

RADICAL PHILOSOPHY TEN

Keith Joseph and the simple- minded

"Mounting evidence that a small minority of university teachers regards truth as being at worst irrelevant and at best a political weapon to manipulate the simple-minded" is apparently gathering in the files of the right (see p.8)

The charges have implications beyond Keith Joseph's bid for stardom on the outer right and such accusations have become common since 1968.

The burden of Joseph's accusations is that socialists cannot respect the truth and that therefore their presence in the education system is a threat to academic freedom. His attacks complement a reactionary elitist social and educational programme. His method is to manipulate liberal democratic concern for truth and freedom.

It is a slander to say that socialism is an intellectually dishonest perspective. And when this is added to the confusion generated, as in the Huntington affair, by panic over "academic values" (see Roy Edgley's article in this issue), then an ominous shadow rises behind the credulous liberal.

THREAT TO SWANSEA STUDENTS

In the last issue of Radical Philosophy we gave a good deal of publicity to the dismissal of Mike Weston, and threatened dismissal of Colwyn Williamson from their posts in the Swansea Philosophy Department. We pointed to the fact that these events had come as the culmination of three years of discontent in the Department over the organisation and content of courses, and actions of its head, Professor D.Z. Phillips, but it was felt by the students that we had not given sufficient space to their continuing struggle for reform of the syllabus and assessment system, especially the system of annual examinations. The following is based on a report from one of the students in the Department:

Two boycotts of exams, various demonstrations, a three day occupation of the Philosophy Department and a 26 day occupation of the main administrative building give some idea of the extent of the battle that students have been waging at Swansea for reform of the assessment system and for staff/student democracy. It's three years now since these issues first came up for debate, and the protest has mounted ever since.

The Philosophy course is dominated by exams which are held in each of its four years. Only the final exams grade degrees; first year exams determine entry to the course; third year exams are supposed to be 'good practice' for finals. Not even the moderates in the Department regard second year exams as necessary, and one student who failed them recently was still allowed to continue the course. Hence they became a focus of attack.

It was argued generally against exams that they limit the content and method of courses by requiring them to be exam-orientated; that they provide a quantified and finalised verdict of a kind not relevant to philosophy where assessment should be open-ended; and that they preempt the development of changes in the students' viewpoint on the material learnt.

Year One

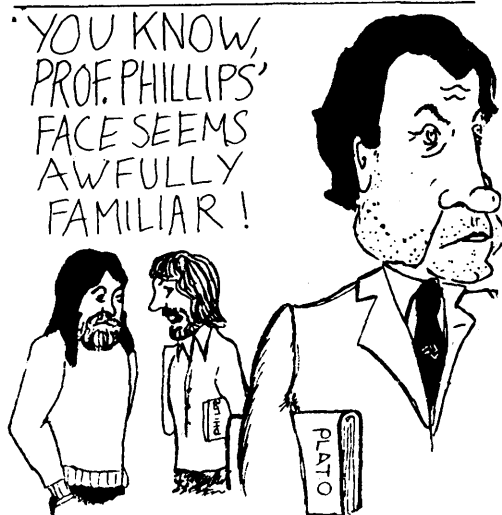
In Feb. 1973 a staff-student forum voted overwhelmingly for abolition of second year exams and reduction of third year exams. Prof. Phillips rejected the proposals. By way of protest the students announced their intention to boycott the second year exams. Prof. Phillips evaded all discussion of the educational issues involved and threatened to prevent the students proceeding to the third year or to resign if they were allowed to. The students took the exams.

Year Two

Discussion continued but to no avail, and was finally clamped down on by Prof. Phillips in February 1974. The only change made was that an individual tutorial system was introduced which provided an alternative means of monitoring progress, and discouraged students from merely learning lecture notes. But in the Summer term, with exams imminent, the conflict between this more constructive work and exam work became acute, with consequent increase in discontent. The final straw came when lecturers with whom the students discussed this discontent, and who themselves deplored the apathy of students' attitudes to work, still refused to entertain any hope of changes.

So again the students decided to boycott the exams, and once again Prof. Phillips refused to discuss the issue, and threatened *de facto* expulsion. Ultimately the students agreed to take the exams provided exams were abolished for future years. But this offer elicited no response, and as things were worsening in the Department with the victimisation of Mike Weston and Colwyn Williamson, the students boycotted again.

Further negotiations with Prof. Phillips failed. A staff meeting voted to reinstate the students unconditionally and to discuss the exams issue, but Prof. Phillips rejected both recommendations and proposed instead that the Faculties concerned suspend the students for a year pending external exams in June 1975. A Senate meeting of Heads of Department offered students more exams in October. At no time were the students' yearly academic records questioned; they were just told that they must sit their



exams in order to comply with Departmental (not College) rules.

Support was solicited from other students, and the Student Union Executive took up the issue. After initial support of the boycott it managed to persuade the union that the exams should be taken. It was hinted that improvements in the Department were on the way. In addition, Professor Phillips promised to abide by a democratic staff decision about exams in December, and to consult students about it.

The students felt this was a defeat for a cause with widespread support. They felt that the students might be victims of the exams if they had to sit them at this juncture.

This proved correct: we all failed the exams equally badly. Most staff, knowing this reflected our state of mind rather than our ability, wanted us all to proceed to the third year. But a Senate Committee accepted the proposal of Prof. Phillips and three of the staff that two of the students should repeat the second year. The Student Union Executive protested to the Principal, who refused to change the decision and added that the two students must in future have 'exemplary academic records and not engage in any 'dissident activity'.

The response to this was immediate: 200 students occupied the Philosophy Department; three days later 600 voted at a Union meeting to occupy the Registry.

In reply to this direct action, members of the A.U.T. went on 'strike' (i.e. they stopped teaching) against the occupation. This served to strengthen student support rather than split it.

Four fifths of a 2,000 strong Union meeting voted to continue the occupation.

The next move came from the Principal, who, in consultation with two students and the Union Executive submitted a compromise solution to a specially called senate meeting. The only philosopher present at the meeting was Prof. Phillips. The compromise was rejected.

It now looked as if the occupation was succeeding where earlier attempts at negotiation had failed, and a second Union meeting voted to continue with it. But the N.U.S. executive was lukewarm in support of it, and this, combined with a failure to escalate the action, meant that support gradually dwindled.

Year Three: The Reckoning

Nonetheless we have managed to sustain an occupation for nearly four weeks in a College that has not been militant for several years. On the debit side, two students are having to repeat a year with no guarantee of finance; three have returned, somewhat demoralised, to the third year. Another has left in disgust. On the credit side, we have learnt the importance of unity. It was this which made us hold out so long. In fact it was only with the competitiveness induced by the exams that the group began to dissolve. Nevertheless, the Students Union, realising the mistake it made in advising us to sit them, then understood the need for direct, united action.

If nothing else we have shown students the nature of our Department and the ease with which the university structure as a whole can accommodate it. The Principal's assertion that the university is a democracy has been exposed for what it is: it refers to an authoritarian hand within a democratic glove.

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details page 7

Radical Philosophy is published by the Radical Philosophy Group, c/o Richard Norman, Darwin College: University of Kent, Canterbury
Printed by LARULAR LTD.

