

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BWB-17
Sussex University:
The Quiet Ones

Im Rosental 96
53 Bonn
West Germany
7 December 1969

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Legitimate criticism has been leveled at student excesses in violence and vituperation on both sides of the Atlantic, but I believe most observers of the "student revolution" laud the activism and political participation of the current undergraduate generation, admitting, sometimes grudgingly, that it bodes greater optimism for future leadership than the silent, follow-the-rules generation to which I belong. Nonetheless, keeping a college quiet these days is deemed a plus point for university administrators, so to examine one of these quiet colleges in a nation that has also been relatively quiet in student revolution terms, I spent some days at Sussex University in Brighton, England.

When Sussex University was founded nine years ago, the administration had high hopes of "drawing anew the frontiers of knowledge," as senior tutor Derek Oldfield told me over a glass of sherry in his office one afternoon. To an admirable extent, the staff and faculty have done just that--Sussex is one of the few English universities which is structured in schools instead of departments, making it possible for a student to tie together interests as varied as math and philosophy. It has a personal tutor system, in which faculty members act as amateur counselors for students' academic and personal problems, relieving the isolation of a mass university and establishing, at least in theory, a close professor-student communication. It has student participation on various university committees, and has allowed the president and vice-president of the Student Union to attend, by invitation, meetings of the University Senate since its founding, long before other universities were prodded by their students to let them have a voice in government.

By virtue of its location some ten minutes' train ride from the seaside resort town of Brighton, where rooming house landladies were persuaded to rent their rooms intended for summer visitors to the students during off-season, it has become the largest of England's "new universities." It has the third lowest failure rate of all universities (just behind Oxford and Cambridge), and its academic reputation is such that for every student accepted at Sussex, 14 applications are returned with regrets.

During the last two years, when the terms "student revolution" and "student power" and "student movement" were bandied about on campuses around the world, Sussex--despite a liberal reputation and a student population which one student described as "a larger numerical proportion of students who call themselves left than any other campus...but they just say it because it's fashionable"--remained relatively calm.

There was one brief incident of symbolic protest against the American position and British support for the Vietnam War--when students splashed a visiting American



Burning the Stars and Stripes in protest against the Vietnam War
(photo courtesy London Daily Express)

Embassy representative and his daughter with red paint, then set fire to the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes. But a student-staff committee "rusticated" or suspended the two students held responsible, and condemned the violence. Another protest was against the examination system, when 34 students boycotted the preliminary exam, traditionally a memory test for three hours, by leaving the examination room with their papers and returning them 24 hours later, written with the aid of outside references. The exam board said the students who returned their papers late had failed, but when the students' progress committee considered each case individually, some students passed on the strength of their previous work and others were allowed to resit the examination three months later. As a result of the protest, some schools now allow students an option of writing the three-hour examination from memory or writing a paper within 24 hours and using outside material.

Yet in political terms, the average Sussex student is apathetic, disinterested, unconcerned--typical no doubt of the silent majority that the student movement fails to reach, or reaches only sporadically, on most campuses throughout the world.

"There's little indication at the moment that our students are interested in anything," said Fred Newman, the university information officer on whom I called during my first afternoon at Sussex. His position was created last year as the result of recommendations made to the university by a McKinsey & Co. organization study (another indication of the progressive tenor of the administration that smacks slightly of technocracy). His job is "to oil the wheels" of communication to the outside community and within the university. "The Student Union has difficulty in getting support," Newman said, "and there's the danger that it may be manipulated by those few who are active."

Brian Leahy, lanky blond long-haired president of the Student Union, thinks the apathy of the student body partially results from an artificial environment created by the upper middle class student intake (more than half the students come from fees-paying schools), augmented by the counseling and psychiatric services that "mollycoddle" the students. He believes student politics would also profit from more genuine confrontation, instead of a liberal "let them get it off their chest and then we'll decide" attitude he feels is often assumed by the administration. "Trying to get something done around here is like fighting your way out of a bag of cotton wool," he said acerbically during one of our long talks in his Student Union office. "I hit at some issue, the administration seems to give way. I pull back, and the cotton fills up the space where I thought I'd made a hole."

