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## Born to be mild

Is conservatism a badge of honour among students?



# Where has all the passion gone?

In the heyday of campus radicalism, protests took place at the drop of a hat and Marxism ruled. Today's young are quieter and as likely to vote Tory as for the Left. There's still commitment but, as **Tariq Tahir** finds, now it's to getting a good job

In the end it was perhaps inevitable, given the usual trajectory of these things, and the intransigence of the forces of oppression, that the students' protest ended in violence.

Hundreds of them had gathered to make their point, many with placards, but after drink was consumed and tempers became frayed, they went on the rampage. Fighting continued well into the night before the "Fascist Pigs" moved in and arrested five of the angry young protesters.

"The behaviour of the young men and women was inexcusable," said a police source at the time. The university authorities warned darkly of expulsions if the behaviour were repeated.

So what, then, was the cause of all this anger and frustration? The arrival of a blood-soaked dictator on campus? The imposition of an intolerable financial burden on already hard-up students? Outrage at the bombing of a defenceless Third World country by the United States?

No – the injustice that provoked the students from the University of St Andrews to

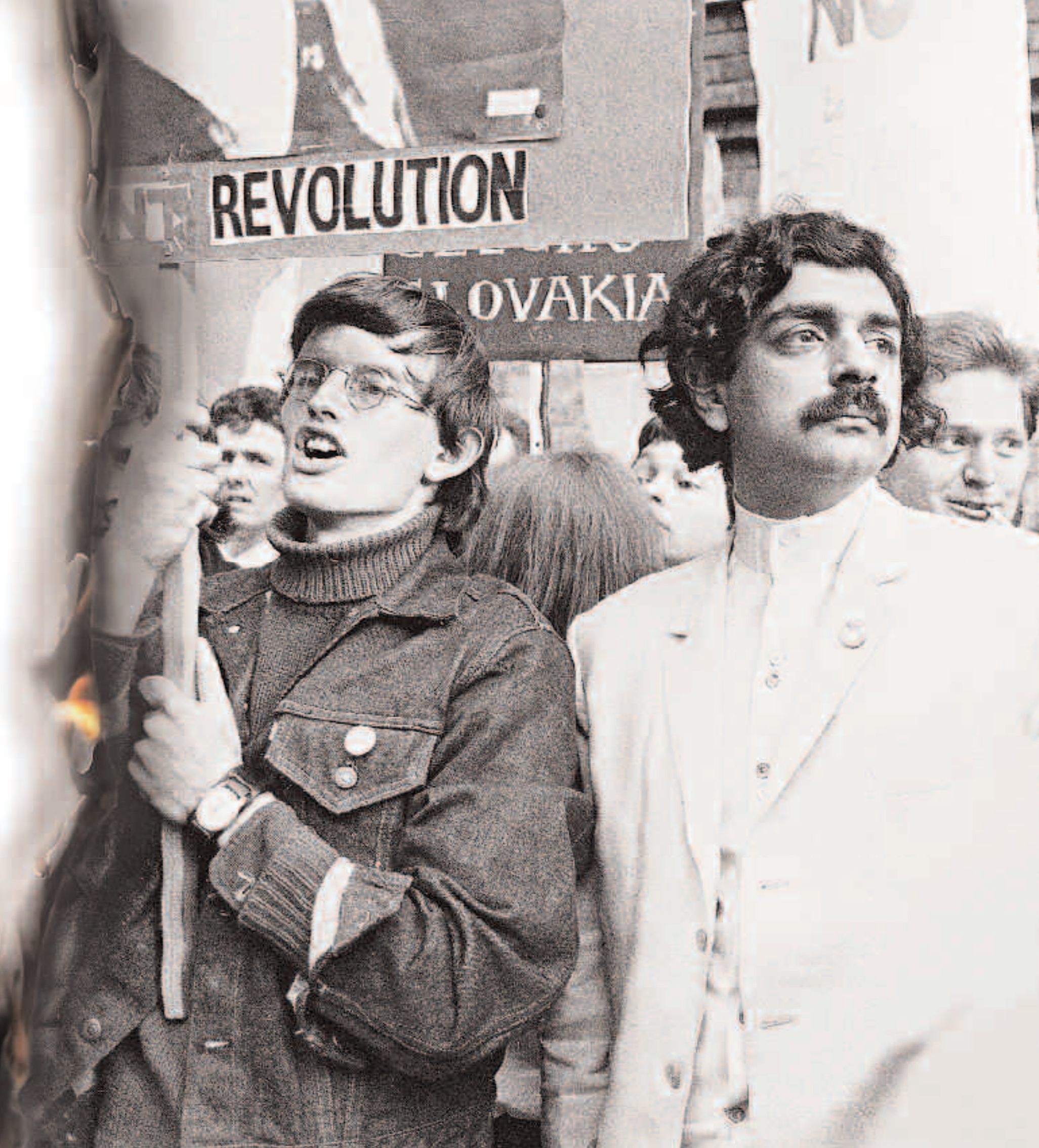
rampage through their town was the local licensing board's decision that the union bar had to close at 11.45pm rather than 1am.

