Abstract: Sarah PICKARD

Productive Protest? The contested higher education reforms in England (2010-2012)

During the 2010 general election campaign, political discourse from all the main political parties regarding English higher education was focussed on the further expansion of universities and their importance for the economy. There were no references to cutting higher education funding, or increasing university tuition fees that had been introduced by the Labour government in 1998-1999 to finance the expansion of universities in accordance with The Dearing Report. On the contrary, the Liberal Democrats repeatedly underlined their manifesto pledge to scrap university tuition fees completely. No one political party obtained a simple majority and thus a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government took office. It soon announced plans to reduce dramatically public spending on higher education and to raise significantly the ceiling on university tuition fees as of 2012-2013. Thus, many MPs especially Liberal Democrats did not fulfil their electoral promise. When these policies went through the democratic process of being debated inside the Houses of Parliament, between November 2010 and January 2011, the streets outside were full of protestors. The period was marked by sizeable demonstrations, occupations and civil disobedience, with unrest being centred on contesting the hypocrisy and broken promises of politicians.

This paper explores the causes and primarily the consequences of the unrest in England regarding contested higher education policy changes since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government came to power in May 2010.

Its main aim is to assess the effectiveness of the protests in terms of changing democratically voted government policy.

First, the paper very briefly examines the historical precedent of protests regarding changes to higher education in England and the nature of the 2010-201 contestations including the policing of them. Then it explores the impetus behind and the nature of the recent unrest, encompassing the relationship between voters and elected representatives in a democracy with reference to Edmund Burke (1729-1797). This will lead to a longer discussion regarding the productivity of the protests in terms of the implementation of the policy, political compromises, political party support, political participation, the popularity of social movements, awareness of the issue and more profoundly the democratic process itself within a representative democracy.

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