As illustration of the vice-chancellor's clever tactics in deflating student ardor for political demonstrations, Leahy related what had happened when a group of students planned a sit-in in support of student protests at the London School of Economics: "The vice-chancellor heard about it, and arranged for the snack bar to stay open so food, drinks and music were available. Of course it turned into a party, and the political punch was gone. Some students went over to the administration building to sit-in, but they wrongly chose the room where the pay-checks for the university laborers were made out. That would have caused chaos--the checks being a day late--so they left. I said we should have sat-in in the vice-chancellor's office, but nobody listened. As much as I oppose him," chuckled Leahy, "he's a brilliant politician."

The Student Union president is no slouch at power politics himself. After the Student Union meeting had been declared inquorate the week before my visit to



Before and after classes--the tiny Falmer train station

Sussex, and the annual budget was still invalid because it had not been voted through, Leahy refused to sign any checks for Student Union funds. The rifle club had to miss a match that day because they could buy no ammunition. "Too bad," said Leahy, "I'll continue to keep the treasury closed until enough students turn up to pass the budget." Two days later some 700-800 students (still a small percentage of the 3,700 registered students) jammed themselves into the Union common rooms to pass the 1969/70 Union budget.

Leahy, and several professors with whom I talked, believe another reason for the lack of student interest in university politics is the accident of geography and the university's construction limitations. "It's possible to spend not more than six hours on campus per week--some students arrange their tutorials on the same day and commute from London. The zoning laws state that we can't build more than 300 feet high--which means that never more than a third of our students can be housed here on campus." The university currently has accommodations for 600 students, but only 312 of these rooms are in the "park houses" on campus; the other rooms are in off-campus privately-owned "guest houses" with whom the university has rental contracts. First-year students generally live in university accommodations, but second and third-year undergraduates negotiate for their own "digs" in Brighton or other small towns nearby.

Although the university seems to have found the best solution for its non-resident population, and the proximity and availability of rooms in Brighton has enabled Sussex to expand at a rate far faster than other "new universities," the focus of university life "after hours" shifts to Brighton and the campus begins to die about 6 p.m. each night. Since most students live in Brighton, said senior tutor Oldfield, "the societies and clubs are in Brighton rather than on campus. Poetry readings go on at the pubs there instead of in the Student Union. Therefore we tend to get interested in Brighton politics rather than university politics."

The Brighton project which interests a few Sussex students now is the Brighton Rents Project, a campaign in which town and gown have made common cause to expose the inequities of the Brighton Town Council's housing policy. Theoretically, the prosperous community of Brighton has 1500 flats open and 1400 applicants, yet there is a desperate housing shortage while some luxury flats have been empty for three years. The Rents project, which has had nine families squatting for more than six months, grew out of a survey on housing conditions by a leftist group in Brighton. Its aim, explained Jonathan Cowley, 20, a history and social studies major in his third and final year at Sussex, "is to try and create in Brighton a left-wing opposition to the Tory Council, an attempt to unite the students and townspeople on a political program, but also an attempt to build up a mode of practice separate from the Labour party."

