

Give the student a marshmallow!

“Grants of up to £9K each year for Welsh university students”

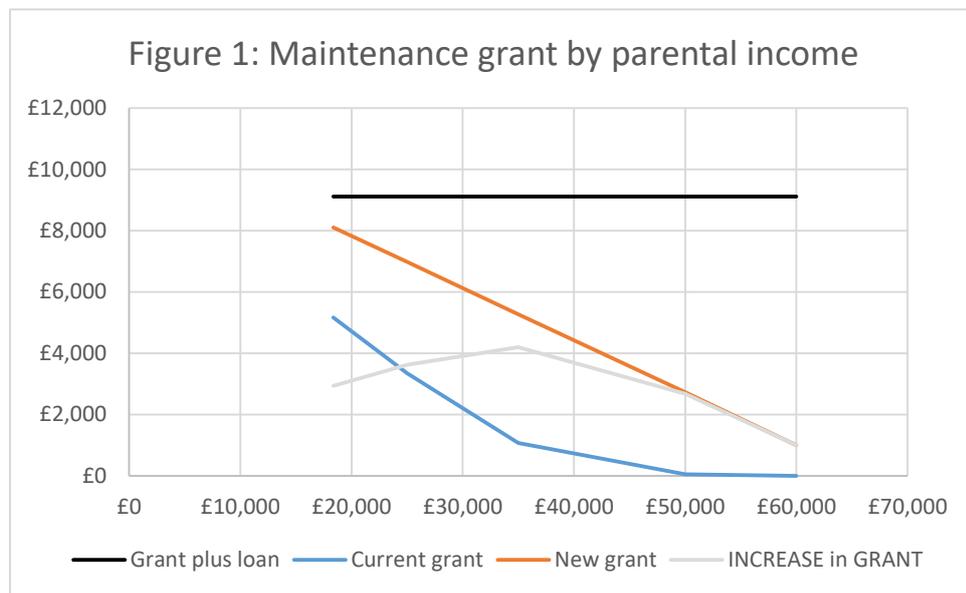
Western Mail Wednesday November 23rd 2016

“Fee changes could land students with £50k debt”

Western Mail Thursday November 24th 2016

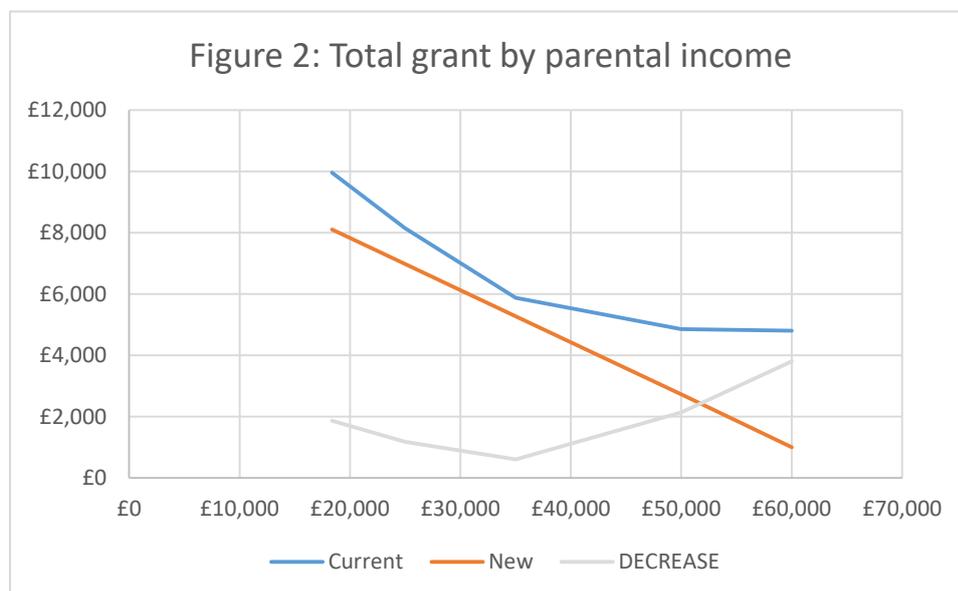
Probably on Wednesday they read the Press Release. On Thursday someone must have looked at the document in which the Welsh government explained the details of how they plan to fund their apparent generosity.

