

Oxford Union debating society threatened with legal action over censoring criticism of CIA

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The *World Socialist Web Site* has been investigating the censorship of a panel discussion, “Whistleblowing: Exposing injustices or undermining institutions?” hosted by the Oxford Union earlier this year. Records of the event, including transcripts and videos, have been withheld from publication—apparently to suppress remarks by human rights activist Heather Marsh about the activities of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) made in the presence of one of its former operatives, David Shedd.

A veil of silence has been thrown over the February 27 event, in an effort to suppress Marsh’s remarks and block any knowledge of them ever having been made.

Marsh has now published a letter she sent to the Oxford Union in April, pointing out they are in breach of contract over the censorship of the video, threatening legal action. As she notes, both her invitation to speak and the Oxford Union’s web site boast of the significant publicity given to speakers at their events, from press coverage to its own YouTube account. The only caveat listed is that such publicity will be at each participant’s discretion as far as his or her own contributions are concerned. Marsh has been denied publication of her own speech. The Union still refuses to say by whose instruction this decision was made.

Since the event, Marsh has made every effort to hold the Oxford Union to its obligations. In her letter, she describes sending a number of e-mails asking when the video recording would be posted and why this had not yet been done. She has not even had the courtesy of a response.

In late April, she returned to the Oxford Union to collect her travel reimbursement and to inquire in person about the video of her speech. According to

Marsh, union bursar Lindsey Warne explained, “We have had many meetings about this” and “A great many people are asking, but that video is not ever going up.”

According to Marsh, Warne reportedly commented in one of these meetings “that it was ironic that we were censoring a whistleblower panel.”

In the course of its own inquiries, the WSWS has met with similar stonewalling. E-mails sent to the Oxford Union, to the standing committee and to the now three presidents who have been in office during this censorship—asking on whose authority and on what grounds was reporting of the “whistleblowers” panel censored—have been met with silence. Phone calls have seen our reporters given the runaround before finally being told to send an e-mail for an answer. Whoever demanded or carried out the decision to censor the records of the Whistleblowing Panel, the entire Oxford Union is now engaged in a cover-up to protect them.

It should be noted that the Oxford Union’s Facebook page announces a forthcoming debate, “Is Democracy Under Siege?”, and an advertisement for “women’s public speaking workshops, open to all self-identifying female and non-binary members,” to improve women’s “confidence in all areas of public speaking.” There is no small irony involved, given that they have undemocratically silenced a debate due to the remarks of a female panellist!

Marsh and Shedd’s co-panelist was Ewen MacAskill, defence and intelligence correspondent at the *Guardian* newspaper. Neither MacAskill nor the *Guardian* has written on the event itself, or the blackout.

One would have thought that the issues raised by Marsh over the activities of the CIA during her

presentation at the Oxford Union, and their subsequent silencing, would be of fundamental concern to anyone concerned with democratic rights and the use and abuse of power.

In response to an inquiry from the International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality (IYSSE) regarding censorship of the meeting, MacAskill wrote, “I left almost immediately after the panel discussion to catch a train back to London. I have had no discussion since then with anyone from the Oxford Union, other than to sort out reimbursement for my train fare. I don’t know why a decision was taken not to make the video freely available.

“I was unaware the video had not gone up online until I read a few pieces online. I have no objection to it being made available.”

There is not a word of protest in this response. MacAskill states neither whether he supports Marsh’s complaints nor if he will be pursuing the matter further.

The *Guardian* did not report on an event at which one of its leading journalists appeared and has not publicly complained about the suppression of his and everybody else’s remarks.

The only published work on the matter, besides that of the WSWS, is from journalist Douglas Lucas, writing in the Buffalo, New York-based news weekly *the Public*.

This can hardly be because the story is not considered newsworthy. Oxford Union debates usually receive widespread coverage in the UK media. In fact, the most recent *Guardian* article pertaining to the Oxford Union was published on June 1—after all the currently available details about the Whistleblowing Panel had become public.

Focusing on the controversy around the Oxford Union’s decision to invite fascistic former Trump advisor Sebastian Gorka to speak, the *Guardian* piece mentions previous controversies over speakers, but makes no reference to the suppression of an entire debate. This silence can only be interpreted as evidence that the paper has signed up to the restrictions placed on reporting the event.

It should also be noted that Marsh’s comments, which she has published, reveal no “state secrets” or any information not publicly available. And there is no question of libel or defamation of Shedd. Marsh did not accuse him of specific actions, but described him as

belonging to and a representative of the hideous organisation that is the CIA—some of whose well-documented crimes she powerfully exposed.

The event is being censored, therefore, not on legal grounds and not on the usual cowardly basis that “sensitive information” has been revealed. What has been deemed necessary to suppress is critical opposition to the US security apparatus and its activities. Meanwhile, the likes of Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen are free to air their opinions through the Oxford Union with no complications.

The implications of the silencing of a talk on whistleblowing by the self-professed “last bastion of free speech” are made clear by their broader context: an international intensification of political censorship, which currently finds clearest expression in the persecution of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange. Opposition to the turn by the major imperialist powers toward war and dictatorship is everywhere coming under sharp attack. Democratic rights are now deemed an unwarranted burden on bourgeois regimes in crisis.

The fate of the Whistleblowing Panel is one manifestation of this process and should be strongly opposed. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on Oxford students—on whose behalf the Oxford Union claims to act—to condemn this censorship and the continued refusal of Oxford Union leaders to provide any explanation for their actions. We will offer all possible assistance to students who wish to mount such a campaign or investigate this issue.



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