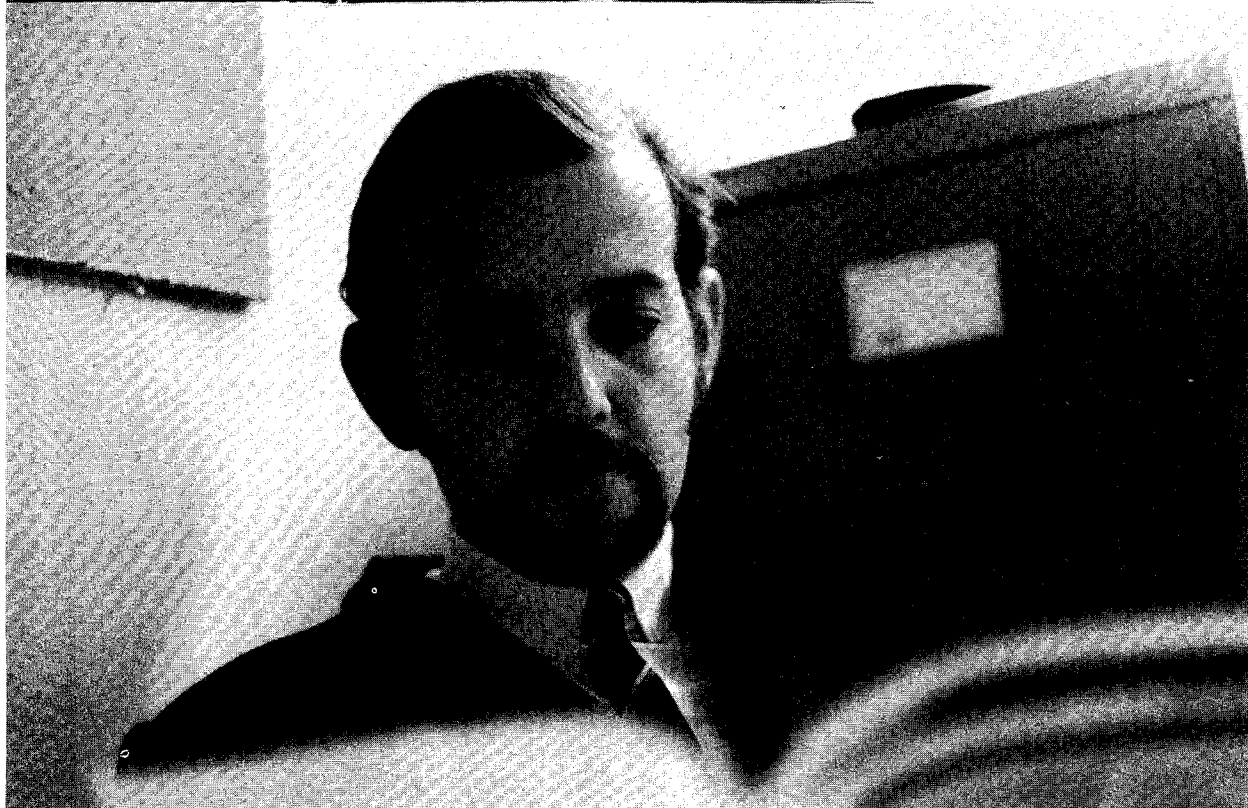
This exercise in practical socialist politics has sparked interest among some 40-50 students, but Cowley said the group has not attempted to mobilize the entire student body. "Students wander in thinking what a groove and wander out thinking what a bore. There was one proposal to get the students to occupy all the empty houses in Brighton, but this would have been just a groovy thing to do for the weekend...we turned it down. We want people to become involved with commitment; we're not interested in hundreds of teeny-boppers sloganizing."

Although the Student Union voted 50 pounds to support the Brighton Rents Project and promises to house the squatter families in Student Union rooms if they are eventually turned out by the Brighton Council, Leahy thinks the Rents Project channels off student political enthusiasm that could be directed at educational reforms. "We need to do something about the class structure of



Left: Brian Leahy, Student Union president with a poster of a fanged Nixon in shock colors decorating his office wall.

Below: Nigel Smith, who heads the Sports Federation at Sussex.



student intake. We could have more working class kids in the university, but instead of doing something about this, they dash off to Brighton to take care of the squatters. It's a matter of priorities and I suppose I have a different set than the majority of students."

Leahy argues that admissions should be weighted in favor of working class students, or those who attend public (in the American sense) comprehensive schools. "Fifty-five percent of our students come from public (in the English sense) or fees-paying schools--a higher percentage than Oxford or Cambridge. This is one of the last bastions of the upper class." The admissions officer assures Leahy that Sussex takes about 10 percent of the applications from comprehensive schools, a rate comparable to the overall admissions percentage. "But my argument is they should solicit more applications from comprehensive schools, where most kids take it for granted that they can't get into a university. I want them to say that of the 60 kids in a comprehensive school who meet the requirements, 30 will be guaranteed a place at Sussex."

A second-year sociology student at age 31, Leahy suspects he was elected Student Union president "because I'm exotic--I drove a lorry for ten years." And he scoffs at his mandate: "I think it disgusting that I can be elected with 480 votes. A Communist Party candidate got 399, a candidate who called himself apathetic was third, and a Tory was the fourth candidate."

