boycott Bristol if it continued with its proposal.

It was not long before the prime minister stepped in to make clear he regarded the row as a terrible misunderstanding and to underline his resolute commitment to the preservation of social privilege—declaring that university places should be awarded according to “merit” rather than on the basis of class.

His incantation, echoed by the Tories, turns reality on its head. Instead of suggesting that more working class students should be admitted to university, it was a pledge to maintain the status quo whereby admission should be determined by grades and grades alone, thereby favoring those with access to private tuition.

On closer examination, the extent of educational privilege in Britain becomes even more insidious. Just seven percent of the total school population attends private schools, but as they progress further up the academic ladder their disproportionate advantage becomes ever clearer.

Private school pupils account for 20 percent of sixth formers—i.e., those approximately three times as likely to go on to A-levels. This 20 percent accounts for 40 percent of places in the best universities. To make matters worse, almost half of “Oxbridge” (Oxford and Cambridge) students come from the private sector. Even with the same A-level grades, state school pupils stand less chance of going to a top university.

During their campaign to rubbish Bristol University and the proposed access regulator, the right-wing media routinely employed the term “middle class” to describe the pupils who attend private schools. This only serves to mask social reality. What is in fact being discussed is the upper stratum of society—the top seven percent—and not an all-encompassing and ill-defined “middle class”.

While the British median wage is just £20,000—and half the population often earn much less—those who can afford to send their children to fee paying schools have annual incomes around £100,000. In general, they constitute an extremely wealthy and privileged layer, determined to ensure their children will be able to enjoy a similar social position.

The government’s shoddy attempt to deflect criticism from their free market policies naturally did not survive the broadside from the press. It declared that an access regulator as described in a January White Paper would not now be appointed. Instead, the government has proposed an Office of Fair Access. The previous numerical targets for the admission of working class students have been replaced with less rigorous criteria. “Milestones and indicators” have replaced the quantitative certainty of a target figure. In short, the big name universities can carry on as before, just so long as they pay lip service to narrowing the class gap in admissions.

Recently released research by Professor Steve Machin of the Centre for the Economics of Education on behalf of the Department for Education and Skills is highly critical of present

higher education policy.

His research concludes that plans to increase the numbers of students from working class background by increasing the number of school-leavers attending higher education by 2010 will fail miserably. Instead of increasing working class numbers, the introduction of tuition fees will continue to squeeze out prospective poorer students.

Professor Machin, a former adviser to Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, states in the report, “It is clear that educational inequality—the link between family income and post-16 education has tended to rise in recent years.”

He continues: “Even the sharp expansion of university participation of the 1990s did not benefit poorer children. If anything it strengthened the position of the middle classes.”

Machin’s study posits a narrow definition of the working class and middle class, so that anyone not employed in manual, unskilled labour is automatically placed in the latter category. Such a criteria is unscientific and misleading. Nonetheless, his statistics show the extent to which the poorer sections of society have been squeezed out of any possibility of social advancement.

In 1991-1992, 13 percent of children from the “working class” as defined by Machin attended university. By the end of the decade even this already low figure had decreased. After the New Labour government introduced tuition fees and abolished the state-funded student grant, the numbers of working class students halved to just seven percent.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of mature working class students has fallen even more precipitously. These figures suggest that Britain is fast approaching an American type scenario where contemporary research highlights how just three percent of freshmen at the most selective colleges are from the poorest quartile of American families. Upon reading the evidence Harvard law professor C. Lani Guinier described the US university system as a “great inequality machine.”



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