

Britain: Blair government seeks massive hike in university tuition fees

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Prime Minister Tony Blair has delayed until January a parliamentary vote on the government's plans to raise university tuition fees. The extra time is to enable ministers to broker an agreement with the 150 Labour MPs who had threatened to rebel over the measure.

The raising of tuition fees is the centre piece of a package of right-wing measures making up the government's legislative programme for the forthcoming year.

Under the proposal, current up-front tuition fees of £1,000 are to be replaced by charges of up to £3,000 a year to be deducted from graduates' salaries. Barclays Bank has estimated that it will mean students beginning their working career with debts close to £35,000, combined with student loans and additional borrowing. However, university vice-chancellors have already indicated that a £3,000 fee is not high enough, and some have suggested raising it to £15,000 a year.

MPs had been expected to vote on the plans before the Christmas holiday, but with a quarter of Labour MPs signing an early -day motion criticising the proposal, there were concerns that the vote could be lost.

According to reports, the government is hoping to win opponents over by raising the salary level at which students must start repaying their debt from £15,000 to £20,000 a year. Blair called the bluff of his nominal opponents within the party when he warned that his authority was on the line and that "there will be absolutely no retreat."

Few if any of the Labour MPs who profess opposition to this or that piece of legislation have the guts for such a leadership fight. Former foreign secretary Robin Cook, who resigned from the cabinet in protest over Iraq, pleaded with Blair not to turn the issue into a vote on his leadership. Cook, who had previously described the plans as "deeply offensive," said, "Any prime minister is entitled to a vote of confidence but...that should be assessed on the totality of the record of the government."

Claims that senior cabinet ministers were opposed to the plans were quickly quashed when both Chancellor Gordon Brown and Home Secretary David Blunkett denied rumours that they were heading up an opposition.

Brown backed Blair's insistence that it was "essential" for the top-up fees to win parliamentary approval, whilst a

spokesman for Blunkett said suggestions that he was "leading a revolt on this is absolute fiction. The home secretary is fully signed up to the Government's policy on tuition fees and has publicly advocated it on numerous occasions."

Tuition fees are entirely associated with the Blair government. Even the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s felt it would be political suicide to suggest such a measure, and an initial plan to replace student grants with loans was delayed for years due to popular opposition. Labour's abandonment of its social reformist policies in favour of a free market agenda gave the go-ahead for its abandoning the right to free education. In 1997, Blair's Labour Party, then in opposition, joined an all-party review of higher education under Lord Dearing, which later recommended students contribute to the costs of their education.

Dearing's plans were seized upon by the incoming Labour government. So keen was Blair to prove to his backers in the City of London that his government would press ahead with the attack on public services where the Tories had faltered, that it even ignored Dearing's recommendation that maintenance grants aimed at the poorest students be kept in order to ensure they were not financially deterred from entering university. Labour abandoned the grant in favour of student loans and later introduced a £1,100 annual tuition fee.

At the time, Labour claimed that the measure was necessary to boost student numbers and enable British universities to compete for research and intake in a globally competitive marketplace—the same arguments it is using today to increase fees. And it presented the measure as "socially just," arguing that it was unfair to expect a cleaner or garbage collector to finance the education of a student who would one day earn much more than him.

It is not often that Blair shows any concern for the fate of the low-paid, given that his government has presided over a record increase in social inequality that has left the poorest families carrying the burden of cuts in welfare spending and indirect tax hikes. But the government considers such rhetoric politically useful in justifying its attacks on higher education. Blair has once again taken to feigning sympathy with his mythical cleaner, whilst Labour's Barry Sheerman, chair of the

education select committee, went further, denouncing students protesting the measure as “selfish,” “greedy” and “cynical.”

Labour’s propaganda in favour of the measure is a tissue of lies. In the first place, its argument that cleaners and other low-paid workers have no interest in ensuring there is a plentiful supply of teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc., is a modern variant of Thatcher’s claim that there is “no such thing as society.”

The political rationale is the same one that has been used to justify the privatisation of other essential services such as health care. By arguing that only those who directly benefit from a service should pay for it, successive governments have run down public services and enabled a bonanza for private corporations.

The next logical step is to insist that those without children, or whose children are privately educated, should not have to contribute to public education at all. This measure is not so far away and is implicit in proposals by the Conservatives to initiate a voucher system for education.

It is also a red herring. Blair presents the issue as a choice between the low-paid financing higher education, and the students themselves, in order to detract from the real issue—that the cost of ensuring higher education should be borne by big business.

The turn towards student fees has been made to enable the government to cut public funding for higher education—by more than half per student in the past 10 years—as part of its agenda to cut taxes on the major corporations and the rich. Some 37 percent of UK university funding now comes from private sources—compared to an average of 21 percent in the industrialised countries—a significant proportion of which is from students.

Far from being a more egalitarian approach towards the cost of higher education, it is the poorer students who are especially penalised by the measure. Just 18 percent of students have parents employed in manual, semi-skilled and unskilled jobs despite making up 40 percent of the population. And according to recent research by the Department for Education and Skills, poorer students are especially affected by the introduction of fees, ending their education with almost 50 percent more debts than their richer counterparts who are often given money by their parents. Overall students’ outgoings are now double their income, despite 60 percent of them holding down part-time jobs.

The fate of what is habitually defined as “middle class” students is not much better. Changes in employment that have downgraded the status and pay of many of the old white-collar professions have rendered this term almost meaningless. Nonetheless, the government routinely employs the term to bolster its claims that because the average university leaver can earn £220,000 more than non-graduates over his or her working life, free university education amounts to a form of “middle class welfare.”

But the figures cited relate to those taking private-sector

employment in the fields of law and science. Research shows that many students hoping to enter what has traditionally been regarded as “middle class” employment—such as teaching—actually lose out by going on to higher education. According to a study by researchers at Warwick University, students graduating in courses such as language, history, art and English can expect to earn between 2 percent and 10 percent less than someone who left education at 18.

Declining earning potential, again accounted for by government cuts in the public sector, is largely responsible for the fact that the number of teachers entering the profession is declining—their places often being taken by less skilled education assistants. University lecturers’ pay, for example, has fallen 40 percent in real terms over the last 20 years.

A vicious circle is thereby being created whereby the least advantaged children are taught in schools with barely adequate facilities or staffing levels, further compromising their own chances of going on to higher education. Government proposals will only compound this social inequality by reinforcing the divide between the elite universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, and the so-called “second tier.”

Members of the wealthier Russell Group of universities already attract the lion’s share of government grants and contracts in research and development, bolstering their position in the top league. Cambridge and Oxford get £60.9 million and £61 million, respectively, compared to just £76,186 for Luton University, for example.

These universities have indicated they intend to introduce a “market rate” for tuition fees, further ensuring their status as the preserve of the rich. The think tank Catalyst has said that the introduction of variable fees would mean fewer working-class students could afford the higher-cost, more prestigious courses, and would lead to them opting for shorter, job-related degrees instead.



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