A second open letter to the vice chancellor

Further on political censorship at the University of Sydney

James Cogan
6 May 2015

The following text is an open letter from SEP national secretary James Cogan to University of Sydney Vice Chancellor Dr Michael Spence.

To Dr Michael Spence
Vice Chancellor and Principal
University of Sydney

Dear Dr Spence,

I refer to the open letter I sent to you on behalf of the Socialist Equality Party on April 20, to which we have not, as yet, received a reply. We have, however, been reliably informed, that in a communication to university staff, you alleged that "lies" have been circulated about the "banning" of the SEP from your campus.

There can be no doubt that this accusation is directed against the Socialist Equality Party. We have conducted a public campaign in Australia and internationally, condemning the University of Sydney's refusal to hire a venue to us, for the purposes of holding an anti-war meeting entitled "Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism and the drive to World War III," as a "flagrant act of political censorship and an attack on freedom of speech." This campaign has been reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Honi Soit*, the *Honest History* website and widely on social media.

Our public characterisation of the university's action as a political ban is entirely accurate. The university's justification—that there was a risk of disruption to other activities on campus that day—is untenable. Firstly, despite our requests, no evidence of such risk has ever been provided. Secondly, as we indicated in our open letter, the university applied a diametrically opposed standard in regards to the likelihood of protests at the lecture delivered on campus, just a few weeks earlier, by retired British Colonel Richard Kemp. You upheld his right to speak, yet you denied that same right to the SEP.

We have also been informed that, in the same communication to staff, you continue to defend the university's actions on the grounds that the SEP meeting posed a risk. Moreover, you apparently claim that the source of that assessment was the police. According to you, the police warned the university that there would be "security concerns" because the university would be conducting its Anzac commemorations on campus on the same afternoon.

We would like to ask: is this really the case? Did the police actually provide such a warning? If so, it would be contrary to information already provided by the university to the SEP, and at odds with our own communications with NSW Police.

In our letter to you, we insisted that you fully disclose precisely who was involved in the university discussions that led to its refusal to provide the SEP with a venue. We specifically asked: "Were police or intelligence agencies involved? Was the federal government or the NSW state government consulted?"

In the belated official explanation regarding your rejection of our booking, which we received on April 21, four days after we had been advised by telephone, your representative referenced these questions.

He wrote: "As outlined to you in our phone conversation, an *internal security assessment* indicated that holding this event on the proposed date poses a significant risk of disruption to other University-related activities. Based on this assessment, the University cannot accept your booking request and make a venue

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available for this event. This decision was made after following standard process and consultation within the University, and *no third-party organisations were involved*." [emphasis added]

Your representative made no mention of police raising security concerns about holding our meeting on Sunday April 26.

What we do know, however, is that NSW Police raised no security concerns after we filed, on April 19, a "notice of intention to hold a public assembly" in Hyde Park North on April 26. In the event that both Burwood Council and University of Sydney maintained their refusal to hire us a venue, and if other venue hirers were intimidated into doing likewise, the SEP had decided to conduct its event in the form of a public open-air meeting.

As it turned out, Hurstville Entertainment Centre agreed to hire us their facilities, and we announced on April 22 that the public meeting would proceed there. Again, NSW Police raised no objections. Their sole contact with us, on April 23, was to check whether our announcement regarding the Hurstville venue meant that the SEP would no longer be conducting a public assembly in Hyde Park.

In other words, the police, to our knowledge, raised no objections relating to "security concerns" with Burwood Council, Hurstville Entertainment Centre or the North Melbourne Meat Market in Melbourne, where the SEP was also conducting an anti-war meeting. Burwood Council had cancelled the SEP's initial booking on the grounds of several complaints, instigated by the anti-immigrant, nationalist Reclaim Australia group, about the "nature of the meeting," not on the basis of concerns it would be either disrupted or disruptive.

From the standpoint of democratic principles, even if police had warned the University of Sydney about unspecified concerns, this would not have justified denying the SEP a venue booking, let alone concealing that information from us. It would have posed, as with the lecture delivered by Colonel Kemp, the need to discuss with us how the event could proceed with the least disruption.

That, however, was not your approach. Instead, on the grounds that Anzac commemoration-related activities were taking place on the same day, you refused to allow an anti-war meeting to be held on campus. In other words, the SEP's public meeting, inside a university lecture theatre, was banned because its political content—to give voice to the opposition of millions of ordinary people toward the government-sponsored, glorification of militarism—stood in direct opposition to the political orientation of the university's own official Anzac events.

This is, to call things by their right name, political censorship and a direct attack on freedom of speech. One only need pose a single question to understand the political nature of the university's attack on the SEP's democratic rights: Would the university have responded in the same way to some other organisation seeking to hire a venue, on that day, for a public meeting devoted to celebrating the "sacrifice" of Australian soldiers in the interests of "King and Empire?"

Your allegations, Dr Spence, that the SEP has lied, are false. Our public meeting was, indeed, banned. Your university's explanations, on the other hand, of the reasons behind that ban are, at best, deeply contradictory and misleading.

Yours sincerely,

James Cogan

National Secretary

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