The 1999 protest made the headlines because Prince William was due to study at the university. But to some observers it seemed like the moment that the street fighters of 1968 were finally superseded by, in the words of one commentator, a bunch of "floppy-haired teddy-buggers" running riot because they couldn't get a late drink.

This week, what is being claimed as the first opinion poll of UK university students' political affiliations appears to confirm what has been suspected for a while – that, far from being idealists thirsty for change, today's students are a pretty middle-of-the-road bunch, preferring the politics of pints over revolution.

As the poll shows, it is the Liberal Democrats that claim the greatest support. And, doubtless to the dismay of many a leftist academic with less-than-fond memories of the Thatcher years, students are beginning to back the Conservatives in substantial numbers.

ALAMY / GETTY



“One of the biggest determinants of Lib Dem success is how high the student turnout is. In Cambridge, with the second-biggest swing in 2005, we raised it from 40 to 70 per cent”

down debate within parties and makes them boring for a lot of students.”

Mark Gettleson, chair of Liberal Youth, the Lib Dems’ student body, says a key element in the party’s electoral strategy was the targeting of students. “One of the biggest determinants of Lib Dem success in marginal seats in a city is how high the student turnout is. In Cambridge, which had the second-biggest swing at the last general election, we raised student turnout from about 40 per cent to 70 per cent.

“Where there is a big student population, we make sure there are Liberal Democrat branches on the ground recruiting supporters. I hammer home to the party centrally that we go after a constituency where there is a strong student population.”

Gettleson says young voters with broadly liberal views and without party loyalty are attracted to the Lib Dems. “We tend to do better among young people. Among the over-65s, 80 per cent of voters associate with a political party, usually Conservative or Labour. Among the under-thirties, that figure is only 28 per cent. That’s not about apathy, but about people being discerning customers who will look at values and policies and then make their decision.”

Philip Cowley, professor of parliamentary government at the University of Nottingham, has observed the steady increase in the number of students who are open in their support of the Conservative Party, something that had its hazards in the Thatcher years and their aftermath.

He says: “If I look back to when I was an undergraduate, the Conservative students were, to be blunt, slightly strange. Even if they were nice and bright, there was always something strange about Conservative undergraduate activists, in particular. But now it’s really noticeable that lots of the

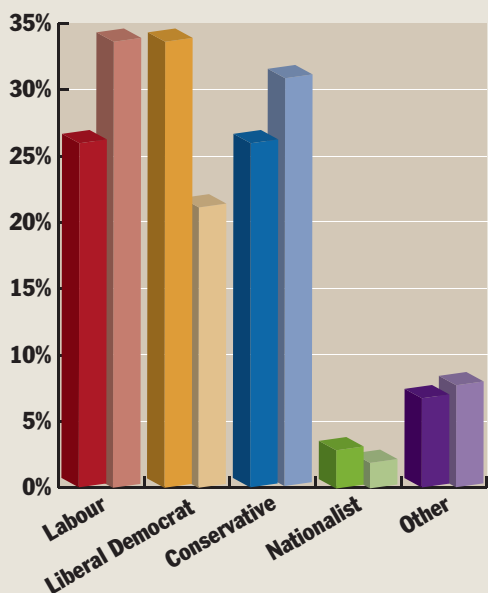
Paul Whiteley, professor of government at the University of Essex, has written the report that accompanies the poll, which was conducted by Opinionpanel. He is not surprised that students are gravitating towards the Lib Dems.

