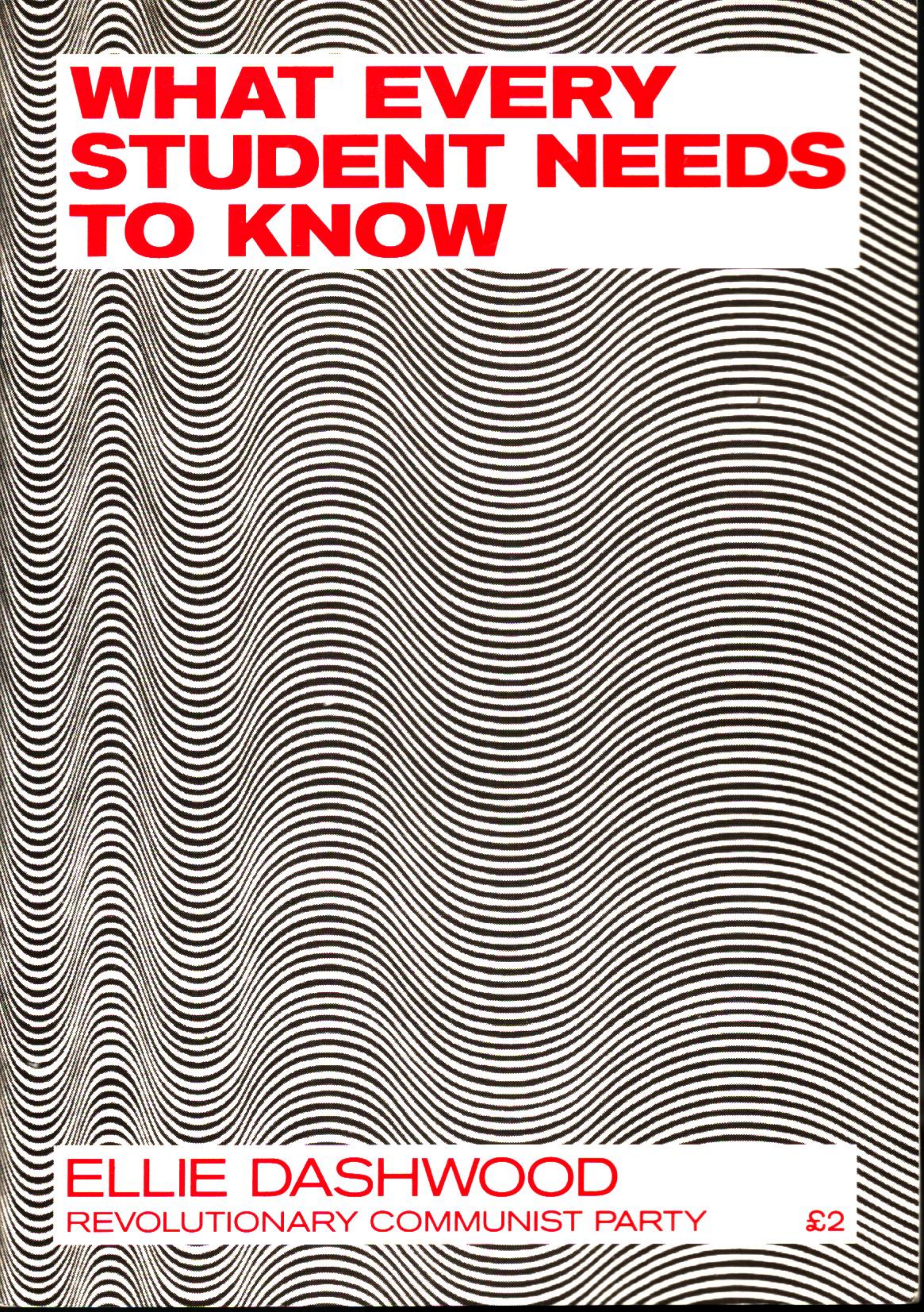




WHAT EVERY STUDENT NEEDS TO KNOW

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REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PARTY

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1 Politics

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1 Introduction

Britain in the 1990s is a disappointing place. John Major calls it the 'opportunity society', but the only opportunity it seems to offer most of us is the chance to lose our jobs and see our living standards fall.

Everywhere you look the signs of slump are evident. Mass unemployment appears permanent. If you still have a job you are probably expected to work longer hours for less pay. The government has pledged to slash public spending. Discussions are already taking place about cutting income support, housing benefits and invalidity benefit, and extending VAT on to fuel and even food. Everyone is being told that they must make sacrifices.

Higher education faces the most severe attack yet. Students are expected to learn crammed into over-crowded, underfunded colleges. There is a shortage of books and a lack of facilities. Students have to take out large loans and get deep into debt just to survive three years at college. Pay-as-you-learn schemes are already being introduced.

These are the things we are expected to put up with today—so you might think that there is plenty to fight for.

Yet against this background, nobody seems to be fighting. It is more fashionable to say that nothing can be done. The problems that we face—from unemployment to worsening conditions for students—are widely accepted as unfortunate facts of life.

Today there appears to be little prospect of things changing for the better. Everything in the world seems to go from bad to worse. In response many people have even given up reading the newspapers or watching the news. Why watch the news to discover that yet more jobs have been lost, or that another war has broken out? Why listen to politicians prattle on about the 'green shoots of recovery' and better times being just around yet another corner?

In today's climate of passivity and pessimism, nobody is asking basic questions about what is wrong with the world. Instead it seems to make more sense to keep quiet. Few are willing to raise a critical voice about the society we live in. Even fewer seem prepared to fight to change it. Instead we resign ourselves to the idea that we have no influence over what happens, becoming victims of society and those who run it.

The aim of this pamphlet is to challenge the mood of our times. Ask yourself one simple question: is this it? Is this the best that we can hope to achieve? Does it make sense to give up without a fight, in the face of a society going downhill fast? If you won't be fobbed off with second best and want an alternative, read on.

2 Student life

Myth and reality

Most students have high expectations about what university will be like. It is assumed that university will provide the opportunity to spend three or four years studying new ideas and broadening your horizons. When choosing which university to come to, the design of your chosen degree course was probably quite important to you. You might choose one course and not another because of interesting-looking modules or units which catch your eye. One of the things that excites people about their immediate future is the prospect of being taught about new areas which they have never considered before. The glossy prospectuses make student life sound very inviting. You are promised some 'rich and satisfying experience in your higher education', and courses which 'aim to develop your creative and analytical potential'.

When the prospect becomes reality it can turn out to be a real disappointment. A lot of students find that their degree course is a bit of a bore. Rather than challenging you, and making you consider things from a new perspective, courses often turn out to be stale and dull. More often than not, learning is reduced to the repetition of set texts, parrot-fashion. Essay writing requires you to repeat the words of others and learn their theories off by heart rather than take a critical and original perspective. Seminar groups, which sounded so stimulating in the university prospectus, can turn out to be an embarrassment. Nobody wants to speak and put forward a view, because formulating an idea and arguing for it has not been encouraged. The myth of 'stimulating and satisfying' education is a long way from the reality of university life.

