

## **In memory of Pam Thompson**

From *The Black Dwarf*, dated Christmas 1969, by Chris Ratcliffe

### **THE LIBERAL MYTH OF ESSEX UNIVERSITY**

The University of Essex is situated in Colchester (under an hour's train journey from London) and has been pumping out facts for just over five years. The University is based on the Reith lectures given by its Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Albert Sloman. The one pervading theme of these lectures was that the new University of Essex was to be an integrated community. It was to be a great experiment in liberalism. Essex is different; it is liberal. It has to a large extent dissipated the classic hierarchies of the old universities. But only because its function is not that of these pre-war institutions. Instead of "fully educating" an imperial elite, Essex University is here as the fifth column of a technological society. The University serves to manufacture limited functionaries for that society and to produce the ideological rationalisation which keeps it going.

Vice-Chancellor Sloman's integrated community was one where staff and students should simply be able to co-exist without distinctions. And in fact there are no (formally) segregated common rooms, bars, restaurants, no "staff rooms" and minimal intrusion into the "private life" of students. But behind this seemingly progressive, liberal myth of an integrated university lies a hierarchy that is even more authoritarian than before and an interference with the student's every day life that breeds even more neurosis than before.

The first crack in the liberal umbrella came in May, 1968. During the academic year 1967/8 a strong left wing movement had developed following attempts by the University to victimise persons involved in political activity and a campaign by socialists to give the students' union to the general meeting. In May 1968, a free university, the culmination of this movement, arose out of several general meetings of staff and students (well over 1,000) which met to call upon the Vice-Chancellor to rescind his arbitrary expulsion of three left wing students. But the left movement was as yet unable to fight the institution's ultimate weapon, the examination, and the free university fell.

Nevertheless, the academic year 1968/9 began with really high hopes, the non-fulfilment of which sowed the seeds of a tragic depression which pervaded every aspect of social life on the Essex campus. It was as if the only time we were remotely free was during moments when we were fighting and although there were many of these, each was short-lived. During the first term 37 of us were fined £20 each after Colchester police gave trumped-up evidence relating to a Vietnam Demonstration in Colchester. On the last day of the first term at around 6 p.m., the University informed the only one of the three students suspended last May still at the University, Raphael Halberstadt, that he must "withdraw". An occupation of the University Computer Centre took place at the beginning of the second term. The University Administration remained intransigent and when they went so far as to take out an injunction against Raffy, the High Court held that he had been illegally excluded and was still a student. Also that term was the occupation of the lecture

theatre block in solidarity with the LSE students and the ill-fated "Revolutionary Festival". In the last term a Parliamentary Select Committee came to examine student unrest, Instead of asking those in the audience that may have been able to help them, only certain preselected members of the University Administration were allowed to submit evidence. When we in the audience objected we were accused of breaking up the meeting.

At the end of the summer term this year, **Pam Thompson**, about the only black undergraduate ever at the University, was "asked to withdraw". Her crime? Failing to achieve the prescribed "academic standard". That is, she failed a minor language option by two per cent. She was thrown out in spite of the fact that the Chairman of her Department, Fabian Professor Peter Townsend, assured her that she should concentrate on her main sociology subjects (in which she attained very good grades) and that if she failed the language option he would "square it" for her. Throughout the summer vacation and the beginning of this term, Pam's friends tried to get the decision changed. They appealed to the Dean of the School, Professor David Lockwood, but he made it clear that he did not want to get involved. Next they appealed to the School Board, the "appropriate committee" which rejected Pam's appeal by eight votes to seven (note that this is the academic standard). Prior to the Board meeting, nearly every member of the Sociology Department had indicated their desire to have Pam reinstated to complete he final year.

On Thursday, 23 October, when it was clear that all the "legal" means to get Pam back had failed, a general meeting of 400 voted to move en masse to lobby Vice-Chancellor Sloman. Dr. Sloman claimed that he supported the decision of the "responsible body" albeit whilst disclaiming any knowledge of the facts, and claimed that the body that, would have to alter the decision, if it were to be altered, was the University Senate. The same evening Students' Council resolved that if Pam were not reinstated by Tuesday morning, they would withdraw all forms of cooperation with the Administration, e.g. by not sitting on committees. The following afternoon a general meeting of 500 staff and students demanded an emergency meeting of Senate, the governing body of the University, to immediately reinstate Pam Thompson. Over the weekend the University was decorated with posters, a petition received around 800 signatures and a leaflet was issued giving the internal phone numbers of each member of the Senate.

By Tuesday 28th October the Senate had of course issued no statement. The Tuesday meeting was even larger and three other students declared that they too had been unfairly treated. Nick Jones had been "asked to withdraw" in June 1968 because of a "bad disciplinary record" and told that he could return this year if he passed examinations in June. After passing these examinations with top grades he then received a letter from the University Administration informing him that because of his "bad disciplinary record" he could not return. Graham Jocelyne had been expelled without trial last January following his admission to a local mental hospital in connection with drugs. The University Administration refused to let him complete his final year in spite of medical reports stating that he was no longer dependent upon drugs. Dinah Bolton was another victim of the mythical academic standard.