“The Lib Dems remain, at least in relation to conferences and so on, a party that has fairly open debate and rows in a way that other parties don’t, and that probably attracts an educated audience,” he says.

“Modern government means that you have to control the PR message very tightly. New Labour has done that and the Conservatives did that before [them]. That tends to shut

### SHARES OF THE VOTE 2004-2008

Of the two bars for each category, the darker of the two represents student choice, while the lighter is the figure for overall party choice



Source: Opinionpanel Research



THOSE WERE THE DAYS... OF REVOLTING STUDENTS

There was a time in the late Sixties when student agitators such as Tariq Ali, the man with the angriest moustache in Britain, and Daniel Cohn-Bendit in France were well-known public figures, granted semi-celebrity status as thorns in the side of the Establishment.

Things had come a long way from what is acknowledged as the first recorded campus revolt, when Harvard University was torn apart by the Butter Rebellion. “Behold – our butter stinketh. Give us therefore, butter that stinketh not,” the students proclaimed in 1766, voicing their outrage at the quality of campus dairy product provision.

Along with sex, drugs

and rock music, student protest came to symbolise the decade, although some historians have begun to question whether violence and cruelty, rather than peace and love, were in fact more characteristic of the era.

Perhaps the most infamous UK universities were the London School of Economics and Essex, and it was at the former that the UK’s first sit-in took place in March 1967 as students protested against the appointment of Walter Adams – seen as associated with the racist government of what was then Rhodesia – as director.

Inspired by the civil-rights movement, the sit-in became the weapon of choice for American students

protesting against their country’s war in Vietnam. The first was held at the University of Michigan, although technically it was a “teach-in” as classes continued in the occupied buildings.

A glance at the “chronology” section of the website Essex68.org, dedicated to student radicalism at the university, reveals that there were about half a dozen sit-ins between 1967 and 1969, with grievances ranging from the presence on campus of controversial Conservative politician Enoch Powell to the war in Biafra.

There were other activities too: “10th February 1969 – Revolutionary Festival begins with car burning in the square.”

Not to be outdone, the LSE also forged a reputation for radicalism that – an intelligence report from 1968 released by the Public Record Office reveals – spread beyond these shores. German students, who were not exactly wallflowers, viewed the LSE as “frighteningly radical”, the spooks observed.

But, while they might have made a lot of noise, the students were a small minority, says Nick Thomas, an historian at the University of Nottingham who specialises in the student protest of the era.

“It’s a bit of a misnomer to be talking about the Sixties as a period of student radicalism. There were a lot of student protests in

the late 1960s, and there is evidence of large numbers of students taking part in demonstrations, sit-ins and so forth.

“But what usually happened was that you had a very small number of people on individual campuses, usually members of organisations such as IS [International Socialists] or IMG [International Marxist Group], who would trigger a mass protest on an issue.

“They would take part in something provocative, the authorities would clamp down on it, which would then mean that people who were much more moderate and politically apathetic would take part in a protest on surrounding issues, such as freedom of speech.

“So they were clever in mobilising people who were not remotely sympathetic to Marxist politics and who, once that protest was over, went back to being apathetic.”

If there is a feeling that today’s students are politically inert, then that was mirrored in the Sixties, Thomas says.

“If you look at student union newspapers throughout the Sixties, they were consistently complaining about the apathy of students.

“There is this rather odd situation where we perceive the Sixties as this peak period of student activity, but at the time the perception of people taking part is that the vast majority of students are totally apathetic.”