A dismissive attitude towards thinking and learning is exhibited from the top down. The Conservative government itself has an attitude which suggests that it couldn't care less if you learn anything or not, and in fact will make it harder for you to do so. One important reason for higher education failing to deliver on its promises is the policy which governs the way the system is organised. Through its current education policy, the government has downgraded education and ensured that facilities get worse and resources diminish.

Several studies have recently been carried out looking at college facilities. One of them labelled libraries in higher education a 'disgrace' with 60 students chasing one book. Another found that the old universities were only buying one and a half books per student per year, while at the old

polytechnics the ratio was one book per student. And, of course, individual students are far less able to buy books for themselves. The poor level of student grants sees to that. Already by last year, 53 per cent of students could not afford to buy the books their lecturers recommended.

It's not just a lack of books. The number of staff in relation to students is now so low that it's not really surprising that seminars are a washout and people don't know what to say. It is obvious that without enough attention from lecturers the standard of education falls. There are very few institutions teaching humanities and social sciences with a staff to student ratio of less than one to 15. Tutorials are now either being abandoned because the tutors aren't available to take them or are so large that they can't really be called tutorials.

The new doublespeak

Today things are so bad in higher education that the authorities have had to think of a whole new terminology to hide the problem. Over the next few months you will encounter a lot of buzz-words like these:

Self-evaluation. This is a new teaching method which sounds quite right-on. Look a little closer and things aren't so rosy. It means that you evaluate your own work instead of a member of staff doing it for you. So you may well be marking your own essay this term, because there aren't enough tutors to do it for you. No doubt you will get good marks, but what will they be worth?

Semesterisation. A new system to organise the academic year. It sounds more modern than the conventional version. In fact it's a way to cram more students into an already overcrowded education system. Semesterisation means replacing the existing academic year of three 10-week terms with three semesters of 15 weeks and shorter holidays. You might study for two of the three new terms, say summer and winter, and work for the rest of the time (earn as you learn), while other students study spring and summer. The latest proposal is for two-year degrees where you study straight through six terms. This means that lecturers' time and the college facilities are 'maximised'. In other words, the same number of lecturers rush many more students through a low-quality, fast-food education system, while the university avoids shelling out on extra books or wages.

Modularisation. This trendy system is promoted to combat the 'narrowness' and 'dogma' of current degrees. Instead of doing one subject you can study many, as a series of modules which make up your course. American colleges already mix modules as diverse as computer studies and advanced

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tennis. The system is certainly cost-effective for college managers and accountants. After all, who needs to employ expert professors and organise expensive tutorials when you are teaching a lot of subjects in little detail? In educational terms, however, the system is demeaning. In-depth analysis and the development of expertise is replaced with a 'pick and mix' of poor quality courses.

Over the past three years the government has made great play of its interest in the future of higher education. It has emphasised its commitment to ensuring that more people than ever before can have the opportunity to study a degree course. Everybody is supposed to be offered the chance to learn and to expand their minds. The watchword in education is 'access'. But what are we actually getting access to?

Access to what?

The government says that higher education should no longer be just for the privileged minority. Everyone should be offered the same opportunities. The 1991 policy document 'Higher Education: A New Framework' explained the aims of the new attitude towards the higher education system. Many of these proposals have since been implemented. The two main measures, of which you will probably already be aware, are the expansion of student numbers and the change in status of the old polytechnics.

There has been a 60 per cent increase in student numbers since 1979, with a projected increase of 30 per cent more by the year 2000. By expanding the numbers entering higher education, the government claims to be demonstrating its interest in equal opportunities. It suggests that in the past only the elite were allowed an education. Now everyone has the chance to learn—quality education is available to all who want it.

In fact, the expansion of education has nothing to do with giving people more opportunities to improve themselves. It is a cynical manoeuvre on the part of the government to disguise one of the biggest social problems of our time—unemployment. Mass unemployment is an embarrassment to the government, and it will try every trick in the book to disguise the scale of the problem.

For years the issue of youth unemployment has preoccupied the Conservatives. They do not want to be seen as a government which offers the dole queue and no more to the nation's youth. To deal with this political embarrassment the government has devised scheme after scheme to fiddle the figures. First they introduced the Youth Training Schemes (YTS), to remove unemployed teenagers from the official unemployment figures by making them work for their giros. Next they took 16-18 year-olds off the

jobless register altogether by barring them from claiming benefit. You can get married when you're 16 but the government has decided that you are not really an adult—so you don't count as unemployed.

'Access to education' is just another way of fiddling the unemployment figures—a sort of YTS for the 1990s. The government's main motive is making the statistics look better. Cramming people into colleges and calling it 'access to education' is another way to massage the jobless figures downward.

The government has also created 'new universities' as part of its access policy. Noting that polytechnics have been the poor cousins of universities, it has 'upgraded' the polys to university status, so that all students can have equal access to the same quality education.

If you are studying at what used to be a polytechnic, you can now claim to be a university student. Yet what has really changed? The Polytechnic of Central London, for instance, has now become the University of Westminster. All that was needed was a new coat of paint, new letterheads and replacement signs on the front of the buildings. But if you study there are you getting the education you want? A lick of paint doesn't make much difference to the thousands of students at new universities who will be fighting each other over books and trying to take notes squashed into overcrowded lecture rooms. Surely this cannot be the best that university education has to offer.

If the motives of government can be put to question, so can the consequence of its policy. The government claims that more people than ever before are now given a quality education, and that maintaining high standards in education is a priority. But if the government is so concerned with giving people a decent education, why is it ensuring that facilities are getting worse and worse? The resources invested in higher education have not kept pace with the expansion of student numbers. Instead, the amount spent on each student is falling in real terms. Without enough books and without attention from tutors, it is inconceivable that doing a degree course could provide a quality education. How can anyone develop intellectually and find education stimulating without the resources and facilities to do so?

Worse still, this year the number of A-level passes means that many more students are looking for places than places exist. So far the government has reduced the quality of education by overstressing it with increased access. But obviously the universities cannot keep expanding indefinitely without the resources to fund the extra places. Now many will be turned away or have to settle for second best in the search for a course. It's bad enough that 'access' was used to debase education for those who get it, but now, having increased the demand for education, the government is set to deny places to many applicants.

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Behind the promises, the reality is that more people are being given an inferior, shoddy education. The underfunding of higher education by the government reveals that the 'opening up' of the system is not about giving more people the chance to get a decent degree. It is about ensuring that thousands are herded into universities, given a second class education and churned out again. Students are treated as fodder for the government's campaign to make the unemployment figures look better, and given a downgraded education in return.

NUS—a Tory think-tank

One reason why the government has got away with downgrading education is because of the attitude of the National Union of Students (NUS). The NUS is the national representative of students. You might not actually know this as most students' experience of the NUS is fairly limited. Normally it involves you arriving at the Freshers Fayre on your first day at college, where you get your library card, your timetable and your union card. You get your 'NUS welcome pack', go for a few drinks in the bar and lose your welcome pack. That is likely to be your first and last experience of the NUS.