This Tuesday general meeting expressed solidarity with all four students, but again did not decide upon any militant action. This was probably influenced by previous experience, which has taught us that there is no nerve centre within the University which is particularly vulnerable and that conventional forms of direct action bring no immediate reaction. A policy of mass lobbying of senators was agreed upon. Consequently, every member of Senate, including the Vice-Chancellor, was to be continually lobbied until the following Monday. Lobbying too brought forth no response. There remained a refusal on the part of Senate to discuss the futures of these four students with fellow members of the University. On Monday 3rd November, a large general meeting agreed to devote the following day to a token strike of lectures, bar, classes, coffee bar, restaurant, shops. The strike received well over fifty per cent support.

Unless something was done soon, it would be too late for the four students to complete this academic year. So a couple of days before the proposed Senate meeting of 5th November, a group of 70 or 80 people who felt very strongly about the four cases of injustice agreed to appear outside the Board Room where Senate were due to meet, soon after the meeting began. We agreed that we would not let the Senate out until the four students had been reinstated. We arrived at a quarter to three. It was not until just before seven that the first senator was peacefully prevented from leaving. He was told to return to the meeting to tell his friends that they would not be let out until the four students had been reinstated. Senators were allowed to go to the toilet and one or two, who had strong reasons for leaving like kiddies birthday party, were let out. A barricade was erected and every time they attempted to make a rush a human barricade of linked arms prevented them. One by one they came out to reason with us (and we later found out, to identify names) and to threaten us with immediate expulsion.

Although the students (fluctuating between one and two hundred in number) took these threats seriously, they were not deterred. Unknown to the Senate, some of us were listening to them through the skylight. At one point a suggestion that the Catholic chaplain and two students be allowed in to discuss the situation was howled down by Senate. Most of their discussion centred around not the four students, but how many to discipline. Another suggestion was made that anybody who could be identified as having been outside the Board Room at any time (up to 200 if necessary) should be expelled immediately. Their proposed methods of escape were: i) Forcing their way, which was abandoned after an advance party failed; ii) Escaping through the skylight, but this was too undignified; iii) Five people chosen at random from outside would be expelled. If the blockade was not removed, five more would be thrown out, and so on until they were released: iv) The police originally refused to come, but eventually they got hold of some top knobs. Just after eleven Chief Superintendent Wood and Chief Inspector Rush arrived, informing us that the Director of Public Prosecutions had approved the laying of charges against us if the Senate were not let out next time they tried, and that 200 fuzz would be here within minutes, if necessary. We discussed this for half an hour and shortly before midnight voted (by a narrow margin) that Senate, the senior "academics" of the University, had been sufficiently ridiculed and that the point of the demonstration had been achieved. The four students remain excluded. Subsequently, general meetings of up

to 1,000 have expressed support for the blockade of Senate and have demanded a public inquiry into Essex University. A petition with over 200 signatures demanding a public inquiry into Essex University has been rejected by the Department of Education and Science. Around 20 students are to appear before a disciplinary committee, the University's organ of political repression, before the end of term, for their part in the blockade. Over half of those accused have issued a joint statement demanding that these political trials be held together and in public. Moreover, the University is also using the law courts as a source of sanction. One graduate of the University, Chris Ratcliffe, still lives in the area for the time being, although he is no longer a registered student. His part in the Senate Blockade won him an injunction restraining him from entering the University of Essex campus. Being refused legal aid and getting no help from several solicitors, he was forced to defend himself. At the first hearing before the Judge in Chambers on Tuesday 18th November, Chris succeeded in having the University's application for a renewal of the injunction rejected on the basis of an undertaking of good behaviour", But the University Administration were not satisfied, and took the matter to the Court of Appeal, where Chris had to face not only the University Administration, but a Queen's Counsel, three barristers, solicitor and three Lords Justice of Appeal. In spite of giving a 15-page statement in his defence and in spite of being commended upon his presentation of his case, he inevitably lost. A political. file was produced by the University Administration giving details of his role in many demonstrations in and out of the University.

The liberal experiment at Essex has failed because the myth of an integrated community remains a myth. As ever, decision-making, discipline, course content, entrance requirements, and assessment are reserved for a very small group of senior academics and administrators. Time after time we have seen the express wish of a majority of the members of the University laughed at by the one or two that have the power. In the Court of Appeal, the University was for all intents and purposes one person, the Registrar. Moreover, this one person under the name "University of Essex" may "manage its affairs in the same way as an individual manages his property" for the University "is neither a collection of buildings nor a community of scholars, but a corporation with a charter" (Lord Justice Harman).

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