Leahy cynically dismisses much of the Sussex leftist aura as "just talk and reaction against the society they come from. They know they can do it safely here. I think they go through a period of being left revolutionaries and then go back to work for Daddy." Cowley has a similar low opinion of his fellow students' political substance, particularly the girls: "It's still a trendy college for nouveaux riche kids. If a girl wants to lose her virginity or if she's already lost it and wants to take advantage of it, she comes here."

Cowley, who told me he is an unattached leftist, said the leftist politics at Sussex is divided into at least seven factions: the Sussex Communist Caucus Marxist-Leninist (SCCML), a Maoist group which was sponsoring a China Week exhibition, films and discussion meetings in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Revolution during the week I visited Sussex; the Internationalists (which Cowley described as Maoists of the cultural repression branch); the Communist Party, a weak group who work within the Student Union; the International Socialists, an influential group of some 20 hard-core activists and 60 supporters; the Socialist Club, an amalgam of CP, IS and unattached leftists which serves as a discussion center; a militant group called the Socialist Labour Club who advocate joining the Labour party and ridicule student politics; and the unattached leftists.

The red paint incident mobilized Sussex students against the left, said Cowley, but "it led to a revitalization of the left, and a new defining of left-wing politics. During the protests at LSE last year, we had 900 voting for us, but these numbers decreased this year. On the other hand, the commitment and understanding of the activists has increased. The age of mass politics is over," he said, "we want more commitment, but less members."

Cowley told me the left at Sussex has made no attempt to politicalize the student body. But he recounted how a "platform of left-wingers" were elected to the school joint committee last year in the School of Social Studies. "The school joint committee is the main cog in the representation system. At the end of the year we were able to say we hadn't talked about anything, that it was a

useless body. So we put forward a proposal for rule by the general assembly. In a referendum on our proposal, 260 of the 300 people in the school attended the meeting. Our opponents called us fascists and we were defeated, but the vote was 96 against 162, and the 162 opposition was not from faculty saying the school joint committee should stay as it is, but from liberals who said it should be changed--they just didn't agree with our proposed change. Had there been other proposals to divide the opposition vote, we would have won. And for 96 to say we need an autonomous base in social studies was phenomenal."

When Cowley and I had finished talking, I asked him to suggest a student who could give me the views of the right at Sussex, and he mentioned Nigel Smith, a third-year law student who is chairman of the Sports Federation. A natty dresser with a well-groomed beard, Smith looked the part of a conservative "jock," but he disclaimed that label. "The sports side is always identified with the right wing, so they think that because I represent sports, therefore I'm on the right. I'd say the students I represent are apolitical, they just aren't interested. But I suppose if you took the sporting clubs and checked political opinions, it would be 60 to 40 right of center."

During the week I was at Sussex, Smith and his sporting classmates were attempting to increase the Sports Federation share of the Student Union budget. Since some 1,700 people participate in sports under the Federation aegis (47 clubs ranging from archery and rugby to sailing and spelunking), Smith and the Sports Federation felt justified in claiming 30 percent of the Student Union budget of 32,000 pounds. Union president Leahy rejoined that since a university grant handles the maintenance, the sports clubs could get by with less--say 8,100 pounds. In an amendment to the proposed budget, the Sports Federation had tried the week before to switch 600 pounds from the "schools" fund to "sports," and when the sports faction realized they would lose a vote if heads were counted, they filed out of the meeting room. Leahy was forced to adjourn the Student Union meeting as inquorate.

"We left to prevent the budget being passed, "Smith admitted. "Somebody accused me of being a political caveman, but we had to leave to prevent the vote going further when we saw our support dwindling. We're not very good politicians and we tend to use brute force and ignorance rather than appeals to intellect." Neither brute force nor intellectual appeals saved the sports faction at the next meeting, when the sports amendment was roundly defeated and the budget passed as proposed by the finance committee.

Smith has little respect for the "wishy-washy liberal sentiments" he hears tossed around at the Student Union meetings. "They ban South African oranges in the campus store, but don't do a thing about Barclay's Bank which is strong in Rhodesia. They can get other oranges, but it's harder to go into town to do your banking."

As for student politics, Smith said "I didn't care about any of it until I took over this job. You can't get people to student meetings, they're too apathetic. It took us four months to get a Sports Federation treasurer...even though it's a nice thing to say you've been. People who think of sports don't think of an office and a telephone."

