

French National Front leader Marine Le Pen addresses Oxford Union

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The Oxford Union (OU) has become the latest major institution to take its place in the international campaign to legitimise the French neo-fascist party, the National Front (FN).

Party leader Marine Le Pen addressed the OU, Oxford University's independent debating society, Thursday, despite widespread opposition. The aim of the OU in inviting her to England was to lend academic prestige to Le Pen's claim to have shed the fascistic legacy of her father's party—what she calls its “demonisation.”

Jean Marie Le Pen is still the party's “honorary chairman.”

In a now familiar pattern, the boosting of Le Pen's fascistic political agenda was carried out while proclaiming the historic society's commitment to “free speech” and “reasoned debate”. But the invitation is of a piece with both contemporary political requirements within ruling circles internationally and with the recent political pedigree of the Oxford Union.

The FN has become the third largest political organisation in France, promoted by sections of the ruling class while exploiting hostility to the right-wing policy of the Socialist Party government of François Hollande. It retains in full its anti-immigrant nationalist programme. Following the killing of *Charlie Hebdo* staff in Paris, Le Pen, who declared the attack to be a “declaration of war by Islamic fundamentalism,” was invited to speak to Hollande in the Élysée Palace. She then penned an op-ed column in the ostensibly liberal *New York Times* and was given a laudatory interview with the *Wall Street Journal*.

Across the official political spectrum, Le Pen's anti-Muslim screed and declaration that Islam is a threat to Western civilisation are welcomed as a means of legitimising the predatory wars of the major powers

and attacks on democratic rights carried out in the name of the “war on terror.” As in the 1930s, the fascists are advanced as potential saviours of the existing order from both an external and internal enemy—then the Jews and now the Muslims—so that they can then be marshalled against the working class.

To underscore the message, Le Pen was invited to speak to the OU to discuss “Western values.”

The OU, perhaps according to its definition of “free speech”, barred journalists from covering the event. The “national and international press are not being invited to this event,” said OU spokesman Daniel Valentine by e-mail. This did not stop the *Daily Telegraph* from asserting that 200-300 protesters against Le Pen's appearance were responsible, writing that “the scrum outside the union meant that reporters were unable to get inside.”

Le Pen, according to the *Times*, took the stand at 7 p.m., an hour after she was scheduled to talk, and gave her views uninterrupted in French.

Citing audience members, the *Times* writes that Le Pen spoke about European Union (EU) immigration and border control, saying: “The nation's border is the nation's first defence against Islamic fundamentalism.

“Without borders, there is no state, no sovereignty, no freedom.... I want to restore national borders.”

She added, “Multicultural societies often become multi-conflicted societies. We have to do everything now to avoid a clash of cultures that will bring down our continent.”

Under normal procedures, an opponent would have also been heard. But this was abandoned in deference to Le Pen.

The OU naturally claimed to have no political axe to grind or sympathy with her views. However, its stand was understood as being sympathetic to Le Pen by

commentators in the *Oxford Student*, published by the Oxford University Students Union (OUSU)—an organisation that protested Le Pen’s appearance. For this stand, the OUSU was denounced on its own newspaper’s web site comment section for its “entirely arbitrary, fundamentally flawed, fascist-in-its-own-right ideology.”

“Be careful of people who shout,” one commenter added. “Anyone who independently thinks, especially about the value of independent nations and returning to national currencies, will become a target of EU-backed attacks.”

One even asserted that Le Pen “has never spoken against immigrants but against the policies of immigration. As for the fascist Le Pen Pere [Jean-Marie Le Pen] he was the first one to propose a black man to deputation in France in the fifties and to regional council for a muslim woman. He has never said that the holocaust was a detail, but when pressed by leftist journalist for quite a while about the gas chamber on a talk about WW2, he told them that this war could not be [reduced] to the history of the gas chambers.”

Le Pen’s appearance was designed to appeal to such sentiment. The OU’s claim to impartiality notwithstanding, its leadership has become ever more closely connected with the Conservative Party—and its right wing in particular. Among its former presidents in more recent decades are such Tory notables as Edward Heath, Michael Heseltine, William Hague, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson.

Current president Roberto Weeden-Sanz is a Conservative. Other officers include former Tory MPs Ann Widdecombe and Edwina Currie, while serving Tory MPs incubated there include Damian Hinds, Jacob Rees-Mogg, Nicky Morgan and, until her 2012 resignation, Louise Mensch.

Prime Minister David Cameron is an Oxford graduate.

These are layers that combine a louche desire to shock by inviting “controversial” figures to debate with a pronounced affinity with the far right that has manifested itself again and again.

The OU boasts of being “steeped in history,” having been founded in 1823. But its more recent history includes:

* In 1998, a debate was planned involving John Tyndall, the grandfather of British fascism in the post-

war era but cancelled due to public opposition and police advice.

* In 2001, an invitation to Holocaust denier David Irving to speak in a debate on censorship was cancelled due to massive opposition.

* In 2007, Irving was invited once again alongside the fascist British National Party leader Nick Griffin to take part in a debate on the motion, “This House believes that even extremists should be entitled to free speech.” The OU, as the WSWS commented, “chose to centre its supposed defence of free speech on legislation enacted by the government against incitement to religious hatred” and “staged a forum in which state censorship was presented as being directed primarily against the far right.”

* This pattern continued. In 2014, English Defence League (EDL) founder Tommy Robinson spoke before the OU, after two previous abortive attempts.

The political evolution of the OU mirrors the right-wing drift in the bourgeoisie and the worst elements within the most prosperous layers of the upper middle class from which the elite universities draw a significant section of their student body. Indeed, it stands at the apex of that process, attracting the future shapers of bourgeois politics and finance—who are attracted to the politics of Le Pen and her ilk like moths to a flame.

In this regard, though somewhat less enthusiastic than Oxford, it should be noted that Le Pen also spoke to the Cambridge Union Society in 2013, while an invite for Irving in 2003—once again to discuss “free speech” and the supposed victimisation of the far right—was quietly dropped in the face of opposition.



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