You could be forgiven for not knowing that the NUS is supposed to stand up for student interests and defend us from government attacks on education. The fact is that, rather than fighting the Tory education reforms, the NUS has accepted the 'access' revolution at face value as a good thing.

This year the NUS published its own John Major-style charter, which makes clear that it aims to ensure that Tory education policies are well and truly implemented. In fact the charter proudly claims that the NUS thought of the policies in the first place.

'The NUS advocated the end of the binary system long before it became government policy. We encouraged the expansion of higher education in the early eighties and have long argued for the replacement of A-levels by a coherent post-16 structure suitable for the nineties. Within institutions, student unions have pushed the case for non-traditional entrants, choice through modularisation and equal opportunities throughout education.'

The NUS has effectively adopted the three wise monkeys approach to government education policy—hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. Not only does the NUS appear to have missed the fact that government policy is about attacking education funding, it has also swallowed whole the double-speak with which the government seeks to cover up the cuts.

We need to be clear about the real nature of education policy today.

Its one aim is to save money. Its consequence is worse education for students. We deserve something better.

3 Uncritical times

The problem of a lack of discussion and critical thought is not simply a question of inadequate resources. There are also broader reasons for university life failing to live up to your expectations. We live in unquestioning times. There is a culture of disinterest and intellectual passivity.

At university you might expect a contrast in attitude. Surely university life is about tackling new ideas and taking an interest in what happens in the world? The reality is rather different. Both inside and outside the seminar room today, open-mindedness and an interest in debate and the exchange of ideas is out of fashion.

The lack of curiosity about the world will become very obvious to you if you look outside of the classroom for debate and discussion. If you are bored with your course and want to find some new ideas it might seem like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Students are part of broader society, and so like most people today, they don't spend their spare time discussing world events. Instead, when the lectures are over and the essays are handed in, students are more likely to watch *Brookside* or go to the bar and talk about who's going out with who.

'It's all too much...'

Today the world appears too confusing to understand. Few people have a coherent view on the major issues of the day. Every event in the world seems too complicated and messy to get to grips with. The economy is in a mess and wars seem to happen every day of the week, but understanding why and what should be done about it seems out of reach.

One reason why confusion about the world dominates is because things have changed so far so fast in the past few years. Even reading books about it in the university library may not get you very far, since most are out of date. The international affairs sections, for example, are all full of books about the Cold War. But in the past four years, since the Berlin Wall came down, things have changed beyond recognition.

Everything is changing, so everything that held true in the past now makes little sense. In the past, Washington and Moscow were enemies. Now they seem to be the best of friends. In the past, the Labour Party seemed able to gain more support and win elections during times of economic hardship. Today Labour seems to lose whatever happens. It is easy in this situation to draw the conclusion that the world is impossible to understand.

Confusion can also make people draw irrational conclusions. If you don't understand why people vote Tory, you put it down to greed and 'human nature' and decide there is nothing you can do about it. Without a proper explanation, a war somewhere around the world can be put down to 'tribalism' or 'ethnicity', and dismissed as just part and parcel of 'their culture'.

The world has certainly changed enormously. But why should that mean we can't understand it in a rational way? Why is it that the cause of every problem from racism to war or unemployment is perceived as human nature? Why should we accept these problems as just a fact of life? Has it suddenly become so impossible to ask the question 'why?' and demand some logical explanations? Starting to ask questions and demanding some answers is more important now than ever—precisely because the world has changed so much.

Know it all

The trouble today is that wanting to know about the world and having an opinion on things is seen as a bit of an embarrassment. People often feel very self-conscious about saying what they think, for fear of being identified as 'one of those people who goes on and on', the kind of nutter who shouts at the television during the news. It seems that if you say something a bit controversial, you will be going out on a limb.

Having a view of things which you actually argue for and try to convince others of is seen as even more weird. It seems much more sensible to just forget about it all and let the world go by. It is now considered common sense to see events in the wider world as detached and separate from your own life.

An unquestioning attitude is now pervasive. It is an outlook which suggests that asking critical questions about what is happening in society today is a waste of time. It is a waste of time because it cannot help or make a difference to your life. It is a waste of time because you can never find any answers anyway. The issues are just too complicated and distant to handle.

4 Student politics

Today's uncritical attitude is something new. Traditionally, students have been a section of society which has refused to accept that nothing can be done. Students have questioned the authority of the powers that be and have attempted to change things for the better.

Students have played a prominent part in every major campaign or social movement of modern times. If you look at any significant revolution or uprising, it will have involved students. The most recent ones which spring to mind are the demonstrations in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the democracy movement in China which ended with the massacre in Tiananmen Square. If you look back further to the sixties and seventies, you will find that all of the many movements and campaigns of that era—against the Vietnam War, for nuclear disarmament, for women's liberation or gay rights—involved large numbers of students.

Student involvement in these movements is not surprising. Students have fewer constraints holding them back than most people. Students are relatively free to step outside the concerns of everyday life and get involved in broader social questions.

Most people have to divide their time between a job and their responsibilities to do with home and family. But students don't have the same barriers and worries. Their work leaves them more free time, and they are usually relatively free of family ties. And generally students have fewer financial worries than other people. They don't normally have to look after children and they don't have a mortgage to pay off.

It is possible to argue that there are more constraints on students today than in the past. There is not the same freedom to do what you want when you go to college. The level of income which passes for a grant certainly makes life harder. The problem of not having enough money to live on creates worries and leaves you less room to manoeuvre. The prospect of unemployment after you get your degree may make you worry more about getting your head down to make sure you get decent grades.

It is also true that there are fewer campaigns for students to get involved with. All of the movements which emerged in the sixties and seventies have collapsed or just disappeared. There is no mass peace movement or women's movement any more.

Yet none of this is sufficient to explain the lack of interest and campaigning about what's happening in the world among students today. Students still have enough time and freedom to take a stand—and plenty of problems to campaign about. Nor have they ever previously been shy of

starting something new if no ready-made campaign existed. The main barrier stopping students getting stuck in today is not just a practical problem, but the insular and narrow-minded mood which dominates university life in the nineties.

Most people's concerns seem to revolve narrowly around being a student, with little interest in anything wider. Life revolves around doing what is necessary to get a degree and having some sort of social life. Students are likely to be interested in ideas only insofar as they bear a direct relation to their course. There seems to be little spontaneous interest in anything which isn't to do with writing an essay or passing an exam.

For many students, doing a degree for three years has almost become a chance to 'get away from it all' and shut yourself off. Rather than taking the opportunity to understand the world and become more involved in things, student life seems to be an invitation to hide away for the duration of your degree and avoid confronting the problems which exist in society today.

A tendency to avoid the problems of society and a reluctance to take an interest in the world is a big problem. The only consequence of cutting ourselves off like this will be that another generation is left with no option but passively to take what it is given by the authorities.

A fighting union?

The tendency for students to ignore the world outside university is shaped and reinforced by the attitude of student unions. They have consistently acted as a barrier to students adopting a more broad-minded outlook.

