

# A curious incident involving the Oxford Union's Whistleblowing Panel

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On February 27, the Oxford Union sponsored a debate, “Whistleblowing: exposing injustices or undermining institutions?”

The Oxford Union is a prestigious debating society, whose members are drawn mainly from the University of Oxford. It set out the purpose of the “Whistleblowing Panel” debate in a blurb on *Facebook* :

“The issue of whistleblowing concerns potential clashes between national security, intellectual property rights and the need for public scrutiny. In an age where Wikileaks is able to release millions of documents in an instant, how should these issues be addressed? Are whistleblowers acting morally, and are they being treated fairly?”

The three invited panellists, as described by the Oxford Union were:

“Ewen MacAskill—The Defence and Intelligence Correspondent for the *Guardian*, MacAskill was one of the journalists that released the Snowden disclosures about the NSA's surveillance programs.

“Heather Marsh—A human rights and internet activist, Marsh was the Administrator of WikiLeaks Central between 2010 and 2012.

“David Shedd—A former CIA operative and Deputy Director of National Intelligence before becoming acting Director of the Defence Intelligence Agency.”

According to the Oxford Union's Facebook post, there were 51 attendees. But there is no account of the meeting. No reports, no transcripts or videos. There is only one comment to the post, two days before the event: “How about providing a short apology to people next time you advance the date of an event three days before it's due to happen?”

According to an anonymous submission to the *World Socialist Web Site*, the event has been censored. The submission states: “For the first time in history, Oxford Union has censored an entire Whistleblowing Panel to silence critique of U.S. Policies.”

The submission claims that the impulse for the panel to be censored came from David Shedd. It alleges that he “demanded that the entire video (not just his parts) be suppressed.” It further notes: “He objected to Marsh's contributions, which were not complimentary to the human rights records of many in

[US President Donald] Trump's inner circle, including Mike Pompeo and Erik Prince. It is not just his own speech he has successfully persuaded ‘the last bastion of free speech’ [Oxford Union] to censor, it is the rest of the panel, a third party action that has never happened at the Oxford Union before and which has serious implications for any future Oxford Union debates on U.S. Policy.”

The submission says this flies in the face of a “publicity contract” that all panellists are given when invited to speak and a release waiver agreeing to a video of the panel being posted on YouTube that all the panellists signed.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) has not been able to independently verify these statements. Though it has written to those responsible for more information, including contacting the Oxford Union and Heather Marsh, it has received no response.

An Internet search for this event proves to be in vain. It confirms that aside from a posting to the Oxford Union's own website and the one Facebook post that replicates this and contains a small catalogue of photos of the panelists, there is no evidence the event even took place.

The submission poses that either the Oxford Union feels it is “too risky...to offend even former U.S intelligence...and has chosen to make official their increasingly evident role as the mouthpiece for the U.S. far right or David Shedd has exercised some official secrets power to cover the personal embarrassment of an ex-US intelligence officer (which is even more ironic since the abuse of NDAs [Non-Disclosure Agreements] and official secrets to protect those in power was one of the topics covered in the panel).”

A search on David Shedd cites him as “one of the most influential American intelligence officers in the post-September 11 era,” according to an article in the *Majalla* .

The *Majalla* is a Saudi-owned, London-based political news journal. The article, “A conversation with David Shedd,” notes that he served on the National Security Council during the Bush years before moving on to the position of deputy director of national intelligence for policy, plans and requirements. In this position, he implemented sweeping intelligence reforms and a new National Intelligence Strategy. Under the Obama administration, in August 2010, he was named deputy director

of the Defence Intelligence Agency. In 2014, he took the post of acting director.

In the interview, published October 2017, he raises his concerns over the narrow focus on ISIS (Islamic State), which fails to adequately take into account Iranian and Russian gains from an ISIS defeat.

Beacon Global Strategies, a strategic advisory firm specialising in international policy, defence, cyber, intelligence, and homeland security for which Shedd is an advisory board member, notes that until January 2015 he led the Defence Intelligence Enterprise workforce comprising more than 16,500 military and civilian employees worldwide.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Shedd was based in US embassies in Costa Rica and Mexico, holding senior management assignments at the CIA, including chief of congressional liaison. Shedd also sits on the Government Advisory Board of Dataminr, a social media “big data” company that broadly services the federal government

It is common practice for the Oxford Union to upload videos of their events to roll out to a broader audience. If it is the case that a panel on whistleblowing has been censored, this occurs against the backdrop of the British government blocking facts through the issuing of D-Notices—as the *World Socialist Web Site* recently noted regarding leaked facts surrounding the alleged poisoning of Russian double-agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia.

The Oxford Union claims that it is the “bastion of free speech.” Bursar Lindsey Warne told the *Oxford Mail* in 2013, “There are very few places left in the world where you can have students challenging the views of heads of state on a one-to-one basis. It is a unique institution because it is not partial and does not hold a particular view. Anyone is welcome—free speech is essential.”

In April 2018, the Oxford Union stated: “Beyond defending the principles of free speech, the Union has become a place where systematically oppressed voices can engage with a global audience, advocate important causes, and spark movements,” noting as one of the issues it will be taking up, “Venezuela’s oppressive regime” and ending the term with former Crown Prince of Jordan HRH Prince Hamzah bin Hussein OSJ among the speakers.

However, there is a well-known case of censorship involving WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

In February 2013, WikiLeaks accused the Oxford Union of censoring Assange’s address to the debating society. While his speech and a following Q and A were broadcast, WikiLeaks objected to the censoring of the video that formed Assange’s backdrop. The video known as “Collateral Murder” released by WikiLeaks in 2010 shows the gun crew of a US Apache helicopter firing on Reuters journalists and civilians in Baghdad, Iraq, in 2007.

The Oxford Union replaced this video with a still of the Oxford Union logo, claiming it was not an act of censorship but

a potential issue of copyright. WikiLeaks rebutted that “by law and practice the US government does not claim copyrights on footage or documents that it produces.”

The mantra of “the bastion of free speech” is most forcefully promoted when it comes to justifying the invitations of far-right and other odious political figures. In 2013, Marine Le Pen, leader of the French neo-fascist National Front, was invited to speak, unopposed and with no media presence, on Western values.

The WSWS noted that this was part of international efforts to rehabilitate and legitimise the far-right, especially in Europe.

The submission to the WSWS notes that there seems to be an increase in the number of invites extended to Trump’s own inner circle. The leadership of the Oxford Union has become ever more closely connected with the right wing of the Conservative Party, as shown by its long list of former officers and presidents.

The IYSSE poses the question to the president at the time of the Whistleblowing Panel, Laali Vadlamani, and the current president, Gui Cavalcanti: Is it true that transcripts of the debate have been suppressed? If so, on whose authority and on what grounds?

We send an appeal to anyone who has more information on this event and is concerned about democratic rights and the struggle against war to share this with us and shed more light on this case.

*The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are holding a series of meetings titled: War, lies and censorship—Free Julian Assange!*

*We urge attendance at our meeting in Oxford at the Fusion Arts on Saturday May 26 at 2 p.m. Full details below and Facebook event here .*

**War, lies and censorship—Free Julian Assange!**

Saturday May 26, 2 p.m.

Fusion Arts, 44b Princes Street

Cowley Road

Oxford, OX4 1DD



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**