

Forty years on – welcome to new plutocracy



View from the street

Liz Thomson

News of a cousin's A-level results reminded me that it's now 40 years since I headed to Liverpool to embark on a music degree. What a different world.

The Borough of Barnet paid my tuition fees and a grant, which my parents topped up. I lived "in hall", red-brick and ivy-clad, near Penny Lane, at a cost of £225 a term which included breakfast and evening meal, lunch and high tea on Sundays. I can't remember what was left to live on, £15 a week maybe, but more than enough for books and beer. I survived quite happily, as did my friends.

Our backgrounds were not dissimilar: Our parents had known war and rationing. We were all products of the grammar/comprehensive changeover. And while I don't think anyone was poor, none of us had money to waste. We had the expectation of "vac" jobs, which provided a cushion, but no

one needed to work during term time. We were there to get our degrees but also to experience life. We had been given "the gift of an interval", as political philosopher Michael Oakeshott wrote in *The Idea of a University*, "a moment in which to taste the mystery without the necessity of seeking a solution".

For my cousin and his generation there is no interval. When Dominic and his friends go out for a pint or a pizza, they will be acutely aware of adding to the £40,000+ bill they will begin paying off as they struggle to get a foot on the broken ladder of

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21st century life. For those 18-year-olds whose parents are not bankers or over-paid techies whose FTSE 100 portfolio has done very nicely thank you – the likes of me and my friends in 1976 – it's tough, the prospects bleak.

I typed my final-year dissertation to the results of the 1979 election that swept Margaret Thatcher to power. In retrospect it's possible to



■ Life is now much harder for A-level students wanting to go to university than in the 1970s.

see that election as the moment the post-war consensus began to unravel. By the time Theresa May stood on the steps of No 10 to deliver her take on Thatcher's St Francis of Assisi speech it had been entirely unpeaked.

Those of us who graduated that summer of '79 were lucky. Not as lucky as the baby-boomers for whom the meritocratic 1960s were so very heaven and the '70s a breeze, with jobs aplenty, many with blue-chip pension schemes, and low cost

endowment mortgages that allowed them easily to trade up. But we knew that if we worked hard we could achieve a fair few of our dreams – which included saving enough to buy a modest home of our own, even in London (Walthamstow, £28,500, in my case). We aspired to intellectual fulfilment and took entry-level jobs, working our way up knowing we could make our own luck. Today such jobs have been replaced by unpaid internships which means they are open only to

those who can afford to work for nothing – those whose parents have the financial wherewithal to support them. "Luck" is now an accident of birth, which is why the media and the arts – and of course politics – are stuffed full of the over-confident but often intellectually underwhelming products of public school and Oxbridge.

On that long-ago night of 3-4 May 1979, none of us could have imagined this. I doubt even Margaret Thatcher would approve: as a consequence of her policies many people became rather richer than they were – but I do think it was consequence rather than intention.

For David Cameron, entrenchment of the already advantaged was the intention and everything he did made life harder for the average Janet and John, whose parents supported them through uni but don't have the cash to help with the whopping deposit needed for what's laughingly called "a starter home". Brexit – the ultimate folly, Cameron's only legacy – will make life harder for everyone save those rich enough to risk the roulette of the stock market and it will have a deleterious effect on academia.

Welcome to the new plutocracy.

■ Liz Thomson is a Muswell Hill-based journalist, author and broadcaster

Air quality must be central in debate on EU relationship

Air pollution: a critical issue of our time.

With the bank holiday over the summer is nearing its end. For many it will mean back to school.

Let me congratulate all those who did so well in their exams, and wish you all the best with your futures, whether that involves further education or starting work.

Returning to school should mean going to a place in which children can work and learn in a safe and secure environment.

But in Camden we know this is not always the case. Pupils – and teachers – face an invisible hazard in the quality of the air that we all have to breathe.

Pollution in London has reached completely unacceptable levels.

In July this year the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, published a list of schools across the capital that are in areas where pollution exceeds legal levels.

There are 36 Camden primary schools, and six secondary schools, among the 200 schools in London that register the highest levels of pollutants such as nitrogen dioxide.

A study by King's College also found that 264 deaths in Camden



View from the House

Keir Starmer

were attributable to the poor quality of our air.

We are the sixth most polluted borough in London.

This is simply unacceptable and has to be challenged. Sadiq has announced a series of measures on air pollution, including extending the Ultra-Low Emission Zone and implementing an extra charge on the most polluting vehicles entering the city.

This is welcome, but we all have to understand the scale of the challenge and do more.

The Clean Air Act 1956 was passed 60 years ago to deal with the then smogs of London.

Now an equally radical and far reaching response is needed to the different, but still lethal, pollution we face.

Camden Council has launched a new Clean Air Action Plan, which builds on work over recent years including the Cleaner Air Fund, which helped 19 schools and nurseries improve their environments.

But a necessary first step is, of course, to accurately record and monitor air pollution.

The Camden Plan envisages a range of sensors which will measure the pollution across the borough. This is badly needed, particularly with the threat that the many years of HS2 construction work will make a bad situation worse.

If HS2 goes ahead we could have literally hundreds of lorry trips through our communities every day for many years.

Crossrail 2 could also add to these numbers. The threat to the quality of our air is obvious.

More widely, we have to acknowledge that, at the moment, action to manage and improve air quality, including legislation and limits, is largely driven by the EU.

In light of the EU Referendum result, it is critical that the UK is not unhitched from this drive to improve standards.



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Picture: PA

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Air quality should be a central issue of the ongoing debate about our relationship with the EU.

We simply cannot be complacent

about this issue. That is why I have decided to make air quality in Holborn and St Pancras a priority in my work, alongside housing and HS2.

To help raise the issue and start a wider discussion I am hosting a public meeting on air quality at Netley Primary School at 4pm on Thursday, September 8. Please come if you can.

■ Keir Starmer QC is MP for Holborn and St Pancras.