The officials who run student unions insist that they should only be concerned with issues which directly affect students. Anything else is an irrelevance and a diversion, and has no place in student politics. The minute anyone attempts to promote a discussion about a major issue in the world they are likely to be shouted down. Any discussion of the bombing raids on Iraq or Somalia, for example, will be ruled out of order by student union officials on the grounds that it is not of direct concern to students.

Even something as straightforward as getting students to go on a demonstration against the pit closures last year was seen as a problem. In the middle of a national outcry against the government's policy of devastating the coal industry, when even the matrons of Cheltenham were marching in support of the miners, many student unions refused to book coaches to the miners' demonstrations. They argued that the issue lay outside the concerns of ordinary students.

By adopting this attitude, student unions accept and underline the idea that students live a closeted existence, untouched by the traumas and

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upheavals in the real world. They encourage the notion that what goes on outside university, no matter how important it might appear, does not directly affect you.

By adopting this approach, student unions strengthen the notion that it is illegitimate for students to take a stand on the major issues of the day. Instead, all students are allowed to think and talk about are 'student issues'.

To justify their narrow-minded outlook, the student unions pin the blame on ordinary students themselves. They say that students are apathetic and conservative, only bothered about the price of beer in the union bar. The attitude of student unions is not only narrow-minded, it is also patronising in the extreme. It suggests that somehow all students are programmed to be brain-dead and incapable of taking an interest in the world outside of the campus.

Cap in hand

The student unions' acceptance of the head-in-the-sand approach has now reached its logical conclusion. In the face of government threats, the National Union of Students has rolled over and died.

The government is attacking student unions on the grounds that they are misusing public funds—spending their money on campaigns unrelated to the educational needs of students. The government is introducing new legislation which makes it illegal for unions to spend money on anything deemed 'political'. In the face of this attack on students' right to organise and campaign about anything we want to, student unions are running scared.

For example, the National Union of Students claims that there is no need for the government to clamp down because it is not political anyway. It is at pains to point out that of an annual income of £3m only £30 000 is spent on campaigns—that is on efforts to defend its members against the government.

The NUS has responded to government threats by clamping down on political discussion. It has witch-hunted activists and proposed that it becomes a charity—thus ruling politics out of bounds. Lorna Fitzsimmons, NUS president, opened the last NUS conference in March 1993, by saying that the problem with the NUS is that the outside world thinks it is 'left-wing and subversive'. She wants everyone to be clear that the NUS is a respectable body, which is why it should become a charity.

As a charity, the NUS would not even have to pay lip-service to the idea that it is a campaigning organisation. It would, however, give itself the right to prevent any student from raising controversial issues in the union. As a charity, the NUS would have the right—indeed the responsibility—to

ban anyone from doing anything deemed 'political' on student union premises. As it stands, student unions are already formally non-political bodies. They are governed by *ultra vires*, a law which states that unions cannot financially support issues or movements that do not relate to students directly. This law has always been used to stop people doing anything too controversial on divisive issues such as Ireland or abortion. Now the law is being interpreted more tightly to suggest that unions cannot even send coaches to demonstrations in support of the miners.

By formally adopting charity status, the NUS wants to bolster its authority to police student activity. This is how it explains its plans to become a charity:

'Charity law will limit the issues on which it is legitimate for student unions and the NUS to work. A broad definition will be those issues which affect students as students. It is important to stress, however, that these will not be exclusively educational issues. On the issue of rail privatisation it would be legitimate for student unions to make representations to ensure the continuation of cheap travel for students. It would not be legitimate to run any form of ideologically based campaign against rail privatisation as such.'

Student unions are already turning themselves into 'non-ideological' bars and canteens. All they give you is beer and soggy pizza. This ensures that they stay on amicable terms with the college management locally and the government nationally. It also ensures that they can do nothing to address the serious problems affecting their members.

Anything 'ideological'—that is anything which might rock the boat—is ruled out of order in advance. The NUS has decided to stop anyone from even raising controversial issues, just in case a debate breaks out and some students decide they want to do something instead of sitting in the bar.

Yet surely this is exactly the kind of debate we need if we are to stand up for a decent education and try to have an influence on broader issues. We need to raise the controversial questions and have the arguments out as widely as possible. We need more debate, more people raising the big issues, not the head-in-the-sand approach of the NUS.

Lorna Fitzsimmons might be happy with 'charity status'—going cap in hand to John Major—but what we need is an organisation that is unashamedly ideological, afraid of no arguments and prepared to fight on whatever ground we choose.

5 Anti-politics

In a sense it is not surprising that students or anybody else should hate politics today. After all, when you think of those who are involved in what passes for politics, what image does it conjure up? Grey men in grey suits, liars and cheats. Who in their right mind would want to end up like politicians—a bunch of corrupt place-men who are all as bad as each other.

One thing that puts people off politicians is the recognition that they all say the same thing. You may dislike the Tories, but the other parties are no different. So there seems to be little point in taking it seriously.

Anybody watching the debate in parliament on television could well be put off politics for life. They would see a lot of *Spitting Image* puppets making cheap jibes at each other's expense and calling it a debate. They would see discussion of important matters reduced to the frantic waving of bits of paper, and jeering and heckling from both sides of the chamber.

All the noise and mud-slinging of the parliamentary process is there to mask the fact that there is no real debate in mainstream politics. For debate to mean anything, there have to be clear differences of opinion between the two sides. Debates in parliament have the character of wrangles and politicians seem like squabbling children because they are disagreeing over very little.

There are no major ideological conflicts. Instead the differences among the parties are petty and insubstantial. They are making paltry disagreements into major matters of principle. On every issue they agree on the substantive point.

What passes for debate in parliament trivialises it. They suggest they are engaged in a serious consideration of the economic slump or the war in Bosnia. But politicians only go through the motions of discussion. Because there are no big differences, debate is replaced by insult swapping. Having nothing positive to say for themselves, the parties are reduced to rubbishing their opponents.

Take the issue of the monarchy. The future of the royal family has been a preoccupation of politicians for many months. All would argue that they have strong feelings on the subject. All say that decisive action has to be taken to decide the future of the monarchy and work out its appropriate role in British society.

What do all these 'strong feelings' come down to? A suggestion that the Queen should pay tax, that a few royals should be taken off the civil list or that a new clause about Her Royal Highness should be written into the constitution. They suggest that these changes are 'far-reaching' and

'fundamental'. In fact the fundamental debate about the monarchy is entirely absent.

A real discussion of the role of the monarchy would have to involve a forceful argument for the alternative—its abolition. Someone would have to say that the whole concept of the monarchy is elitist and indefensible, and so force their opponents to make a case in defence of the Queen. However, the argument for abolition is never put. So the debate about the fundamental issue never takes place. Instead, everyone agrees on the substantial matter—that the monarch should be head of state. Their differences are trivial and minor. Yet these differences are blown out of proportion—a molehill becomes a mountain.

Because politicians today have no substantial difference of opinion, their criticisms of each other can never amount to much. The 'debate' is narrow, petty and consistently misses the point. What strikes you most about politics today is the lack of any big ideas. There is no major battle between competing views of how society should work. Today there is no 'left' and 'right' in politics. These terms have ceased to mean anything.