Leahy, the "exotic" Student Union president, said he considers it his job in the Union "to keep the right and the left apart," yet he thinks of himself as "the only true socialist on campus. I'm a practical socialist. I realize you have to work with the tools available. Some students seem to think that if we vote against

the Vietnam War, it will be stopped tomorrow. I can't see any non-violent revolution, and if it were violent and the students went to the barricades, they'd call back to the workers, who would say, 'not me, bloke.'"

Despite the virtues of the counseling services and tutor system, Leahy insists that these cushions prevent the students from being forced to think for themselves. "They get their noses wiped and hands held. Every student is supposed to go to his tutor with moral and social problems, and if you go to the health center with an ingrown toenail, they're apt to treat it as a psychological manifestation."

I think Leahy's arguments are somewhat overblown, but his complaints about a lack of genuine student participation are legitimate. Real "student power" is not included in the Sussex system, and critical students claim they have plenty of "consultation rights, but no decision rights." The University Council has 35 members, of which two are students allowed to attend by invitation but with no voting rights. Nine school speakers and two postgraduates, the president and vice-president of the Student Union (13 in all) are student members of the 127-member University Senate. Students are represented on the Planning, Social Policy and Buildings committees, but at well below a third parity except in the Social Policy committee which has 14 students of 37 members. On the Discipline Committee, students have parity "but all decisions must be ratified higher up," Leahy pointed out. The school committees which determine curriculum have no student members; the school joint committees have parity, "but they only suggest things like a coffee machine for the school common room," said Leahy.

With little genuine involvement in university decisions, and the supportive counseling services to boot, Leahy suggests that the Sussex student "can have a reasonable continuation of school life without having to make any decisions at all." Even if student support for the Union were stronger, Leahy added, the vice-chancellor "has the advantage in pursuing a continuing policy. The Student Union might vote in a right-wing president one year and a moderate the next."

The student body did rally to defeat a Senate-approved disciplinary scheme that had been worked out to allow students more voice in disciplinary actions. The students argued, however, that the university has the right to discipline only in academic matters. "They argue that in political actions, for drugs, etc., the university wants to make itself into a protected part of society where they operate above the law of the land," said Dr. Michael Ford-Smith, the senior proctor. "But the snag here is that the chief constable will exercise discretion and stay out of the university's private property. The police say student disciplinary cases are best dealt with by the internal machinery. It's interesting that in other countries the students want no police interference, but at the moment they feel the police here are more just than the university."

Whatever the arguments for or against, the disciplinary reform was turned down by the students two to one and the student disciplinary officers resigned. At last report, both sides were just biding their time.

Actually, disciplinary problems at Sussex, according to Dr. Ford-Smith, are generally minor. "Most have to do with first year accommodations, such as complaints that the record player is on too late and too loud, or parking." There is no question of an "in loco parentis" attitude at Sussex, as Newman had told me earlier. "The students are treated as ordinary citizens," he said. "The university neither defends nor protects them."

The university sets an 11 p.m. curfew in its guest houses and park houses for entertaining visitors, but there are no limits on how late a student can stay out. "They can come and go as they like--some of the guest house proprietors aren't too happy, but the university has insisted on the students' right to come in when they want to," explained Dr. Ford-Smith.

The university also considers the student's sexual life his own business, and would not "rusticate" a young man or woman for a sexual offense. "Sex is no longer the great issue," the senior proctor continued, explaining that the university operates one park house dormitory on a coeducational basis, with men and women in neighboring rooms on the same floor. "The country has accepted, generally, the new mores, even if some of the Brighton population has not. If a boy and girl are sleeping together before 11 p.m., the curfew for visitors, I think the guest house proprietor would be upset, but she couldn't do anything about it. There's a strong feeling among English students that they're adult, and what right has the university to adopt a parental attitude?"

Nor is drugs a problem except in town-gown relations. Only four or five students were prosecuted for possession of drugs last year, and the university has gone on record as refusing to expel a student for a drugs conviction. The local Brighton Argus newspaper, however, bannered a headline "50% Sussex University Taking Drugs Says Worthing Lawyer" on my last day at the university, and student and faculty tempers flared when a look at the story offered no excuse for linking the drug charge to Sussex. Student Union president Leahy considered writing an angry letter to the editor, but decided instead to "send them to Coventry."