Figure 1 shows how the maintenance grant is to be increased. The black line shows



the £9K grant - in reality the total of grant and top-up loan (the story is the Western Mail after all). However, it is true that all students get an increase in maintenance grant.

Figure 2 shows how the trick is done. Grants are cut back at all levels of parental income by removing the most generous aspect of the old Welsh system – that which paid off the bulk of tuition fees. By removing this grant and replacing it with a loan of

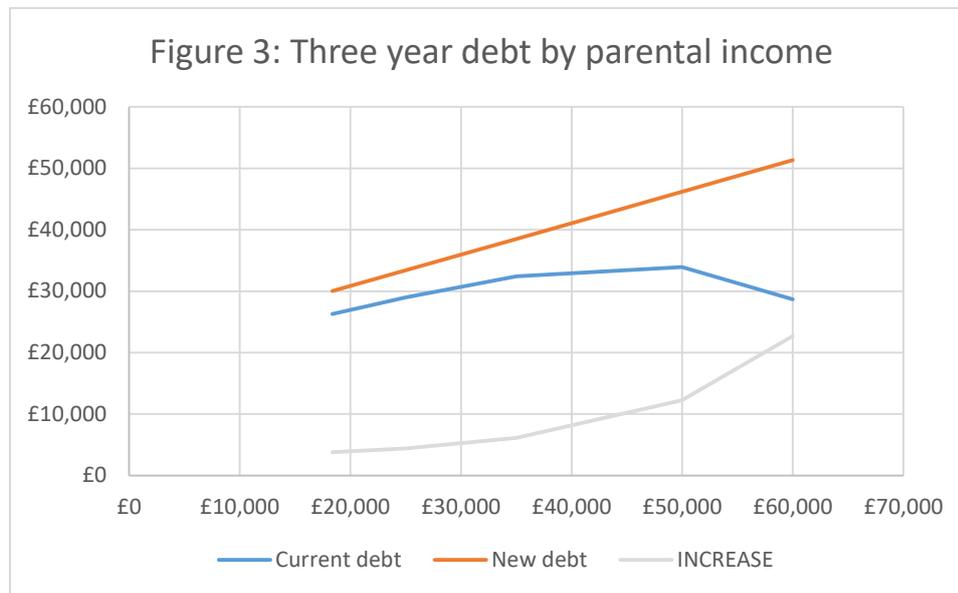


£9,000, grants are reduced at every level of parental income – even the poorest lose £1,863 a year, the richest lose £3,802.

The final figure (3) shows the truth that the Western Mail had realised by Thursday. All students will receive smaller grants and end up with bigger debts. The poorest will

owe £30,039. The richest will owe £51,339, an increase of £22,686.

The term 'richest' is relative, by the way, a family of two teachers counts as rich in Wales.



What the government is doing reminds me of the work of Walter Mischel of Stanford University. In the 1960s, a group of four-year olds were given a marshmallow and promised another, only if they could wait 20 minutes before eating the first one. The youngest could not defer their gratification and ate the sweets.

Kirstie Williams, Liberal Democrat minister in the Welsh government says, “We are looking to introduce the most generous and progressive system anywhere in the UK Our proposals are a fundamental shift so that Wales can develop a higher education funding and student finance system that really does provide for all.” So the Welsh government offers students the marshmallow of immediate gratification (higher maintenance grants) at the expense of a deferred loan as big as a mortgage.

When I taught at Cardiff University (then University College Cardiff) students got a maintenance grant, they could claim housing benefit, they could sign on in the holidays, and they were charged no fees. The courses were better, zero hours contracts for staff were unknown and there was no pressure to raise funds. One could concentrate on research and teaching. So why is it impossible to call for a return to decent university education? Have the neoliberals won every argument? Will no one raise their voice in defence of public service against private greed?

Mike Newman (SEA Cymru)