When you think of politicians today, it is difficult to think of anyone who stands out. Few people today could even name more than half a dozen MPs. And even if they could, political parties are so indistinct that they may well not know which party the politician was in. The current leaders of the Tories and Labour sum up the situation. John Smith is supposed to be left-wing and John Major right-wing. But where's the difference between them?

What's new?

Of course parliamentary politics has always been something of a charade. Today, however, things have gone a stage further. Politicians have ceased to inhabit the same world as the rest of us. Their concerns are now entirely removed from those of most of society.

The politicians' recent preoccupation with the Maastricht treaty is a case in point. For months, parliament was locked in struggle over a worthless piece of paper which even Conservative chancellor Kenneth Clarke was forced to admit he had not read. Yet the fate of this treaty was presented as a matter of life and death. Meanwhile, the Maastricht-obsessed politicians managed almost entirely to avoid discussing the most important issue in the real lives of people in Britain and Europe—the little matter of the worst economic slump for half a century.

The deep-seated crisis in the economy impinges on everybody's life in drastic fashion. Yet a mention of 'Brussels bureaucrats' gets parliament far hotter under the collar than four million unemployed ever could. The Maastricht fiasco provided convincing evidence that there is now an

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enormous gulf between what passes for politics and the real problems of society; between them and us.

In these circumstances, it is easy to see why politics appears uninteresting and even irrelevant to many people. If you do still think of yourself as a supporter of one of the parliamentary parties, it is likely to be for negative reasons—because you can't stand the others—rather than because you identify in a positive way with any policies.

What's the use?

People are also put off politics because it seems futile. Politicians spend hours debating things in parliament yet never sort anything out. Politicians seem indecisive and ineffectual because they are. These days the best they seem able to come up with is writing another charter. Their proposed solutions are often clearly out of proportion with the scale of the problem. Everyone knows that problems in society today are of a substantial order. Take something like unemployment. It is now at record levels. It constitutes a major social problem which is not going away. Unemployment is having a devastating effect on the lives of large numbers of people. But the political response never goes beyond the level of futile gestures. We are offered a 'Job-seekers Charter' and a helpline for advice and sympathy. Who could take this seriously?

Politicians are also associated with making our lives worse. They are not just ineffectual—they are worse than useless. The policies they implement make our lives harder and it becomes more difficult to survive. They are cutting back on spending on healthcare, education and benefits and they are presiding over mass unemployment and wage cuts.

Government policy has had an effect on students' living standards too. Students have never been well off, but poverty is now a real prospect for many. If your parents can't back you up and give you a handout, it is going to be difficult to survive. Grants were frozen in 1990, leaving your income well below the poverty line even when you have taken out a student loan. And the government has ensured that if you cannot get a job over the holidays you starve because it has stopped you claiming benefits.

So the intervention of politics into people's lives is often perceived in a very negative way. Politicians have the power to sack people, cut back on the services we need, reduce the amount of money we have to live on, and constantly make things more difficult for us.

Rejecting politics seems like a logical response to the state of public affairs today. But being anti-politics also means that people look at the prospects for change in a negative way. After all, every politician promises, especially at election time, that they stand for change. Who these days

could look at that promise in a positive way? Our experience tells us that when politicians promise to change something it either makes no difference or makes things worse.

People's negative attitude towards change should come as no surprise given what change has come to mean. But if it goes unchallenged, this outlook guarantees that things will continue to get worse. It suggests that people should put up with what they've got and accept the status quo without asking any questions or looking for alternatives. Anti-politics creates a culture of passivity and defeat.

6 A culture of passivity

Cynicism is the dominant response to politics today. At the moment people are particularly cynical about the Tory government. Every policy it introduces is greeted with derision. Even his own supporters seem to think that most things John Major does are a mistake. Conservative ministers are treated as a joke by most political commentators and are deeply unpopular.

The official opposition parties fare little better. In fact most people find it difficult to take them seriously at all. Regardless of how big the Tories' problems are, the other parties seem unable to generate real popular support and enthusiasm. Labour can soar above the Tories in opinion polls, and the Liberal Democrats can win by-elections in previously safe Tory seats. But this only shows how much people dislike the Conservatives; it does not represent any positive endorsement of the other parties. Cynicism prevails.

If a cynical attitude towards existing political options leads to a search for an alternative, all well and good. At the moment, however, the mood of cynicism is entirely negative. It imbues society with a culture of passivity.

As a starting point, cynicism suggests that those in power are not to be trusted. It recognises that politicians have their own agendas to pursue, which don't correspond with our interests. So when they promise us that they will improve the lives of the majority in Britain, they are just saying this to get our votes. They are much more likely to defend those who already have the wealth in society rather than improve things for the rest of us.

If cynical distrust leads you to be critical, to find out *why* politicians don't deliver what they promise, it is a positive start. A critical examination of why they can't solve the problems of society is the precondition for working out a possible alternative to the existing political parties.

For example, a critical look at why politicians can't solve the problem of unemployment could indicate that their main interest is in defending an economic and social system run for profit. They all support the market system and so all advocate policies which try to make the market work. The discipline of the market demands that, in order to keep profits up, they have to impose mass unemployment and cuts in living standards.

The logic of the market dictates that jobs have to go when profits fall. Unemployment is therefore a consequence of the profit system. Which is why pro-market politicians are incapable of delivering on their promises to provide us with jobs. By criticising their arguments, it becomes possible to identify the real issue at stake. This in turn allows us to generate a debate about an alternative solution to the problem of unemployment.

Unfortunately cynicism today rarely leads to criticism. Most people are

just plain cynical. They don't trust politicians but they have no faith in their own ability to come up with an alternative. Instead they accept that politics is simply a waste of time and decide nothing can be done to improve things. They don't just distrust the existing political parties, they are equally sceptical about any alternative.

This kind of cynicism creates a vicious circle. If people discount the possibility of any alternative in advance, all we are left with is the existing political parties. And, since their every move makes things worse, politics becomes even more discredited. So people become even more contemptuous of anything political, and less and less critical. They give up on politics full-stop and cease to ask questions.

Passivity is the flipside of cynicism today. People accept that it is pretty much impossible to do anything effective about social problems, that there is no way to make a difference. They are then left with no option except to put up with it. If you reject the idea of creating an alternative which could change things for the better, then feeling dissatisfied and angry becomes something you just have to live with.

There are many things happening in the world which people dislike. The news is dominated by stories of war and famine abroad and unemployment and falling living standards at home. Most people can see that things are getting worse and they don't like it. But these things are now widely accepted as facts of life. The mood of cynicism dictates that there can be no possible solution to these problems.

This kind of 'common sense' and the 'realistic' approach is nothing more than a cop-out. It refuses to raise the most simple questions about society, and accepts instead the greatest platitude of all—'you can't change human nature'. The cynic puts just about every problem of our times down to human nature. Human nature is the cause of war and racism because humans are naturally antagonistic. Human nature is the cause of unemployment and poverty because greed dominates us all. In this way, the climate of cynicism endorses the status quo by default. The government doesn't get away with launching wars and slashing jobs or pay because it has a popular mandate to do so. A lot of people disagree with its actions. The government gets away with it because nobody believes they can stop it. The cynic says that the situation is terrible but it's a waste of time trying to do anything about it because alternatives will never work. So the government just gets on with it anyway.

