

British think tank fronts right-wing “academic freedom” campaign—Part 1

Thomas Scripps
24 August 2020

This is the first part of a series. Part 2 will be published on Wednesday, August 26.

The house think tank of the Conservative Party, the Policy Exchange, has produced a report titled “Academic freedom in the UK: Protecting viewpoint diversity.”

It is a manifesto for a political alliance of the Tory government and its social Darwinist periphery, the libertarian right, and the most right-wing sections of the Labour Party. It argues for a combined intervention into both academia and student politics on campus to suppress left-wing protest and give free rein to far-right ideologues.

The authors argue of universities, “there is growing concern that academic freedom in these institutions is being undermined in a way that departs from the liberal traditions and democratic norms of British society.” They allege a “structural discriminatory effect” above all directed against academics who “identify as on the right.”

Among the report’s recommendations are that the government “establish the position of a Director for Academic Freedom” with ombudsman powers—as part of the Office for Students (OfS)—and introduce “an academic freedom clause which, by automatic operation of law, is incorporated into the contracts of academics.” It should also “expand the scope of activities which are protected beyond those specified by existing academic freedom legislation,” including “in their research, teaching, and public engagement.”

The OfS ought to “be willing to exercise its existing powers to fine HEPs [higher education providers]” for alleged “breaches of academic freedom,” and student unions should be subjected to the same regulations.

Universities should “appoint an Academic Freedom Champion, who would report directly to the Vice-Chancellor” and “consider adopting a version of the ‘Chatham House Rule’ as an institutional code of practice for teaching and research seminars.”

References to “free speech” and “academic freedom” are designed to conceal a reactionary class programme. The authors are peddling a long-standing myth in ruling circles, that universities are bastions of violent left-wing intolerance strangling the right of “conservative” figures to have their voices heard. On this basis, the call is made for an open-door policy on campuses, empowering despised right-wing figures to speak and produce pseudo-science, free from criticism or consequence—protected by the government and the courts.

The only thing substantively new about the report’s claims is the

inclusion of a dubious YouGov poll. This “evidence,” statistically misrepresented, includes a grand total of around 10 claims of “self-censorship” from current academics. These are padded by clearly bogus “personal accounts” including, “A previous line manager had a large photo of Jeremy Corbyn on his desk. When I failed to approve (I said nothing) he had me removed from the programme despite very positive feedback” and, “I have been called in for a meeting with University marketing, my Head of Department, and an HR officer after I published an article in a peer-reviewed academic journal... They asked why I had not explicitly condemned conservatism as immoral within this article... I was told that, if I insisted on remaining impartial within my research, I was not to further research this subject and warned I may face disciplinary hearings if I did.”

Government intervention on the campuses

The quality of the authors’ “findings” is irrelevant, however. Their report is a mechanism for advancing a state-orchestrated campaign several years in the making.

In January 2018, Theresa May’s Tory government established the OfS as a regulatory body with a mandate to protect “freedom of speech” at the universities. The intention was to hand leadership of this organisation to Toby Young, a darling of the Tory right who had previously advocated “progressive eugenics” and written that the term “inclusive” was “one of those ghastly, politically correct words that has survived the demise of New Labour.” Under his direction, the OfS was set to intervene aggressively on campus to promote reactionary speakers and academics and silence their critics.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) wrote at the time, one of “the primary political reasons for the appointment of Young, who occupies a position on the right of the Conservative Party, was... his following among the hardened reactionaries won through his crusades against ‘the left’ at universities... a self-proclaimed warrior against all things ‘politically correct,’... Young was hailed by the government as the right man to put an end to such illiberal stupidities.”

These plans were interrupted by a massive popular backlash against Young, who within days of being proposed for the role was

revealed to have attended a secretive annual eugenics conference at University College London—the London Conference on Intelligence. Over 200,000 people signed a petition demanding his removal and he was eventually forced to give up his position, though not before then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson intervened personally in his defence. The WSWS warned, “Young’s departure does not change the role of the OfS one iota.”

