

"Something has to give... if it gives, it's going to give this year", Simon Lucas, Union President, on changing Uni policy

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Interview with Tony Blair

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Labour had romped home to victory in the 2001 General Election, but it was only a year before things started to go wrong and rumours of top-up fees began leaking out. The government had promised not to introduce them, but left a generously sized loophole to crawl through. Next year, Warwick's UK freshers will pay fees of £3000 a year, something a lot of students thought they had voted to prevent.



It's no surprise that many still feel betrayed. When you add the student unfriendly war on Iraq that at least 500 Warwick students marched against, it's no shock that Labour's popularity amongst undergraduates has plummeted. In a recent opinion poll carried out by Opinionpanel, Labour slumped into second place behind the Liberal Democrats. Just 23 percent of students said they would vote for the Government; one percent more than Conservative supporters.

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Which might explain why the Prime Minister took time out from his election tour to speak to the Boar and explain why students should have no qualms about supporting his party.

"I know many Labour supporters have disagreements and differences with decisions we have taken and I can understand why some students are unhappy about the changes we are making," says Blair, "but if you value the changes that have taken place in Britain over the last eight years, the only way to be sure that the country will keep going forward is to vote Labour."

It's the nearest his dissenters will get to an apology, but the PM has already moved on to the theme of change. It's something he's clearly pleased about: when he talks about his achievements that the Blair appears genuinely sincere. Watch any interview and as soon as his party's accomplishments and challenges come onto the agenda, you can sense real enthusiasm for the subject.

"I am proud of a great deal of what we have done. We have delivered the lowest inflation, interest rates and unemployment for a generation; we are investing record sums in our schools and hospitals, and we have brought in the minimum wage and lifted hundreds of thousands of pensioners and children out of poverty. We know we have to do more - and will in all of these areas. But whether we get that chance will be down to the voters on May 5."

Tony Blair the student studied Law at Oxford played bass guitar and was lead singer in rock band, Ugly Rumours. He might be expected to empathise with Warwick's undergraduates, so what has he done in power that he would have wished for as a student? "The expansion of student numbers which means far more people now have the chance of going to university would be high on the list." It's not very rock and roll and a bit too easy.

Certainly, there is little chance of Blair straying off the serious points. He seems happier talking about his goals that include full employment for all, ensuring that everybody can benefit from post-16 education and

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eliminating child poverty.

The theme of fairness runs right through the manifesto and Labour seem determined to implement their version of a fair society. Despite protest from the business world, maternity leave will increase, although commerce might be assuaged by a promise to cut red tape. Blair is likely to raise the minimum wage after the election and is committed to continue cutting waiting lists. He countered criticism that the targets waste money and create other NHS pressures by promising targets that are more sophisticated and accurately measure service.

He is also committed to continue his 'Africa project': "Our record on helping the poorest people on our planet and are determination to do more. We have already doubled the aid budget and intend to make a new drive to tackle Africa's problems along with climate change - the top priority for Britain's G8 Presidency."

Amidst the social revolution, graduates have apparently not been forgotten: "You certainly have more chance of getting a job now than for many years, and with the evidence showing that most of the new jobs being created over the next few years will need degree-level education, you should be well-placed."

Blair also pledged to work with the Pension Commission to put into place a sustainable pension system that would mean current students would not be faced with having to work until they are 75, but didn't indicate how he thought this might be done.

The likelihood is that Blair will win the election, but despite national polls suggesting he is well on his way to a Thatcher-equalling third-term in office, he still wants to suggest apathy could prove his downfall: "You can be sure that the Tories will be trying every cynical effort they can over the next few days including pretending they can't win to persuade Labour voters not to bother voting or to cast a protest vote to try and get it by the back door. Don't fall for it."

Certainly, Conservative appeals to "send Blair a message", emphasising that it is the last election that they will be able to do so, seems to have greatly reduced Labour's guaranteed vote.

However, he does discount the Liberal Democrats: "Charles Kennedy is not going to become Prime Minister. But if you vote Lib-Dem, you do risk a Tory Government.

"Students should be as concerned as anyone to want a Government which will continue with policies which have delivered a strong and stable economy."

Blair has often said that investment in education is the best economic investment, so is British education the best? Warwick was recently placed 80th in the Times Higher's University World League Table, but Blair is satisfied that his Higher Education funding plans are adequate: "Our best universities like Warwick are world-class.

"Our universities were in a pretty poor state after 18 years of Tory Government. Public funding per student had fallen by 36% during their years in power and you could see the result in the fabric of university buildings, the lack of modern equipment and a cap on student numbers. The pay of university staff was held down.

"We are putting that right. We have more to do but we have dramatically increased investment to improve facilities and support research. There is huge investment now going, for example, into science and we are working with universities to ensure they and the country benefit from the commercial use of the ideas and innovation generated from within them."

Of course, central to Labour's funding plans are increased student fees and the Prime Minister felt obliged to again defend his stance, saying, "As graduates earn around 50 percent more than non-graduates, we also think it is right they also make a bigger contribution towards this extra investment provided it is done in a fair way.

"We will give you a real terms interest-free loan to cover the cost of attending college. And on top of that we are re-introducing student grants to help those from poorer backgrounds. Unlike now, no one will have to pay anything under the new system until they have left university and got a job." Mr Blair, however, didn't comment on the awkward situation that students in their twenties face repayments based on their family situation at the age of 18.

It is also worth noting that Warwick has stated that top-up fees will not provide enough income for the foreseeable future. It seems that Blair has chosen the middle ground: students wanted to get rid of fees and vice-chancellors like Warwick's David VandeLinde hoped to charge £6000 a year. It's a real compromise and a clear gamble to introduce a policy that pleases nobody.

Blair cleverly deals with perception that he is untrustworthy by focusing on his past issues and often referring to a Conservative alternative, but as speculation continues to rise that he will step down soon, he does seem keen to fulfil his manifesto promises. Rumour has it that the promises made at this election will be made law in a record 18 months.

But can Blair deliver? Surely Britain would be better off under the Conservatives with lower taxes, or under the Liberal Democrats with no tuition fees?

But Blair does have a Trump card. There is no difficulty suggesting your opponents are naive when so few of them have been in government: "I know other parties will be saying they will do things differently but their economic policies simply don't add up. One of the things you learn in Government is that there is a limit to how much money you have."

A politician not promising the world? Surely not.

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