Dr. Ford-Smith refutes Leahy's charge that the Sussex students are "molly-coddled" by the counseling services. "They need the health service for this most difficult time of their life. We have a low drop-out rate, the third lowest in England, and I think this is important in terms of human happiness. If you manage to sort some out, it's a contribution to student happiness. What would normally happen to some is that they'd be thrown out by society to molder."

Dr. Anthony Ryle, director of the University Health Service, argues that the counseling services provide a "reasonable method of picking up" the accident cases in a community of 3,700 "with a vulnerable system." Said Dr. Ryle: "we provide safety nets rather than guidelines."

But the psychiatrist described the Sussex student body as "inert politically," and added that the university's quiescent record in regard to the student revolution is "partly luck and largely intention. Sussex has tried not to create a hierarchial institution...it's out of date to be authoritarian. Consultation takes more time but it is less hard work than having the schools closed down by strikes." The university authorities, he said, "are always prepared to talk, even to the ultra-radicals, but we don't give them issues in which we're absurd."

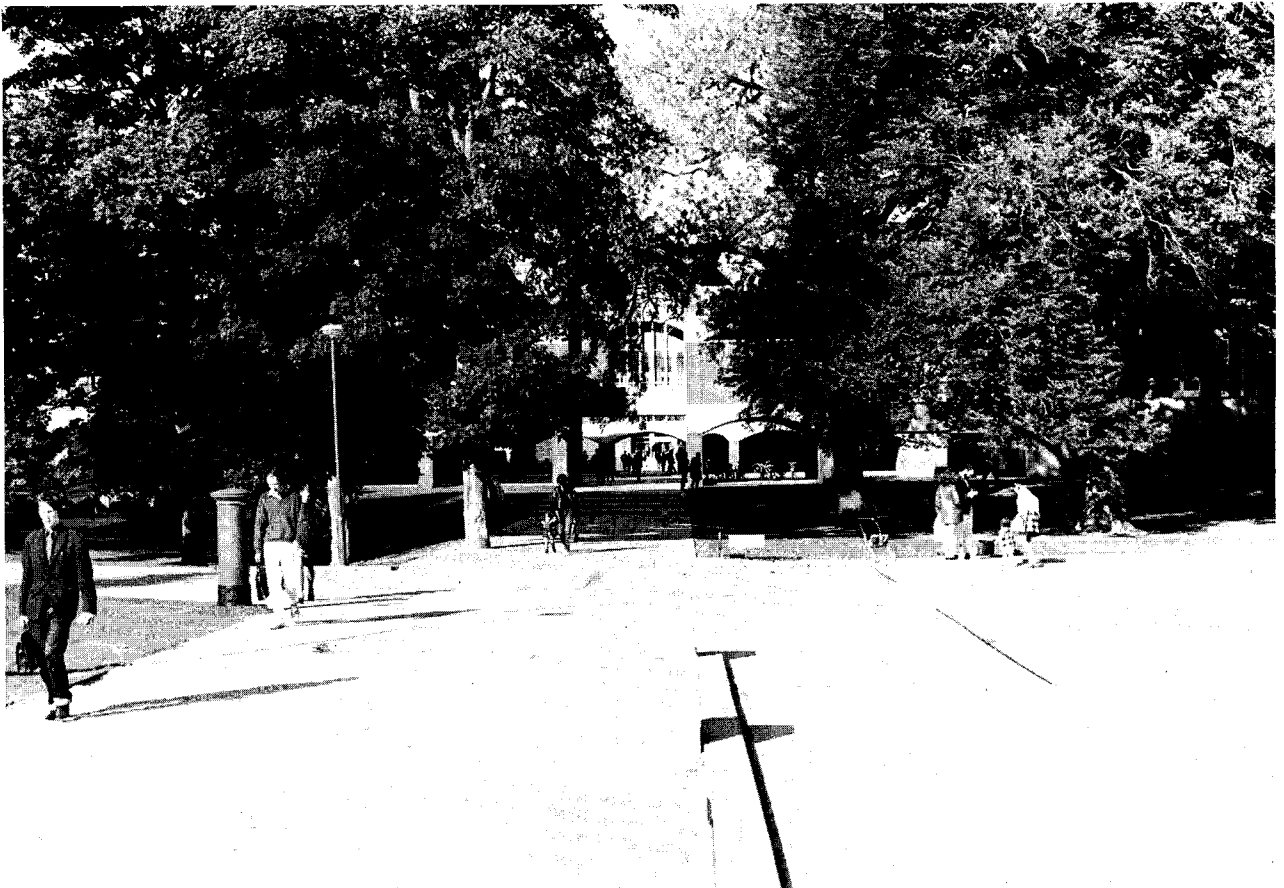
An American graduate student of the left with whom I talked later pointed out several explanations for a general torpor among English students compared to the activism seen in German, French and American universities. The English education system is still elitist, with barely ten percent of the college age group seeking higher education; the mass of students therefore reflect the political interests of the upper class. English universities are not as numerically overburdened as those in France and Germany (or some in the U. S.). "Youth in England don't face the problem of conscription, which frightens every male American college student, nor has there been any direct impact of Vietnam or the street rebellions of city

