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John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): There have been times this afternoon when, apart from losing the will to live while listening to speeches from Government Members, I thought I must have slipped through a glitch in the space-time continuum and landed on another planet. We have been told that, because £30 is too small an amount, we need to abolish EMA; and someone from a sedentary position on the Liberal Benches told us that because the Labour Government refused to extend school dinners, we should abolish EMA. I have heard many Liberal MPs speak. They in particular have an important decision to make, because when they talk about the 90% dead-weight they should worry not about offending us but about offending those people outside who are included in that 90%.

Last week, I was at a meeting with about 120 students from throughout Britain and the right hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) indicated clearly that if the Opposition motion was moderately worded and-as I think he phrased it-sufficiently friendly, he would consider going into the Lobby to vote with us. It will be interesting to see whether he does, because if he does not he will have misled those students last week and others at other meetings over the past few weeks. He has a consistent record of doing so, and I shall be interested to hear what he says when he returns to the Chamber.

I was under the impression that today's debate was about EMA, but according to the Secretary of State it is really about the economy, so let us get one or two facts straight. The real spark for the financial crisis was when BNP Paribas posted its figures on the north American market in autumn 2007. At that point, the British deficit was below 3% of GDP, which I mention because it is the figure in one of the convergence criteria written into the Maastricht treaty by Conservative Ministers, who at the time said that it was quite tight-but achievable. We achieved it year after year, as we did the 60% debt figure that is also in the criteria, but, after the events involving BNP Paribas, followed by Lehman Brothers and Northern Rock, the deficit had to mount because we had to intervene continually. That was the root of the financial crisis

Gavin Barwell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Cryer: I am not going to give way, because I am short of time.

In my borough, I note that 63% of students at Leyton sixth-form college in my constituency receive EMA, and well over 1,000-1,100-receive the top rate of £30 a week. In the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Dr Creasy), who was in the Chamber earlier, 47% of students at Waltham Forest college receive EMA, and more than 800 are on the top rate. Those students and their college principals have told us not to get rid of EMA.

Principals from other boroughs have said the same thing. Eddie Playfair, who has been on television and radio repeatedly over the past few weeks, lives in my constituency but is the head of Newham sixth-form college in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). He has one of the highest numbers of students on EMA, and he has consistently said, "Don't get rid of it." My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said the same in her remarks, yet the Government say, "We know best; we're going to get rid of it."

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way.

John Cryer: No, I will not, because I need to crack on.

The "enhanced discretionary learner support fund"-if ever I heard an Orwellian phrase, that is it-is so far unclear. We have not been told how it will work, but we do know that funding will drop from half a billion-£575 million-a year to £75 million a year, and it is absolute fantasy to suggest that with such funding we will be able to cover all the students who need assistance. I have attended meeting after meeting with students, principals and lecturers, and they all say the same thing: "This will deter people, particularly from poorer backgrounds, from continuing in education." Yet the Government, and Liberal and Tory MPs, have engaged in a process of mendacity and misinformation, saying, "We'll work together and do our best to come up with some scheme that will actually work." The way to send a signal to the Secretary of State, however, is to join us in the Lobby tonight and vote for our motion.

At a time when bankers' bonuses are being doled out to the tune of £7 billion, it is an obscenity to see a Government refusing to intervene with the banks yet at the same time taking money away from some of the poorest students in this country. However, there is one thing that we should be grateful for, and that is that the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister are managing to do what many of us have wanted to do for a long time by politicising a generation of students. I can promise the House that those students who are being politicised by the abolition of EMA and by the tuition fees debacle will not be voting Liberal Democrat and will not be voting Conservative.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm110119/debtext/110119-0003.htm#11011956001313>