“When I was an undergraduate, the Conservative students were slightly strange. Now it’s noticeable that lots of the very bright students who are interested in politics are Conservatives”

very bright students who are interested in politics are Conservatives.

“That would not have been true even five years ago. And they are not all toffs or political weirdos. In fact, they are all perfectly ‘normal’ students from ‘normal’ backgrounds. They’re perfectly pleasant and bright undergraduates who a decade ago would have been Labour supporters – but they’re Conservatives.”

For the first time, Cowley says, there will be substantial numbers of students in the social sciences who are more right wing than their teachers, although he stresses that it might be a transient phenomenon attributable to the length of time that Labour has been in power.

“Academics are going to have a more right-of-centre bunch in their seminars than they realise. Within the social sciences and the humanities, there is a left-wing consensus among academics. I wonder how that will play as a very Conservative cohort comes in, and quite how left-of-centre academics will deal with it.”

He points to the somewhat perverse consequences of ten years of Labour rule on the politics of today’s students.

“These people have seen a Labour Government all their [teenage and] adult lives. From the moment they became politically aware, Labour has been the party in power. That has never been true in this country’s history because we’ve never had a Labour Government for that long, and it means that this cohort has grown up thinking that the Establishment is Labour.”

Students’ concerns with day-to-day practicalities are reflected in the make-up of the National Union of Students. Where once there was a significant hard-Left element in individual unions, it is now insignificant.

During Douglas Trainer’s period as president of the National Union of Students

“It’s not about students changing their politics to become more Conservative – it’s a lot to do with worrying about getting a job, paying fees and having to concentrate on your studies”

in the mid-1990s, he oversaw a transition to a more pragmatic style as the hard Left struggled to maintain the influence it once had on student politics. His NUS leadership from 1996 to 1998 straddled the last days of the Conservatives and the dawn of new Labour, when it was a party of the Left that put forward the idea of students paying tuition fees.

“The debate was between those people who saw the NUS being relevant to student concerns and how we could interact with government, and those with revolutionary views that harked back to Paris in 1968.

“We thought that times had changed, that students were working harder than they had ever worked and that it was self-indulgent to be proselytising about the Sixties rather than dealing with the realities of the Nineties.”

Trainer, who is now director of communications for Serco, a group of companies providing services for the public sector, recalls the quality of some of the discourse.

“At the first-ever NUS meeting I went to, there was a debate about which Soviet mineworkers’ trade union we would support. The notion that mineworkers in the Soviet Union were waiting to decide on their next course of action until they heard from the West of Scotland Area National Union of Students was absurd.”

So what’s it like teaching this new generation of undergraduates, who are firmly committed to the struggle – for well-paid jobs?

“The ideological rhetoric of the Seventies has gone,” says Whiteley. “That’s not to say there aren’t disagreements, and there is plenty of discussion about Islamic fundamentalism. But the chances of having a Marxist rant in a seminar are much less now than they used to be.

“When I started teaching, which was in the Seventies, we had the radical Marxist groups



All fired up students now are less passionate about revolution and more concerned about getting a good job

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and all the other far-Left splinter groups. You don’t see that now, you really don’t. The far Left has disappeared completely.

“It’s not about students changing their politics to become more Conservative, but it’s a lot to do with worrying about getting a job, paying fees and having to concentrate on your studies because you need a job. Students are more focused on their careers than we were in the Seventies.”

With a somewhat wistful tone in his voice, he compares the seminars of the Seventies with those of today. “When I started teaching, the ideal seminar, for me at any rate, was to have a ranting Marxist and a new right conservative. You could have a really good set-to.

“Now it’s just not as passionate. That’s not to say there aren’t Greens who are very concerned about the major issues that we face – global warming and so on. But they’re not saying, ‘Let’s go out and occupy the local town council’, whereas in the Sixties they would have done.

“Rather than argue with me about the class struggle, someone now wants to get [a mark of] 70 per cent instead of 60 per cent, so he or she says: ‘Can you give me some more references for this?’ That’s how it works out now. I suppose that’s a good thing, but I miss the old days when people would go at it.