ghettos or the French protests during the Algerian War."

The English, he continued, "have an inherent tendency toward superficiality," so that although the Social Democratic tradition of the Labour Party expresses itself in Marxist terminology, the political ideas are often less radical than the language.

But English universities, just as much as American, are tied in to the military-industrial complex, he said, "and the content of courses still represents the ruling class. If you define imperialism as monopoly capitalism, the universities here are as imperialistic as those in the United States--some manual workers at Sussex get only 4 shillings 6 pence an hour."

Surprisingly, I heard some of the American student's phrases echoed in my talk later that day with the senior tutor, who seemed to share Leahy's concern for the lack of student participation at Sussex and professed a modified acceptance of the American student's complaints about the university ties to capitalism.



Tree-shaded entrance to Sussex University; the sidewalk leads to the Student Union building.

"There's no military research going on at Sussex," Oldfield said, "but the fact is that we prop up the capitalist regime generally. We aren't directly in the service of, but we certainly are worshiping at, a capitalist shrine." Oldfield said even moderate students are concerned about this technocratic aspect of university education. "Some of them have told me they feel like bloody dummies stuck in a shop window for Ford to look at and pick the best one."

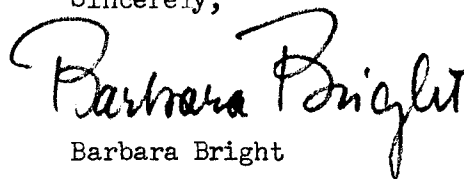
When I mentioned Leahy's proposal on weighting the student intake to favor more students from the working class, Oldfield agreed that "it would step up demand for student involvement if the campus society were more balanced. Student representation is minimal, but it has reassured most that every committee joined by students has been reinvigorated."

Turning again to the tutorial system, Oldfield commended it as a help against the "depersonalizing, dehumanizing" aspects of a university, but noted as well that "when I teach two instead of two hundred for an hour, we reduce enormously the amount of exposure to a teacher." The tutorial system is also uneven, he admitted, since some teachers feel incompetent in more personal exchanges and others cannot solve the teaching-research dichotomy.

"We've gone beyond the charismatic stage--as senior tutor I can't be a father figure to 3,700 students--that's why we also have a sub-dean in each school. But if a student has a work block, without putting the bloke on my couch, I think there might be an educational counselor, a quasi-professional institute that is somewhere between the personal tutor and the psychiatric health service."

"The deplorable thing is to have passive students," the senior tutor said, and yet with all its progressive attitudes, this is what students and faculty at Sussex agree is the rule. How much geography, the students' background, the counseling services and the administrative attitudes are responsible is difficult to say. Leftist students here in West Germany have expressed concern that psychiatry can be used as a form of subtle repression to integrate rebels or radicals into society. I'm not suggesting this is the case at Sussex, but when thanking their lucky stars for a lack of student revolution on campus, I think the professors and staff might also remind themselves that the ultimate purpose of a university education is not only to turn out graduates who are schooled in advanced calculus or nuclear physics or the Chinese economy, but individuals who have developed a political awareness and concern about their community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara Bright". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Barbara Bright

Received in New York on December 10, 1969.