

Britain: The real issues in the Oxford Union “free speech” debate

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The latest attempt to justify dissemination of right-wing views with the claim that it represents a commitment to “freedom of speech” is amongst the most cynical.

On Monday night, the Oxford Union (OU) hosted a “debate,” supposedly on free speech, in which Nick Griffin, leader of the fascist British National Party (BNP), and the infamous holocaust denier David Irving were cast as the victims of an overzealous, totalitarian political correctness.

The forum was organised to discuss the motion, “This House believes that even extremists should be entitled to free speech.”

Had it been genuinely conceived of as a debate on the very real danger represented by censorship, it could only have been welcomed.

One of those invited to speak was Des Browne, Labour’s Defence Secretary. He represents a government that has passed a barrage of anti-democratic legislation that has enshrined state censorship to such a degree that it has created a new category of thought crime. Under anti-terror legislation, it is now illegal to even view material that is alleged to be supportive of terrorism, and the weeks leading up to the debate saw several Muslims imprisoned on these grounds.

The OU, however, chose to centre its supposed defence of free speech on legislation enacted by the government against incitement to religious hatred. This was apparently the grounds on which it invited Griffin and Irving to speak.

In February 2006, Griffin and party member Mark Collett were unsuccessfully prosecuted for incitement to religious hatred after they were secretly filmed by a BBC reporter referring to Islam as a “wicked, vicious faith,” claiming that white girls were being groomed

for sex by Muslim men, and denouncing Asians for “trying to destroy us.”

The same year, Irving spent 10 months in jail in Austria for glorifying and identifying with the German Nazi Party, which is banned under Austrian law.

It should be noted that Griffin was cleared by a jury after his lawyers successfully argued that his comments to an internal meeting were protected as free speech. Irving—who is widely discredited as a historian for his holocaust denial and association with fascists—has never faced legal censure in Britain.

Moreover, Griffin’s criminal prosecution was the exception, not the rule, regarding his treatment by the media. The fascist leader is regularly interviewed by the news channels, and has fronted his party’s election broadcast. The BNP has its own website and organises public meetings and demonstrations. Irving also maintains his own website, publishes books and has lectured up and down the country—his appearance in Oxford was reportedly to kick-start a “come-back” tour.

The laws on incitement to religious hatred met with widespread opposition, and it would have been entirely possible to invite a high-profile speaker who would have probed the genuine democratic issues raised.

Instead, the OU staged a forum in which state censorship was presented as being directed primarily against the far right.

It has been argued that the invitation to the two was a cheap publicity stunt by an organisation that in recent years has become known for courting controversy, rather than a genuine academic discussion. But political considerations were at work.

The head of the Oxford Union is Luke Tryl, a prominent member of Conservative Future, the Tory Party’s youth organisation. He justified the invitation

on the grounds that “these people are not being given a platform to extol their views, but are coming to talk about the *limits* of free speech” (emphasis added).

If one were to argue that free speech has its limits, then how better to do so than invite those who are guaranteed to evoke repugnance? Not only did the debate allow Labour and the Tories to pose as opponents of fascism—Browne withdrew from the forum, which was also condemned by former Conservative leader Michael Howard—it bolstered official justifications for anti-democratic legislation.

Tryl et al may have had more of a chance of passing themselves off as champions of intellectual freedom had the Oxford Union not withdrawn its invitation only last month to the prominent anti-Zionist critic, Professor Norman Finkelstein.

Finkelstein—the author of numerous scholarly works including *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*—had been invited to participate in an October 23 debate on the motion, “This house believes that one state is the only solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict.” Finkelstein was to oppose the motion along with Lord David Trimble and gay rights activist Peter Tatchell.

On that occasion, it took just a handful of complaints from pro-Zionists such as Harvard Professor of Law Alan Dershowitz that the debate was “unbalanced” for Tryl to disinvite Finkelstein.

In an e-mail to Finkelstein, Tryl justified the decision on the grounds that “Many people expressed concern that the debate as it stood was imbalanced and people felt that as someone who had apparently expressed anti-zionist sentiments that you might not be appropriate for this debate. I tried to convince them otherwise but was accused of putting forward an imbalanced debate and various groups put pressure on me. I received numerous emails attacking the debate and Alan Dershowitz threatened to write an Oped attacking the Union. What is more he apparently attacked me personally in a televised lecture to Yale.”

Tryl and the OU’s decision to face off much larger, public protests over Griffin and Irving could not provide a greater contrast. Around 500 protesters assembled outside the meeting, delaying the event for more than one hour and forcing Griffin and Irving to speak in separate rooms.

Whatever concerns there may have been over

associating the OU with the racist and anti-Semitic views of their guest speakers, Tryl was more anxious to make the broader point that the BNP “gain support when they say liberals are silencing them.”

The argument is reminiscent of the justifications advanced last year defending the publication by various right-wing newspapers of cartoons satirising the Prophet Mohammed. When this deliberate provocation solicited the outraged reaction from Muslims desired by its authors, newspapers across the political spectrum were filled with professions of the need to uphold free speech—not just against “intolerant” Muslims but “politically correct” liberals.

The OU debate has seen another attempt to turn reality on its head, one in which racists and xenophobes are the victims and their opponents are political reactionaries, and in which measures meant to safeguard civil liberties and oppose discrimination are recast as restrictions on individual rights.

Speaking before the OU meeting, Griffin claimed that the assault on freedom of speech dated back to the 1960s and 1970s and was linked to the “liberal left elite...from the 1968 generation.”

Griffin’s main complaint is the passing of race relations laws. But his attack on the “1968 generation” is calculated to appeal to a political spectrum stretching from the neo-conservatives in the United States to the Conservatives and New Labour in Britain.

For them, 1968 symbolises the point at which a mass revolutionary movement of the working class, across Europe and internationally, forced a retreat by the ruling elite and an extension of civil liberties and social protection. These concessions won by previous generations of working people are now being systematically dismantled. Indeed, Griffin boasted that his invitation was proof of how things had fundamentally changed. The BNP was now “mainstream” because “A lot of the present generation have shown more sensible views—hence the fact that it appears we are about to see the definitive breaking of a 40-year ‘no platform’ [for fascists] policy.”



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