

What THE OBSERVER thinks



STUDENTS: Intolerant minority

IT IS HARD to set a limit to the damage done by the student militants of the London School of Economics. By forcing Dr Walter Adams to close down the LSE temporarily, they have inflicted harm both on their fellow students and on all the universities of this country. For although they themselves are only a small minority even of the students at the LSE, the stigma which inevitably is attached to their action is bound to rub off onto others. This is the measure of their self-indulgence in engaging in pseudo-revolutionary activities.

There are two distinct elements in the present situation: the grievances (real as well as imagined) of the students and the tactics chosen by the militants among them. Whatever sympathy there may be for their grievances, there can be none for these irresponsible tactics.

Most of the student grievances are not special to the LSE, though that institution has special problems of its own. Many of the grievances express a generalised discontent with society at large and with the place of students in the modern world. The more specific ones revolve round the question of what say the students should have in the running of universities.

In dealing with this challenge, the university authorities have often been clumsy: dons, on the whole, are neither skilful nor practised in handling what is basically a political situation. They have tended to make concessions only under pressure, so encouraging further militancy. They have created circumstances in which a militant minority could exploit the apathy of the majority: the installation of the doors which precipitated the trouble at the LSE is a case in point.

But having said that, nothing can excuse the tactics used by the militants. Here, it's important to be precise. It would be a mistake to use 'militants' as a universal smear-word. There is nothing wrong and much right with militancy as such, if it means feeling strongly and being ready to support feeling with action. What matters is the kind of action.

There is action which respects the rights of both minorities and majorities (however much one may disagree with their views). And there is coercive action designed to impose a minority view on the majority. The latter is inspired by a perilous belief in one's own righteousness.

In the case of the LSE (as in the case of some of the student 'revolts' in the United States, Japan, France and Germany) the militants clearly belong to minorities whose aim is forcibly to impose their views on the rest of the community. That is not to say that they cannot at times gain and exploit the sympathy of the rest of the student body. In this respect they are no different from other militants, whether in trade unions or in political movements.

Indeed, the actions of the LSE militants are a perfect example of these tactics. The decision to tear down the doors was taken at a meeting where only 500 or so of the LSE's 3,000 students were present (reversing a vote taken at a better attended meeting held earlier in the week). On occasion, some militants have even resorted to threats of physical intimidation.

The real difference between the majority and the minority of real militants is that the former want a reasonable solution and the latter do not. At the LSE, as elsewhere, there is a handful (no more) of students whose real aim is to wreck the institution as the first part of an exercise designed to destroy bourgeois society and rebuild it on a new (but unspecified) model. It is the

difference between reformers and revolutionaries.

In the short run, militancy has paid off—in the sense that university authorities have made a number of concessions to the student demands for more 'participation.' But last Friday's events at the LSE are bound to reinforce the already growing reaction against universities and students.

This is the real tragedy of the LSE. The temporary 'victory' of the militants has been bought at enormous cost to the entire academic community. There is bound to be a growing demand for withdrawing grants from students who spend their time politicking rather than studying (and it will be increasingly difficult to resist this demand, even for liberals anxious to preserve the right of free expression). There is also bound to be growing resistance to finding more money for higher education.

But the significance of the LSE (using this case as short-hand for the entire crisis of student militancy) goes deeper still. It represents a familiar crisis for liberal values. How long can or should a free society extend tolerance to activities which threaten the entire basis of its philosophy? How far can the tolerant afford to tolerate intolerance?

Here the answer is, surely, that to the extent that any activity threatens the central values of our society—the right of free discussion, the system of majority decision-taking—so it forfeits any claim to protection or indulgence. In the last resort, a liberal society has to show itself as resolute and as determined in the defence of its values as those who seek to challenge them. Hence the case for being prepared to support disciplinary action at the LSE.

The trouble, of course, is that all and any society suffers from a bad conscience. Ours is uneasily aware that there are weaknesses and injustices in our economic and social system. Added to which is the usual feeling that the adult world doesn't understand the young. This is as old as humanity itself: the new element is the lack of self-assurance among the adults.

The greatest mistake would be to abdicate from responsibility for the future. If some students want to opt out of the present educational system, let them do so: why not even subsidise a university where the irreconcilables can practise what they preach? But all our universities (like this country's other institutions) cannot be constantly adjusted to take account of every intellectual whim.

An important truth is that the student population changes every three years. And no single generation of students has either the knowledge or the right to seek to impose its own pattern of demands on universities which will continue long after today's revolutionaries have become tomorrow's suburban householders.

Last week's events at the LSE will not be the end of the story. The LSE's problems are not peculiar to that institution, just as student discontent is not confined to this country. A long period of conflict and adjustment is certain. But it is all the more important that this process of adjustment between students and university authorities should take place by methods of mutual tolerance. Change is as inevitable as it is desirable, but it will be constructive change only if both sides recognise that what joins them is more important than what divides them. This means that both sides need to recognise that they have a common interest in preserving the rights of the majority against the efforts of any intolerant minority.