

Whilst Britain is reeling from revelations about the luxury of Ed Miliband's house, Dutch politics has taken a curious turn. A protest by humanities students at Amsterdam's largest university spiralled out of control into a long-running occupation of the university's main ceremonial building, the Maagdenhuis.

Their demands seem archaic to a British ear, calling for a reversal of cuts and more democracy in university decision-making. It is all rather reminiscent of a black-and-white age of student militancy, wild-cat strikes, double-digit inflation and black-outs.

And Dutch students have indeed been here before. Inspired by scenes from Paris's May 1969 demonstrations, Amsterdam's students sprang into action in 1970 to rebel against the old-fashioned, narrow-minded courses their professors forced them to follow.

But in contrast to the 1970s rebels, today's occupiers are no long-haired, pot-smoking anarchists who have taken to the barricades to call for a utopian socialist republic. These are serious, motivated students who see cuts to their language, arts and philosophy studies as a barrier to their own later success.

And another important contrast with the 1970s is that this isn't the students against the professors any more. One department after another is declaring their solidarity with protestors and urging an end to top-down management.

Students in Amsterdam feel the pinch as they have been reduced to a university income stream paying a mortgage on a shiny waterfront campus development they will never benefit from. If your department doesn't hit its profitability targets, then it's for the chop, no matter what those studies' wider social value.

Staff and students have come together to challenge the dominant view that the only thing that matters is the bottom line, and there's no such thing as society. They've been co-operating to involve world-leading speakers to start a public debate about how more than just money can matter.

The occupation is a direct result of protestors feeling that their voices are being ignored. They see their only remedy being to reopen the debate and engage with the public, because we all lose when bankers and bondholders are allowed to debate what matters.

That public debate included the Dutch-born Guardian journalist Joris Luijendijk. He's spent the last three years in the City of London following City movers and shakers, and is poised better than most to explain how our obsession with finance has brought British civil society to its knees.

In the UK, we follow the 1980s Thatcher handbook in dealing with student protests. Last year, facing similar occupations, universities invited police to remove protestors with the full force of their authority, evicting with violence and persecuting through the legal system their students who simply want their voice to be heard.

The short-lived English university protests were a symptom of a more general malaise afflicting England where finance is king. With all public services reduced to making the payment to private financiers, any kind of protest is a threat to keeping the money flowing, an existential threat to the system.

A society where protest is impossible is a society where only powerful voices are heard, and dissenting views are aggressively barked down. And braying loudest are the attack-dogs of the London Tory press, Conservative Central Office rattling their chains harder as the election approaches.

May's vote should give us the choice about what matters to us as a society, not just what we're going to cut to pay the bankers. Five years of Tory vandalism mean we urgently need a debate about whether poor people should be allowed the 'luxury' of remaining in their own homes. And all we get is a row about Miliband's two kitchens.