“The danger with a world where everybody is after a good job is that they are not fired up enough to make things really interesting.”

Having lamented the passing of the fiery seminar, Whiteley points out that those students who want to go on to academic careers are more professional than those from the previous generation.

“The ones that want to stay on and do academic work are really very hard-working and want to get to the bottom of things. What people forget about the Sixties is that a lot of people sat about doing very little work while they were talking about little revolution.” ●

## PARTY PEOPLE

The research by Opinionpanel, which describes itself as a student research specialist, was conducted between October 2004 and May 2008 and provides the first comprehensive analysis of the political views of British undergraduates.

The study uncovers the political persuasion of students and shows how their background and the university they attend can influence how likely they are to vote in a general election.

A similar proportion

of respondents from Russell Group and pre-1992 universities said that they were likely to vote – 69 per cent and 66 per cent respectively. The figure was lower among students from the post-1992s, 56 per cent of whom said they were likely to vote.

When it comes to gender, there is one striking difference among students: women are much more likely to support the Liberal Democrats. Altogether, 39 per cent of them back the Lib Dems, compared with 30 per cent of male students.

The Lib Dems are the

only party that does better among students than it does among the rest of the population and if the figures are a guide to future loyalty, then they are likely to do better among educated voters in the future.

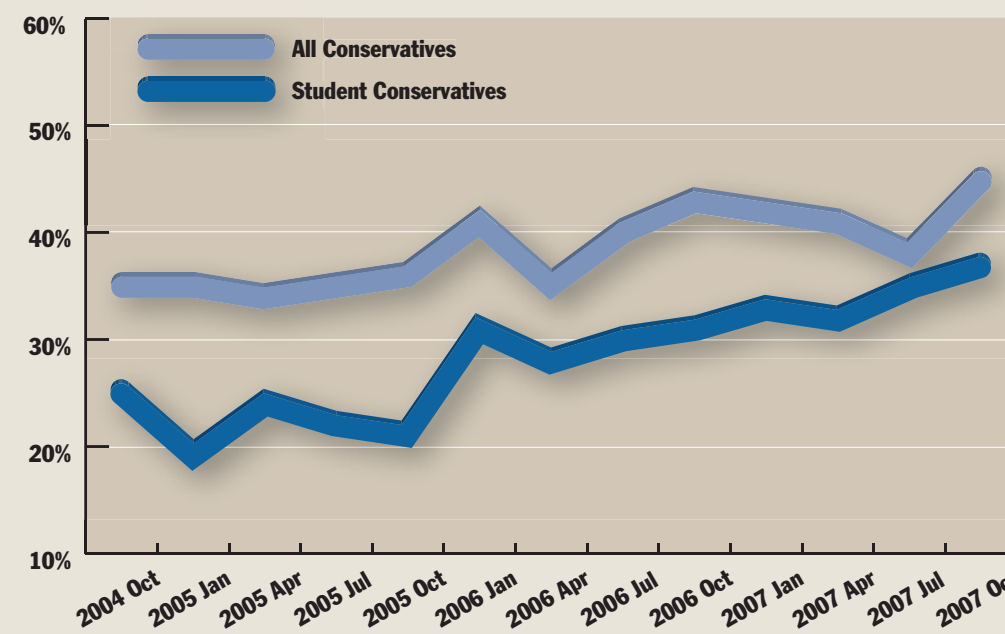
In his foreword to the study, Paul Whiteley, professor of government at the University of Essex, writes: “There are about a million full-time undergraduates in universities and colleges in Britain. Once they graduate, most of them will move into high-status occupations and some will become politically active and act

as opinion leaders in the wider community.

“For this reason, their current voting intentions provide an interesting guide to the future of electoral politics in Britain. For many students, their political beliefs are not fully formed and so their opinions can change, but research shows that by the time they reach their mid-twenties most will have fairly well-formed political opinions.

“Their current voting intentions are therefore a fairly good guide to how they are likely to vote in the future.”

## CLOSING GAP: MORE STUDENTS ARE NOW VOTING CONSERVATIVE



Source: Opinionpanel Research