

Prime Minister

Do you wish to write
as recommended?

Yes ask
why we are
going to an
institution which
denies free
speech
and

PRIME MINISTER

JRW
31/10.

23 October 1986

THE SELBOURNE AFFAIR

David Selbourne (age 49) has been a tutor at Ruskin College, Oxford for 20 years. He is firmly on the Left, a radical maverick. On 28 March 1986 The Times published an article by him on Labour policies in Liverpool. Because The Times was blacklisted by the TUC and the Labour Party, he incurred the wrath of a group of Ruskin students.

At the beginning of the summer term, the Ruskin Students Union (RSU) carried a motion condemning his 'anti-trade union action', demanding an apology and a promise not to publish in Murdoch's newspapers again. If he refused they would boycott his lectures and tutorials and urge print unions to prevent him writing anywhere. He declined to apologise and on 5th May the pickets prevented anyone from entering the lecture theatre (the subject of the lecture was Thomas Paine's Rights of Man!) The lecture was not given.

On 7 May the RSU passed a motion demanding that all of his duties be assigned to others, otherwise they would boycott the whole academic life of the college. On 12th May he attempted to give another lecture, which met the same fate as his previous one. On 14th May the deadline from the RSU expired and the college ground to a halt. The following day following a negotiation between the RSU and the college, his students were reallocated. (Out of 12 only 2 stuck it out with him to the end of term).

On 28th May, and with Selbourne having failed to repent and refused to resign over the issue, the RSU passed a resolution calling for his dismissal and replacement within 3 months.

On 6th October at the beginning of this term Selbourne wrote to his Principal, John Hughes asking for his standard quota of tutees and seeking disciplinary action against students who engaged in boycott, picketing and intimidation in future. Hughes declined, and Selbourne withdrew and decided to initiate legal proceedings v the college.

La trahison des clerics

The attitude of the college throughout has been very interesting.

- In May, the Principal was on sabbatical leave. At the beginning the acting Principal told Selbourne to ignore the boycott, turn up for tutorials and supply the names names of students who did not attend tutorials and lectures. Following the first boycott he told Selbourne "we were slow off the mark" and regretted that the authorities had not acted sooner.
- Initially the College regretted the RSU demands and was only ready to reallocate students who came from print unions.
- A special meeting of Ruskin staff was then held which concluded that they could not accept extra teaching through reallocation because it "might be contrived as condoning the action of David Selbourne".
- The staff then met on 13th May as the Ruskin branch of the AUJ and unanimously approved a statement disapproving and disassociating themselves from Selbourne's action. Academic freedom was fine they said but "the exercise of this right should have reasonable and sensible regard for the institutional context of academic processes". Free speech is fine providing the majority agree!

- On 23rd May Selbourne asked his acting Principal whether he would make a clear statement to the students defending his freedom to speak and write. "No" was the answer.
- On 27th June, the executive committee of the College met to consider the position. It resolved "to place on record its censure of David Selbourne for his action in writing to the Times".
- On 6th October Selbourne wrote to Hughes asking for his protection and a return to normality. The Principal refused all of Selbourne's requests.

Epilogue

Ruskin receives a grant of £570,000 from the DES.

On Monday George Walden sees John Hughes, the Principal.

Recommendation

It may be worthwhile to invite the Secretary of State to write to you giving his judgement on the case and in particular whether a situation such as this could occur under the new Education Bill.

B.G.

BRIAN GRIFFITHS