The kind of cynicism that dominates today is not about being critical and looking for another solution because you don't trust what's on offer. It is about being cynical of everything and rejecting every political option. This kind of cynical outlook is corrosive and destructive. It ensures people get trampled on.

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It is worth asking if the cynics' outlook really makes sense. Is it true that there is absolutely nothing effective we can do? Is it true that wars happen for no good reason—it's just that human beings have an urge to fight? Does it really make sense to accept that mass unemployment is a fact of life and to resign yourself to spending a large part of your life on the dole queue? In short, does the world of 1993 really represent the high point of human achievement?

Listening to the cynics you would think that society is something other than what people do. Flying to the moon or building the Suez canal was difficult. Changing society ought to be easy. After all changing society only means changing the way things are organised.

It may be that the number of people who see the need for change are few and far between right now. But what good idea did not start as a minority viewpoint? There was a time when most people thought that the world was flat. They would probably still think so if a few people had not been prepared to disagree, and argue their case.

Conservative ideas are taken for granted. So much so that nobody notices just how weak and flabby those ideas are. Unemployment is no more natural than a peroxide blond. It isn't the tide or the seasons that put people out of work, but employers who sack them. It isn't their genetic make-up that persuades racists to attack black people, but the example set by governments that deport people on the basis of the colour of their skin. Setting out to change society is as easy as changing the colour of your hair—you only have to decide to try.

On your own

If you accept that nothing can be done to change society you are forced to try to survive on your own. You accept that things are in a mess and try to get by the best you can. You search for individual solutions.

The response to unemployment today is a good example of this. It is widely accepted that unemployment is inevitable. There is not much you can do if you lose your job. Fighting to keep it by going on strike is seen as a waste of time. So you do what you can on your own to try to survive. For instance, many people are now willing to accept a large wage cut as an alternative to redundancy, to hold onto their job at any cost. If there is no alternative to losing your job, you are likely to try to think of an alternative survival strategy. You might set up your own business and become self-employed. Or you might try to get another qualification. More and more people are entering higher education today because they cannot get a decent job.

If individual solutions worked then this outlook would make sense.

But they don't. No matter how hard you try to survive as an individual you cannot escape from the fact that you are part of society—and you cannot avoid its problems. The economic slump affects everyone in society, no matter what they do. Nobody is immune from it.

If you try to go it alone after losing your job you will find it difficult to survive. However imaginative and entrepreneurial you are, you will still find it hard to get a decent life today. A degree from a university won't make the problem go away. Even with good qualifications the jobs aren't out there. However hard you work there are no guarantees.

As an individual the most you can do is struggle on to survive. You may even do alright for a while, but it's inevitable that you'll run into problems. The dice are loaded against you.

All of the problems you face are created by the way society operates. Unemployment is a product of a system run for profit. When profit levels are falling, jobs are lost. As an individual you can try to battle against this but in the end society dictates your future for you. This society dictates that giving you a job is an expense it can do without—so you are made unemployed.

Individual solutions won't work because the problems you face are social problems. You cannot deal with them on your own. As an individual you will always be a victim of what society dishes out to you. You will be forced to put up with what you can get. You become a passive subject when things change for the worse, rather than being able to take matters into your own hands and get what you want.

The alternative is to approach things from a collective rather than an individual standpoint. On your own you are defenceless. The most you can do when threatened with redundancy is plead with your boss to keep you on, or volunteer for a wage cut. When you organise collectively with others you are stronger. Together with others in the same position you can fight for your jobs. You can take action together, which then puts you in a far stronger position. You can then make demands yourself rather than having to take what you are given. To do this, however, you have to expect and demand more and convince others to do the same.

Those who run capitalism will tell you that unemployment and wage cuts are unfortunate but are something we have to live with. Those who dare to suggest otherwise are being unreasonable. Anyone who expects to have a job for life is not facing up to reality. Expecting that you should have a job for the whole of your life is seen as setting your horizons too high. It is simply considered impossible to give people that kind of guarantee.

It makes a lot of sense for us to question this argument. Since people have bills to pay for life and a mortgage for life they need a job for life. When you lose your job, the bank manager doesn't say that you can stop paying your mortgage. You aren't suddenly given free food and electricity.

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All of the bills keep coming in—for the whole of your life. A job is the basic mechanism you have to make sure that you can pay them. Most of us have no other way to make a living. Yet demanding your right to a job is now considered unreasonable. We need to raise expectations and begin to demand jobs for life, rather than accepting the dole queue as the best we can expect.

The fact that this society offers no guarantees is recognised by most people. There is a palpable sense that things are out of control. Many feel powerless and unable to do much about it. A sense of being unable to make a difference applies to every social problem, not just unemployment. You may object to racism, women's inequality, anti-gay views or war and poverty in the third world. But there seems to be little you can do to sort these problems out.

As an isolated individual you have to accept all the problems that you don't like. You can be as cynical as you like, but you will be powerless to do anything to change the situation. As part of a collective movement, however, standing together, you are in a position to start making a difference. The problems you or I face might seem to be our own. But it only takes a moment to see that there is nothing unique about struggling to get by, finding a job and paying the rent. Collective problems demand collective solutions. Divided, we might well fall. But where is it written in stone that we cannot unite to solve our problems?

Mickey Mice

Many people have the preconception that student life will include some discussion and debate about the social questions of the day. You may have thought that you would even be encouraged to take up wider issues. In fact the culture of passivity dominates university life. Take student unions. When you look at the university prospectus you may read that the union at your university is 'one of the most active in the country'. Don't be fooled. Its activity will revolve entirely around running a bar, a shop and a few sports clubs.

These days student politicians often get elected to office on the basis that they are non-political. Some stand as joke candidates—a goat stood for president at Leeds University last year and Mickey Mouse stood at Bristol. The first time it might have been funny. But when the best representatives we can get are our childhood imaginary friends the joke is on us. What they are saying is that all our intelligence can cope with is comic book humour. Since you are a student why not stop using your brain for a few years and get into cartoon characters. They'll tell you to put a frog in the teacher's desk next.

Most candidates stand as 'independents'. They say they are apolitical

and just stand for students. They argue that students are not interested in politics. All students are concerned with is doing their degree and getting drunk. So the students union should reflect this. It should be about providing services for students not taking a stand on political issues.

The notion that it is even possible to be 'independent' and apolitical is nonsense. It is impossible to be entirely impartial and have no prejudice or attitude towards anything. As long as you talk to people, watch the television and read the odd newspaper you will have an opinion on what is going on. Unless you go and live in the Himalayas it could not be otherwise.

'Independents' are no different. No matter how much they tell you otherwise, they will have political attitudes. And their attitudes are decidedly secondhand.