At the end of that year—buoyed by the OfS’s continued demands for “challenging and unpopular speech” and Education Secretary Sam Gyimah’s promise to “clarify the rules and regulations around speakers and events to prevent bureaucrats or wreckers on campus from exploiting gaps for their own ends”—a huge campaign developed in right-wing media and political circles over the case of social Darwinist researcher Noah Carl. An Oxford University graduate who had also attended the London Conference on Intelligence and collaborated with fascist white supremacists, Carl had been awarded a prestigious research fellowship at Cambridge University.

Hundreds of academics and students signed an open letter criticising Carl’s “ethically suspect” and “methodologically flawed” work and calling on the university to issue “a public statement dissociating themselves from research that seeks to establish correlations between race, genes, intelligence and criminality in order to explain one by the other.” Students at Cambridge mounted a determined campaign exposing his pseudo-scientific research and demanding the university rescind his fellowship.

In response, Toby Young led a charge of commentators from the *Telegraph*, *Times*, *Spectator*, and smaller conservative and far-right outlets, declaring, “Noah Carl’s only crime is being a conservative” and denouncing the “left-wing mob” at universities. Carl himself had presented a report to the Adam Smith Institute in 2017 titled, “Lackademia: Why do Academics Lean Left?”—later criticised by one of its main sources for its “flimsy figures.”

In the end, the government did not intervene and Cambridge University was forced to receive Carl’s resignation in April 2019, admitting in its own inquiry that he “had collaborated with a number of individuals who were known to hold extremist views” and could have used the university “as a platform to promote views that could incite racial or religious hatred.”

As with Young and the OfS, Carl’s resignation was greeted with a fresh howl of indignation in the right-wing press and his case became the totem for a renewed campaign for “academic freedom.” He was a prize speaker at a “Freedom of Speech Conference” organised by Oxford Professor Nigel Biggar—whose apologies for the crimes of the British Empire prompted a letter of criticism by around 60 prominent Oxford scholars, seeking to disassociate the views of the faculty from his.

In a public meeting in Cambridge at the end of 2019, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality explained, “Carl is playing a significant role in the attempt to... create a right-wing ‘counter spiral’ in mainstream academia... he is already well established on the right-wing lecture circuit, where his profile will be lucratively enhanced by his newfound status as a martyr.”

Out of these events, the forces pushing a right-wing offensive on the campuses drew the conclusion that it could not proceed with

too obvious a connection to the Tory government and eugenicists. An apparently apolitical campaign—based on invoked principles of “free speech,” “academic freedom,” and “viewpoint diversity”—would need to be promoted, drawing together a wider range of reactionary political tendencies.

The Policy Exchange report is a front for this campaign. One of its authors, Remi Adekoya, has previously written for *Spiked*, an online publication set up by former members of the now defunct Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy and restoration of capitalism in 1991, the RCP declared a “Midnight in the Century” and began a forced march to the libertarian right.

Spiked’s politics is at the core of the approach now taken by the Policy Exchange. It has pioneered the method of claiming a democratic commitment to “free speech”—cynically claiming to have inherited the progressive traditions of the Enlightenment—which it then uses exclusively to castigate left-wing protesters and justify giving prominence to the far right. In 2015, the organisation slandered as a “violent mob” students protesting French National Front leader Marine Le Pen’s appearance at the Oxford Union. Last year, it denounced “The lynch mobbing of Noah Carl.”

Spiked is intimately connected with the Tory government. Munira Mirza, a writer for *Spiked*, has been a close adviser to Prime Minister Boris Johnson since his time as London Mayor. She helped to produce a report for the Policy Exchange in 2017, “Living Apart Together: British Muslims and the Paradox of Multiculturalism,” asserting that “victimhood” was a major theme in “Muslim identity in the UK.” In 2019, she wrote an article for the *Telegraph*, “Intolerant zealots are strangling the intellectual freedom of our universities” defending Noah Carl.

Claire Fox, a former RCP member and a central figure in the *Spiked* milieu, was recently elevated by the Tory government into the House of Lords, having stood for Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party in the 2019 General Election. According to the *Telegraph*, Mirza played a key role in getting Fox the honour.

To be continued.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact