

# Carrots, sticks and windmills

*We print here an edited version of a series of talks given by David Ridley in the last few weeks related to the launch of his new book, **No Consolation: Radical Politics in Terrifying Times** (Peter Lang).*

*The first part, on the crisis of English higher education funding, is based on a presentation given at a Post-16 Educator online discussion on 10 November. The second part, on 'just transition' as the solution to this crisis, was developed via three consecutive picket line speeches and teach outs during the recent UCU industrial action, at Coventry, Warwick and Liverpool Universities on Thursday 24th, Friday 25th and Wednesday 30th November respectively.*

Today, public education is under attack from two related forces: neoliberalism and neo-fascism.

Neo-fascists see schools and universities in particular as public spaces where they can draw people into their movement, from conservative parents critical of progressive measures like LGBTQ+ education to young people looking for radical answers to compounding political and social problems. Neo-fascists also use universities, via a distortion of the idea of academic freedom, as a platform to legitimise their pseudo-scientific and conspiratorial ideologies. Meanwhile, neoliberal reformers continue their project of selling out all public services to the private sector, while transforming young people into consumers of everything, including education.

Superficially, it may seem like neoliberalism is finally going to crumble under the weight of its contradictions, with successive Tory governments seemingly unable to secure hegemony for the neoliberal ruling class. During this time, the Tories' marketisation project in higher education policy appears to have ground to a halt, with the Government fundamentally stuck on the issue of how to finance higher education. The Tories don't want to pay for it - they want to shrink the public sector - but at the same time they have been forced by continued economic stagnation to recognise that higher education is actually quite important to society and the economy.

However, as neoliberals, the Tories also despise any form of economic planning. They ideally would like the market to sort out who studies what and where, according to demand in the graduate job market, with students taking out the appropriate amount of subsidised loan to give directly to universities and pay back once they are earning that 'graduate premium'.

## Carrots

Thanks to Andrew McGettigan, we know that in the background the Tories have been quietly designing a

solution to this problem. Combining student loan repayment information with employment, benefits and earnings information from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) department, the Government can now calculate what a degree at a particular institution will be worth to a prospective student.

Someone thinking about going to university can go to the [discoveruni.gov.uk](http://discoveruni.gov.uk) website (which replaces Unistats), type in what course they would like to do, pick a university and see not only what students thought about it ('student satisfaction') but also what your future prospects might be, including how much you might get paid after graduating.

- Using my local university as an example, if I look at Fine Art at Coventry University - an institution that, as the Lanchester Polytechnic, spawned the conceptual art movement Art+Language and ska pioneers The Specials - I'm immediately told via headline stats that:

- only a third of final year students agreed they were satisfied with the course;
- average earnings for graduates 15 months after completing the course are currently £20,000 - that's well below the £27,295 loan repayment threshold and even further below the average UK full-time salary of £33,280.

Drilling down further into this data by clicking on more tabs, you find out that only two-thirds of Coventry University arts graduates end up in 'highly skilled work' - mostly in design occupations, less than 5 per cent in 'artistic, literary and media occupations' - with the rest in 'other work', including 10 per cent sales and administration. If I search for Economics at the prestigious University of Warwick, just down the road, still in Coventry, this graduate premium goes up significantly. Average earnings for the 93 per cent of graduates that find work within 15 months are £33,500. Almost all (96 per cent) Warwick Economics graduates end up in highly skilled work: 42 per cent as Finance

Professionals, 36 per cent Business, Research and Administrative Professionals, 11 per cent Business and Public Service Associate Professionals, and so on.

Essentially, what the Government is trying to do is 'nudge' people into degrees that will pay people more when they graduate, so that they will in turn pay back more of their student loans, costing less for the Treasury and by extension also the taxpayer.

### **Dodgy accounting**

The cost of the student loans system is now even more of an issue than it was in the Theresa May era, with a Corbyn-led opposition promising free higher education and the abolition and forgiveness of student loans.

