

Facts on Fees – Dispelling the Myths

Ben Howlett, National Chairman of Conservative Future

Over the last few months, I have been struck by the level of misinformation about what the Coalition proposed in terms of the changes to Higher Education in England. Over the last few weeks and the upcoming months, Conservative Future has been helping to make the facts clear.

I was elected as the National Conservative Future Chairman just over 2 months ago, and one of the first things that faced my term was the changes to the Higher Education system. Prior to my election, I was expecting to get on with campaigning, social action and discussion. However, I have led my members by rolling up our sleeves and creating a revival of Conservative Future by travelling around the country engaging with students in debates and campaigns. We have been explaining to them that these are some of the most progressive and fair moves that any Government has introduced since the Second World War.

Labour has left us with the worst economy and largest budget deficit since 1945 and the Coalition have some very tough choices for the future. No example can epitomise Labour's record of poor financial management better than the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury leaving a letter on the desk saying "there is no money left – good luck". Leaving aside the fact Liam Byrne's letter sums up 13 years of mismanagement, it shows what sort of mess the Coalition has to clear up. Given this bleak picture, the Coalition is already putting Britain on a strong financial footing. Since May 2010 the AAA credit rating is now considered safer with the programme of cuts and sound fiscal responsibility being introduced by the Government. Due to the programme of cuts 90,000 more jobs are being saved in the public sector and the economic growth forecasts for the last quarter of 2010 have been upgraded by the independent Office of Budgetary Responsibility.

Where does the economic predicament leave higher education. Students must take a greater responsibility for the cost of their education. The NUS even understand that. In a world where Labour did not leave Britain in a financial mess, Conservatives would have kept fees down. However, this is not an ideal world and Labour have left us in that mess. Fees have to go up and Labour has no workable alternative. Despite a change of heart and another flip-flop from the Shadow Chancellor, Alan Johnson is still at odds with Red Ed over the Labour Graduate Tax. The Browne Review commissioned by Labour clearly explains that a Graduate Tax does not produce a fairer system of higher education. Labour does have an answer of what they would do differently. Red Ed stands with a blank placard protesting against fees unsure if he should go and join the protestors.

Due to the blatant lies, confusion and scaremongering by the Left, the Conservative Party and Conservative Future have launched a new website www.factsonfees.com. This website gives a closer examination of the facts about the Government's Higher Education Legislation and separates the truth from the myths on tuition fees.

For example students:

- won't pay anything upfront, from the day they start their course to the day they leave
- won't pay a penny until they earn more than £21,000
- will pay back £45 less per month under the new system when earning more than £21,000

- the lowest earning 20 per cent of graduates will pay back less in total than they do at the moment
- will be entitled to more bursaries and grants
- interest repayments will be linked to earnings

These are progressive moves, as the Prime Minister explained in simple terms to the House of Commons: “the rich pay more and the poor pay less”. If a university wants to charge any more than £ 6000 per year in fees, then they must prove to the regulators that they are doing so because they are improving access to the poorest in society. It was perverse that under the old system the poorest in society had less opportunity to attend university than the richest. The new progressive system turns this on its head. If a graduate is earning more, they will pay more. This is fair given the economic circumstances that Labour has left us with.