

Dissent suppressed at Oxford Union

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The Oxford Union Society is the most famous debating society in the world. It has hosted such controversial figures as Malcom X, who demanded black empowerment “by any means necessary,” and Richard Nixon, who made his first public speech there after Watergate. Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams spoke there at a time when UK television was banned from broadcasting his voice, and the Ulster unionist demagogue Reverend Ian Paisley caused an uproar when he denounced Catholicism at the Oxford Union.

One of the most famous motions ever debated at the Oxford Union was, “This House will under no circumstances fight for King and Country,” which was passed in 1933 by 275 votes to 153. The motion was denounced in the press and in Parliament. Winston Churchill declared it to be “abject, squalid” and “shameless.” The Union was accused of encouraging Hitler to invade Europe.

“The Oxford Union,” the society’s web site states, “believes first and foremost in freedom of speech: nothing more, nothing less.”

It is all the more surprising therefore that an organization that is no stranger to controversy, and indeed actively courts it, should have acted to censor and curtail a demonstration that was organized by Survival International when Botswana’s President Festus Mogae visited the Union on Friday, March 14.

Members of the Union, as well as activists from Survival International, were asked to leave the building or were escorted from the grounds as soon as they revealed their political sympathies—either by asking pointed questions about the treatment of the San Bushmen, who are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kalahari Desert, distributing leaflets or exposing T-shirts with slogans protesting the treatment of the Bushmen.

Survival International says that in total 25 of its supports were thrown out of the union grounds,

including most significantly some members of the Union from the debate itself.

The group’s director Stephen Corry, who is a Union member, was one of those expelled by “burly security guards.” One protester—another Union member—told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she had been seated in the front row of the debate and had asked President Mogae about his government’s treatment of the Bushmen. She and another woman then stood up and removed their jerseys to reveal T-shirts with the slogan “Botswana Police Shoot Bushmen.” A steward immediately approached them and put his hand on the woman’s shoulder, saying, “I think we are going to have to ask you to leave now.” They were escorted out of the meeting and onto the street.

Survival International’s press release compared the incident to the expulsion of 82-year-old Walter Wolfgang from the Labour Party conference and a similar point was made in a report by the *Independent* newspaper. Wolfgang was manhandled out of the conference and when he tried to return was prevented from doing so by police who cited anti-terrorist legislation in justification of their actions. In total 600 people were stopped by the police and questioned in the vicinity of the Labour Party conference under anti-terror legislation, many of them protesters including some targeted for wearing T-shirts.

Events at the Oxford Union were more low-key and the body insists that hostile questions were indeed asked of Mogae, in what was a successful debate. Anti-terror legislation was not cited and though Special Branch was involved in organizing security it is impossible to know whether the police played any direct part in removing protesters. But after the protesters were removed from the grounds, police were called to prevent them from leafleting those leaving following the debate.

Whatever the contradictory accounts given, such a

response to a fairly small and well-behaved demonstration at an institution famous for robust debate indicates the extreme nervousness within official circles towards any manifestation of political dissent, as well as a growing readiness to respond by suppressing free speech. When seen against the backdrop of the passing by the government of anti-terror legislation and other measures undermining democratic rights, it is a worrying development.

The Oxford Union is not an official part of the political system, but it has acted as a training ground for generations of political figures in Britain and beyond since the days of Gladstone to more recent figures such as Edward Heath, Tony Benn, Benazir Bhutto and Tariq Ali. Its tradition of debate has played a significant part in training political leaders capable of defending not only British government policy, but the actions of its political allies internationally. Nevertheless as with all such institutions, it has acted as a democratic forum in which students have been able to hear dissenting opinion and form their own political views on the world. If the authorities now deem certain views to be unacceptable and attempt to deny them a hearing, it is an indication of a more general erosion of essential civil liberties.

The issues highlighted by Survival International and its supporters amongst Oxford's student body about the Botswana government's treatment of the Bushmen and its relationship with giant mining company De Beers are important ones.

The Bushmen live in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, an area that is unsuitable for agriculture but is rich in diamonds. De Beers controls the mining rights in the area. It denies that it wants to remove the local inhabitants, but since 1997 the government has been forcibly moving them to purpose-built settlements.

Bushmen state that armed game wardens and other government officials have confiscated their animals and forbidden them to hunt or collect food. So intensive was the official presence, according to *Washington Post* reporter Craig Timberg, that when Bushmen went to relieve themselves they found that they had an armed escort.

According to the BBC there have been beatings and tortures. Water tanks and wells have been broken and concreted over in an effort to force the Bushmen to move. A group of 240 Bushmen are currently taking

the Botswana government to court demanding the right to return. Their lawyer Glyn Williams told reporters last year, "The essence is the right of the people to continue to reside on their ancestral land in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. We believe that right is enshrined within the constitution, and forcibly removing the residents from their land by unlawfully terminating services is to deprive them of that right."

Last month police fired rubber bullets at a group of Bushmen who were trying to re-enter the game reserve. The government claims that the police were attacked and that they removed 35 Bushmen from the reserve, but deny that they did so at gunpoint. A number of Bushmen were arrested, including Roy Sesana, a prominent elder.

Botswana is seen as a model of good governance in Africa. The country is rated as the best credit risk in Africa. Its per capita income, at \$9,200, is among the highest on the continent. Globally, Botswana ranks as a middle-income country. This relative wealth is dependent entirely on diamonds, which account for 80 percent of the country's exports.

The diamond industry is largely in the hands of one company—De Beers Botswana Mining Company (Debswana), which is jointly owned by the government and De Beers.

Only a small part of the population has benefited from the income that has come from diamonds. The majority of people still live below the poverty line. In 2003 life expectancy was 40 years. Approximately one in three are infected with HIV-AIDS.

Oxford, the alma mater of Sir Cecil Rhodes, who carved out a fortune for himself and an empire for Britain in Southern Africa with De Beers, is an entirely appropriate place to raise questions about these issues.



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