Saying that you are 'independent' usually means refusing to take a critical stand. In which case, your opinions will simply reflect those of the mainstream. Like sponges, 'independents' soak up prevailing attitudes. If you ask them what they think about any issue this becomes all too obvious. For example, when it comes to government education policy, most independents will suggest that 'Access to education'—the government policy—is a good thing. You will quickly discover that they have swallowed the official doublespeak hook, line and sinker.

'Independence' is a misnomer. It is not about being impartial. It is about accepting mainstream attitudes and refusing to criticise them. 'Independents' tell you to forget about politics. But that just lets the politicians get on with it unchallenged. It gives the powers that be the green light to do what they want and say what they want while we stand back being 'independent'. In this way, the myth of independence endorses the status quo by default.

At the moment many damaging ideas are influential in society, from hostility to the third world to bigotry against single mothers. By refusing to criticise and organise against such notions, 'independence' accepts the prevailing state of affairs. By refusing to put forward an argument on these controversial issues, the 'independents' let narrow prejudices and those who promote them go unchallenged. Under the banners of independence, student union politics today are often the politics of cynicism and acquiescence.

What the independents are really saying is that it is illegitimate to hold a firm view and argue for it forcefully. They are celebrating ignorance by refusing to think and consider what their point of view should be. Such an attitude can only make students more reluctant to work out where they should stand on an issue and argue for what they think. The only things the independents are independent of is controversy and a hard argument.

It is time for some of us to challenge this cop out. Who wants to keep

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quiet and say nothing? It is far better to be partisan and take sides on an issue than refuse to say where you stand.

Only by making a stand and arguing your case can you create the opportunity to change things. By arguing against deportation and organising to defend the right of black people to stay in Britain you challenge racism head-on. By standing up for gay rights and campaigning against the criminalisation of homosexuality you fight for equality. This makes far more sense than pretending you don't have an opinion.

At the moment the 'independent' point of view has some resonance. Many students agree that politics is a waste of time, and take no interest in it. The problem is that, by so doing, they leave society in the hands of the same grey politicians that made such a mess of it in the first place.

To turn things around the climate of passivity needs to be confronted. There are good reasons why this mood exists today—but that makes it all the more important to challenge it. Those who want to see change have to put the case for trying to solving society's problems rather than accepting them. Even Mickey Mouse is not independent from society's problems. If EuroDisney continues to lose money, he, too, faces redundancy this winter. All the more reason then to think that we deserve better than the Mickey Mouse politics of the student unions.

Is this it?

It is understandable that students should want nothing to do with the kind of politics we see on our televisions every day. But if we take that anti-politics attitude further, and reject any idea of trying to change things, the consequences will be devastating. It will mean that the powers that be get away with everything, no matter how unpopular, because nobody tries to do anything about it. Everybody accepts that this is the way things are, and just tries to make the best of it.

Such a downbeat, passive mood reinforces the notion that 'this is it', that society can advance no further. If we accept that nothing can be done to change things for the better, we will have to accept everything that goes along with capitalist society, from the economic slump to the shoddy education system, from starvation in Africa to the bombing of Iraq.

Accepting that 'this is it' means leaving it up to the authorities to solve whatever problems do arise. Is racism a problem? Call in the police. Are women harassed? Call in the lawyers and the judges. Are the inner cities dangerous? Install security cameras. Before you know where you are you have surrendered all your rights to the state. The very people that nobody trusts when they are acting out the charade of parliamentary debate have got more real control of our lives than ever before. Our passivity in the face

of real problems means that the very people responsible for those problems are increasing their power over us and pretending they are doing us a favour.

This is the reality of the world we live in—a society going backwards. A decaying, undemocratic society which offers us less and less. You can respond to this reality in two ways. You can accept it and concede that you expect no better. Or you can fight to change it.

Today sticking your head in the sand and putting up with things seems to be the dominant response. Student life has become about retreating into a smaller and smaller shell—becoming obsessed with exams, day-to-day mundane survival and cutting yourself off from what is happening in the wider world.

A recent TSB survey showed that young people, who in the past would have had very different ideas and heroes to their parents, now have a similar outlook to those 30 years their senior. The survey showed that today's youth are more concerned about future job prospects and exams than ever before. Their aspiration is to get a decent job, settle down and have children.

Where does this leave you? You end up smothered by the climate of conservatism and low expectations. Students end up old before their time. People who should be interested in experimentation and doing something different end up with the mentality of middle age, worrying about what their pension will be like. By the age of 20 it has come to make sense to dismiss any attempt to change things as 'something you'll grow out of'.

In the end this means accepting that what you are given is all you deserve. As a student that is a shoddy, second-rate education. When you graduate things won't get better. You'll have to accept unemployment or a daily struggle to survive. The authorities win, you lose. They get away with making you pay for their mess. If 'this is it' then there is no escape. There can be no realistic prospect of improvement.

Alternatively, you can refuse to accept the idea that this is the best humanity can achieve. When you are told that 'this is it' you can refuse to believe it, and deflect attempts to fob you off with second best. You can ask the question 'why?' and demand a justification for the things we are told to suffer in silence. By adopting a questioning attitude, you can pick holes in the only defence the authorities have—that there is no alternative.

Being critical and generating a culture of defiance is the starting point. However it is not enough. On your own, as a critical voice, you are still powerless to really challenge those in authority. To be effective in opposition requires support and backing from others. You need allies.

Many today who object to injustice or poverty look to officials or politicians to solve the problem. In campaigning to oppose student hard-

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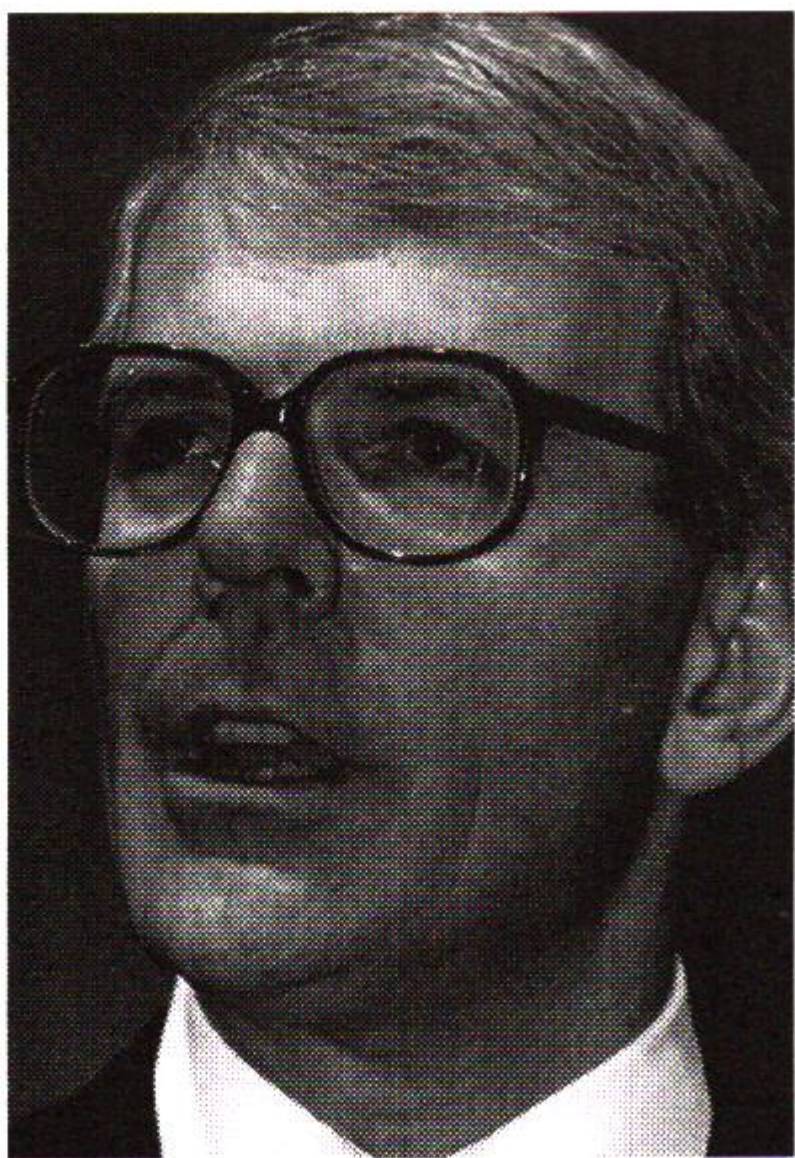
ship, student unions suggest you should write a letter to your MP or go on a lobby of parliament. Those involved in opposing racist attacks call on the police to do more to catch the racists.