When former universities minister David Willetts raised tuition fees covered by the income-contingent loan system (first introduced by New Labour) to £9,000, he considered himself to have 'saved' higher education from austerity. As schools and colleges lost billions of pounds of funding during the Cameron years, (most) universities actually got richer - a windfall that a new generation of entrepreneurial vice-chancellors on eye-watering salaries then ploughed into domestic and international expansion. The trick was to pretend that the taxpayer subsidy built into income-contingent loans - the proportion of loans never paid back, covered by the government as underwriter - was not expenditure today, and would only be counted as public sector net debt at the end of their term, currently after thirty years.

Unfortunately, because of all the fuss made about 'value for money' and student debt, the Office for Budgetary Responsibility recently changed the rules so that the portion expected to be written off is now recorded as capital expenditure by the Department of Education in its current accounts. In other words, HE now comes out of public spending. With the cost of loans currently exceeding £20bn per year, and Rishi Sunak looking to recover the £35bn lost via his predecessor's disastrous mini-budget, you can bet Jeremy Hunt is eyeing up higher education.

### **Sticks**

In the short-term, while the nudging approach works its way through the entire education system, shaping not just graduate outcomes but also pre-university choices as well as teacher training - the Government has several options to bring down the cost of English higher education. It can tweak the terms and conditions of student loans, raising interest rates, lowering repayment thresholds and extending the write-off period, some of which it has already done. It can also

try and reduce the total number of students going to university in the first place.

A simple way to do the latter is to introduce a cap on the number of students each university is allowed to recruit, which would signal a return to the elite model of higher education, but without the grants that made it affordable to the working-class students that managed to secure a place. This measure would also not be very popular with university vice-chancellors, who have made a killing rapidly expanding their institutions, and would risk plunging many universities that have taken on huge financial risks based on continued expansion into insolvency.

A more slippery way to achieve the same outcome is to put conditions on student loan qualification, such as a minimum A-level requirement, and/or, most regressively, to close the 'back doors' into university, for example by getting rid of BTECs - a route favoured by significant numbers of working-class and BME students.

### **Just transition**

There is, however, a better and fairer way to mop up the mess that both Labour and the Tories have made of public education - a way that would also address the more fundamental crisis facing us today: climate change.

Keeping global warming to 1.5 degrees - a target we are looking less and less likely to achieve - requires economic and social intervention on an unprecedented scale and speed not seen since World War 2.

It will involve the building of hundreds of clean energy facilities, a massive expansion of the public sector, especially public transport, and the rewilding and planting of thousands of acres of land and forest. This means thousands, if not millions, of new, good, green jobs that require technical and higher education. New technologies will need to be invented and perfected to transition polluting industries towards a sustainable future. This will require significant investment in ecological and socially useful research, as well as support for adults needing to retrain for new, good, green jobs.

### **Ecological culture**

And it's not just all about science and technology. Citizens and communities will need to get used to a new way of life that relies less on wasteful consumption and more on re-use, resource sharing and care for the natural world. This means creating a new culture, grounded in a 'green imaginary' and built around stories of solidarity and sustainability, rather than competition and selfishness.

In other words, there is a key role to play for the arts, humanities and social sciences, all of which are today under threat from a deeply flawed ideology of education as human capital. What I'm describing is a positive, exciting future for public education, with universities at the centre of a 'just transition'. It may sound utopian, but this ecological vision of socially useful universities is actually a minimum requirement for a future worth getting educated for.

### **Industrial strategy**

Some questions remain.

How do we put this vision at the centre of the current wave of industrial action? How can UCU work

together with other education unions like NEU to formulate demands for an integrated approach to educating people for a zero-carbon future? How do all unions build the movement alongside communities and activist organisations to force the government to take the required radical climate action?

Climate action can no longer be a side project, relegated to specialist committees or delegated to climate change officers. It is nothing less than the seed from which our collective future grows.

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