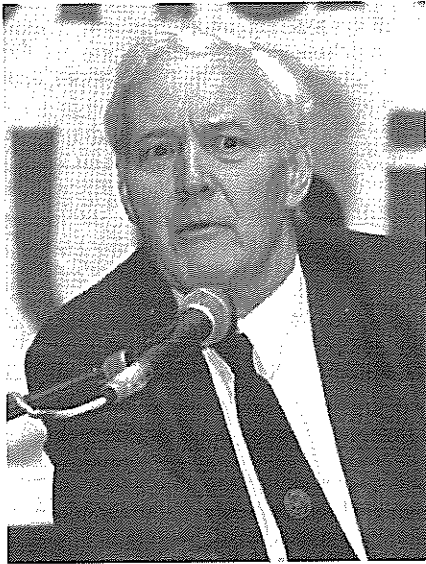


# Tories threaten graduate tax. Campaign for Free Education

## "Campaigning for th



By Tony Benn MP

I BRING support from the Campaign Group of MPs and I congratulate the people who have set up the Campaign for Free Education. It is clear that the present leadership of the National Union of Students have a great reluctance to support the policy agreed at the Derby NUS conference, and something independent of them needed to be set up.

*I can't believe that the NUS leadership can go on for much longer following a policy that has been rejected by their members. There is a broad democratic issue here to be raised.*

I do believe that the argument for free education is an enormously powerful one and it is one that we will need to redeploy because people haven't heard it for such a long time. We are starting to have this argument now.

Next week, the Conservatives announce plans to impose a graduate tax. There are people in the Labour Party who support that proposal!

People say to you, well, why should you have free education? I say, well I'm also a member of the campaign for a free health service, a free fire service; if you have a fire they don't expect your parents to come along and make a contribution. Some

things have to be provided because you need them. You need an educated community if you are going to survive.

*This attempt to raise higher the financial obstacles to be surmounted before people can go into higher education will, if they succeed, throw us back to the period when only wealthy people's sons and daughters went into higher education. That is what it is really about.*

Somebody said to me this week: "Some parents can afford to pay for their children's higher education." But if they can afford to do that, they can afford to pay taxes, and make sure everybody's children can go to college!

These are very powerful arguments indeed. And therefore I think your campaign, in addition to being about protecting opportunities for young people to go on to college, must be seen as part of the argument for a whole range of other services.

They will say: "If you give grants to students instead of loans or graduate tax, that money has to come off financing nurses or schools." Utter rubbish! *There is tons of money about, it's just been spent on the wrong things.*

Can you imagine anything more absurd than a graduate tax? If you're educated then you've got to pay a higher sum of money. Next they'll be introducing an operation tax for everyone who's had an operation in hospital! It won't be long before they'll be talking about loans for operations!

When we move towards the "tiger economies" of Asia and get gobbled up

by the most powerful animals in the jungle, then all these things will happen.

You have to tackle the argument about where the money's coming from. *Think for a moment where the money is going to now.*

Perhaps I could get the House of Commons to divide up the national budget per head of the population? Think about the

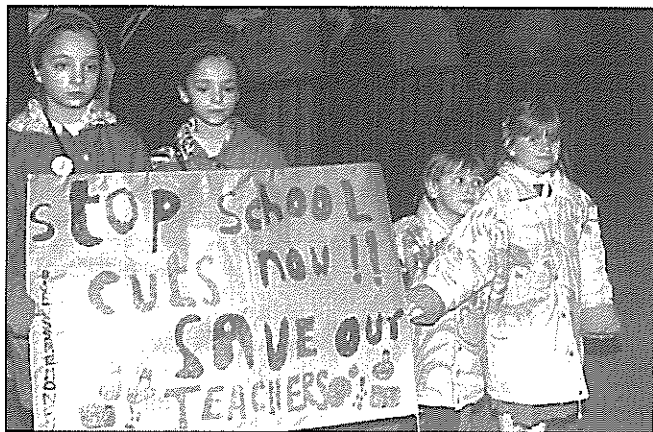
*"They say the government is uncaring. I don't agree with that. They just don't care for our people. Certainly they care for their people."*



NUS-organised demonstration against loans, November 1994. Labour Students have since reneged on commitments to free education. Photo: John Harris.

on fights back.

# the enrichment of life"



Free education needed across all sectors of education

"national budget" in terms of family budgets, and you will see how absurd it is. I might go and knock on a door in Chesterfield and say "How are you getting on?" and they would reply "It's a bit hard".

"It's the money, Tony."

"Well, aren't you spending a bit too much on weapons in this household?"

"What do you mean? There isn't an air pistol in the house."

No, but every family of four is taxed

- £40 a week for weapons,

- £40 a week to pay the benefit for people out of work,

- £40 a week for law and order, much of it caused by unemployment, and

- £20 for the Common Agriculture policy.

Every family of four is paying £140 a week before they've paid the rent, mortgage, whatever. That is wrong!

How can they say there's no money? They've given £50 billion to the richest 10% in tax cuts!

*They say the government is an uncaring government. I don't agree with that. They care all right, they just don't happen to care for our people. They care for their people. Don't accept the argument that the money isn't there! It is.*

The truth is that the government don't really want an educated working class. It's bad enough for the government to have a lot of kids roaming around without jobs. But if those kids had a PhD in economics that would be really threatening, because they would know *why* they

haven't got jobs.

*It is very important that this campaign is got across to the widest possible audience.*

We will have a job putting this argument across to the Labour Party. The Party will have to think very seriously — even if its only motive is to win the election — about the extent to which you can go on alienating huge chunks of opinion whose support you need.

*For example, there is no Labour Party pledge to pensioners who have lost out so much since 1979. There is no support for trade unionists now — they will have to wait for a minimum wage.*

If the teachers and the student population are alienated, the Labour Party is going to find it much harder to get its case across.

This campaign should not be focussed on attacking the Labour Party, or anybody else, but concentrating positively on what we want. *We want educational opportunity for everybody, for the whole duration of your life.*

In campaigning for education, we are campaigning for the enrichment of life, for opportunities that have been denied to earlier generations of working people.

*This is a campaign for a decent civilised society. I have a very strong feeling that this campaign is going to catch on.*

There are a lot of parents who are worried about loans and taxes and entry fees, worried that

their youngsters will not be about to go on to college. And there will be those who remember the time when there were better grants systems, who will feel a sense of injustice. *So we are addressing a very wide and sympathetic audience.*

I think people now want to see simple demands like full employment, more and better housing, decent education, and so on, implemented. And don't try and persuade me that it can't be done!

Take full employment. They say you can't have full employment with a globalised economy and so on. When I was sixteen, I had a lovely letter from the government. Dear Mr Benn, it said, will you turn up on your seventeenth birthday, and we'll give you free food, free accommodation, free training, 10p a day, all you have to do is kill Germans. It was a youth training scheme!

*If you can have full employment to do that, why in God's name can't you have full employment to build houses to recruit teachers and nurses? Because it isn't profitable.*

We need to tackle this absolutely vicious philosophy, that everything has to be profitable before you can even think about it. *If we do that then an awful lot of other things will go down the pan in addition to the Tory Party.*

- Tony Benn was speaking at the Campaign for Free Education rally held in London on 3 February. The Campaign can be contacted c/o Huddersfield University Student Union, Huddersfield.