It is important to question this approach. Is it really the case that we should put our faith in MPs to sort out the problems students face? After all they are the self same politicians who presided over cutting grants and stopping benefit payments to students in the first place. Should we put our faith in the police to fight racism, when they are responsible for implementing racist laws, and are themselves the most consistent perpetrators of racist violence and abuse?

It makes little sense for us to look to the authorities to sort out our problems. It is like holding hands with the enemy. We need to be clear about who we can trust—and we do best to look to ourselves to sort out our problems. Our most reliable allies are other students and working people, who have no vested interest in the system as it stands.

There are no guarantees of success for those who attempt to challenge the way things are. Nobody can promise that we will succeed. There is one guarantee, however. If we don't try, we will always be victims. We will always be at the mercy of those in authority, always dominated by the system we live in.

If you don't ask the critical questions about the way society is run and become part of a movement to change it, you can never hope to have any access to what really matters: control over your life.



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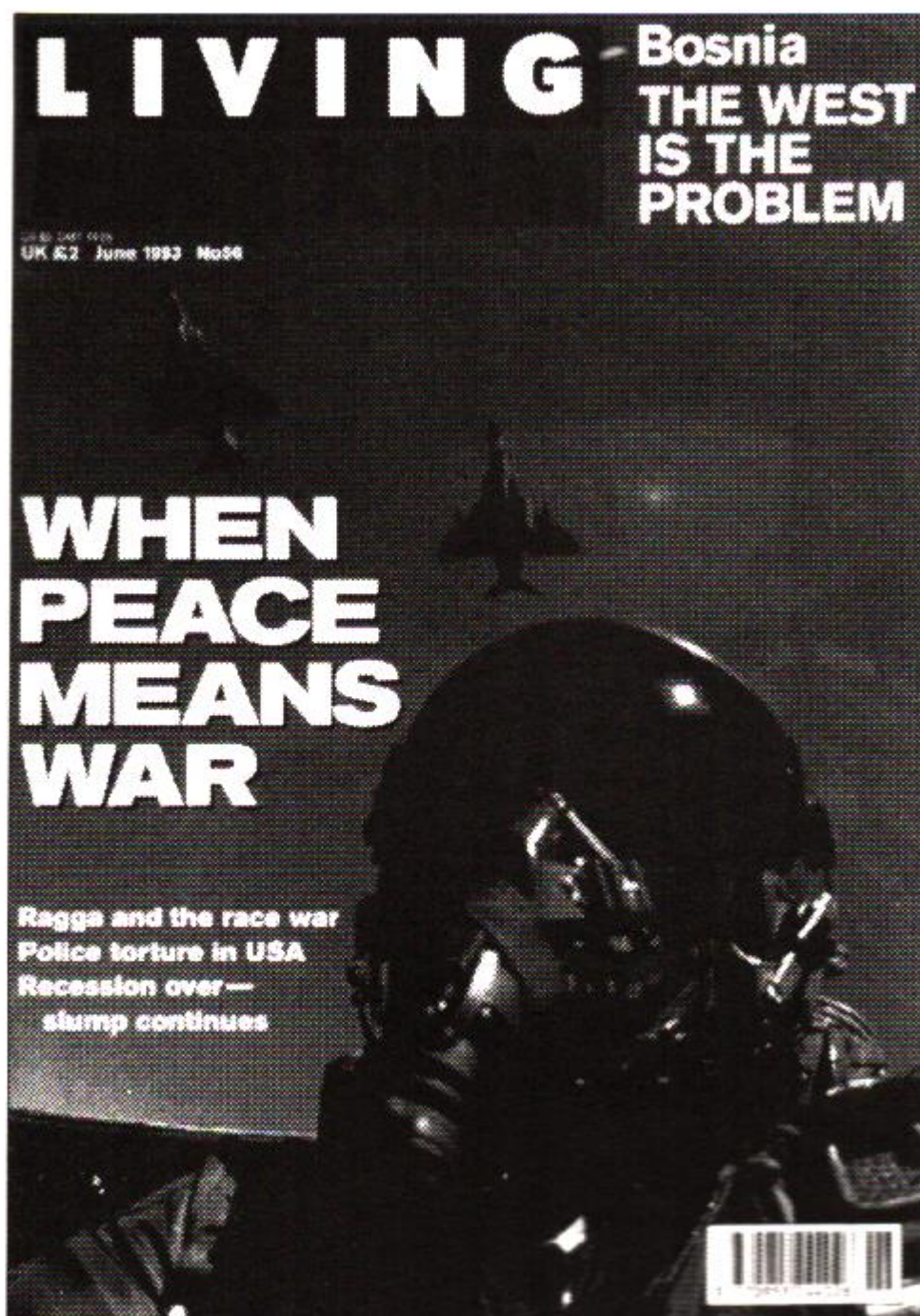
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WHAT EVERY STUDENT NEEDS TO KNOW

ELLIE DASHWOOD

British society is going downhill fast. The economic slump is having a devastating effect on all of our lives. Unemployment has reached record levels and the education system is collapsing under the pressure of student numbers and inadequate resources.

Internationally things get more out of control day by day. The post-Cold War era was supposed to be about peace and stability. Instead war and chaos reign supreme.

The need to change things could never be more urgent. Yet in this context it has become common sense to say that nothing can be done. Too many people have come to accept the problems of society as a fact of life. Even students seem pessimistic about the future.

This pamphlet aims to challenge the idea that nothing can be done. It argues that we should reject the idea that 'this is it'. It puts the case for challenging the status quo rather than accepting defeat.

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