

UK government to appoint “free speech champion” to spearhead right-wing offensive at universities

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Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has announced plans to guarantee “free speech” at UK universities. The government is creating the legal framework for state intervention on the campuses, to protect right-wing reactionaries and silence protest.

Williamson’s proposals include placing a free speech condition on universities which want to access public funding, allowing the Office for Students (OfS) to fine institutions which breach the condition, appointing a “free speech champion” to investigate alleged breaches and recommend redress, and allowing academics, students or visiting speakers to sue for compensation where they claim to have had their free speech infringed.

The requirements will also apply directly to student unions, which the government is looking at bringing under the remit of the OfS instead of the Charity Commission.

The announcement follows a letter sent by Williamson to the outgoing and incoming heads of the OfS, Sir Michael Barber and Lord Wharton of Yarm. Under the heading “Specific priorities”, the education secretary criticised Barber for failing to intervene aggressively enough on the campuses and called on Wharton to do more:

“[T]o date there has been little regulatory action taken by the OfS in relation to potential breaches of the registration conditions relating to freedom of speech and academic freedom... I intend to publish a policy paper on free speech and academic freedom in the near future and I would like the OfS to continue to work closely with the Department to deliver this shared agenda and ensure our work is closely aligned. I would also like it to take more active and visible action to challenge concerning incidents that are reported to it or which it becomes aware of, as well as to share information with providers about best practice for protecting free speech beyond the minimum legal requirements.”

Wharton is a Tory peer who was given the OfS position despite lacking any experience in the higher education sector.

Williamson’s “free speech” proposals are taken almost word-for-word from a report by the right-wing Policy Exchange thinktank last summer, “Academic freedom in the UK:

Protecting viewpoint diversity”. The report called for a “Director for Academic Freedom”, an “academic freedom clause”, for the OfS to “be willing to exercise its existing powers to fine HEPs [higher education providers]” for alleged “breaches of academic freedom” and for student unions to be subject to the same regulations.

Tom Simpson, a professor at Oxford University and an associate fellow at the Policy Exchange, welcomed Williamson’s proposals, before asserting that “a very online culture allows the views of a minority to exert disproportionate influence on administrators, and to exert a chilling effect on other academics.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* described the Policy Exchange report as “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.”

That the right feel able to posture as defenders of democratic rights is thanks to the role played by the pseudo-left and identity politics on campus. A similar report by the right-wing Adam Smith Institute (ASI) states, “Student unions are perceived as ineffective by students, lack democratic legitimacy, and undermine freedom of association and expression... Only one-in-ten students actively participate in student union elections.”

This much is true. But contrary to the ASI’s self-serving claims, it is a result of the *right-wing* climate—the scramble of the affluent middle class for personal advance based on assertions of “identity”—which dominates official campus politics.

Identity politics has nothing to do with socialist politics, which seeks to unify the working class, allied with the best elements of student youth, in a struggle not for individual or sectional advantage but for social equality. Rooted in irrationalist and reactionary postmodern philosophy, identity politics is opposed to the Enlightenment, and above all Marxism, and is advanced by the pseudo-left to obscure the

fundamental division in society—class.

Lacking popular support or democratic principles, the identity politicians have utilised the practice of “no platforming” inherited from the 1970s. The tactic gained broader sympathy among students several decades ago because it targeted fascists and the far-right. Even then, it had dangerous political implications in that it was often linked to appeals for proscriptions and bans by the state and other institutions when history has shown repeatedly that measures nominally introduced against the right are then routinely deployed against the left.

The lurch to the right by the petty-bourgeois layers that find a home either in the Labour Party apparatus, various identity-based groups and campaigns, and in the pseudo-left groups, has exposed more clearly the reactionary implications of no-platforming.

By far the most outrageous case is the attempted blacklisting of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, on grounds of the Swedish state’s concocted sexual assault investigation. In 2012, George Galloway was banned by the National Union of Students on the grounds of being a “rape denier” for defending Assange. In 2015, Cambridge Students’ Union attempted to ban Assange from speaking on campus, and Sheffield Students’ Union tried the same in 2016. Both efforts were overturned by popular opposition.

Campus identity politics assumes its most absurd dimensions in the conflict between different identity groups. In 2016, a National Union of Students LGBT representative at Canterbury University refused to speak alongside gay rights advocate Peter Tatchell, accusing him of being racist and “transphobic”. In 2015, the student union’s women’s officer at Cardiff University led a petition of 3,000 students to bar feminist campaigner Germaine Greer from speaking, again for her “transphobic” views. In 2015, feminist Julie Bindel was barred from speaking at Manchester University students’ union, which claimed her presence could “incite hatred towards and exclusion of our trans students”. Bristol University students’ union voted for a blanket ban on “trans-exclusionary radical feminists”, most prominently Greer, in 2018. Last year, Oxford historian of class and gender relations Selina Todd was no-platformed by the Oxford International Women’s Festival after being labelled a “transphobe”.

This is a reactionary, anti-democratic mess. The de facto drawing of a line between someone like Tatchell and members of the far-right is hysterical nonsense and has repulsed large sections of the population, opening the door to government intervention on the campuses, which will be used to invite in the real fascistic right.

Under the protection of the government’s new “free speech” requirements, student protests of the kind which challenged social Darwinist pseudoscientist Noah Carl being awarded a prestigious research fellowship at Cambridge University will be suppressed. Academics like Oxford’s Nigel Biggar, who

specialises in apologetics for the crimes of the British Empire, will be allowed to get on with their mission of creating a right-wing “counter-spiral” in academia.

The fascists Tommy Robinson and Stephen Bannon, French National Rally leader Marine Le Pen and Alternative for Germany spokesperson Alice Weidel have previously been invited to speak at the Oxford Union, all provoking significant opposition that would now be punished as an attack on “free speech”. Such invites of despised far-right figures will be encouraged at campuses across the country, led by so-called free speech societies set up by darling of the Tory right and anti-lockdown campaigner Toby Young. Young was the Tories’ first pick to lead the OfS before his attendance at a secret eugenics conference was exposed in the *London Student*.

Events in Germany provide a sharp warning. On February 3, seventy German academics founded the “Network for Academic Freedom” with the declared mission of rehabilitating discredited Professor Jörg Baberowski—a leading academic voice of right-wing extremism—to promote other far-right voices and demonise students who voice opposition to the relativisation of the crimes of German imperialism, in particular of the Third Reich.

The hypocrisy of the British government’s claim to be acting in defence of “free speech” is on display in Williamson’s letter to the OfS heads. Two subheadings below “Free Speech and Academic Freedom” is “Antisemitism”, under which the education secretary asks the OfS to help force higher education institutions to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. The IHRA definition provides a mechanism to attack free speech regarding opposition to Israel and the ethnic-nationalist ideology of Zionism. It has been used to justify the mass purge of left-wing Labour members and the cancellation of pro-Palestinian events.

The UK government is also proceeding with a review of “left-wing extremism” aimed at criminalising huge swathes of the left. It will target “far-Left fringe groups” accused of “hijacking important causes and mainstream cultural activity”—that is, seeking to advocate their political views. The outcome of this review will build upon the surveillance of students already in place under the Prevent scheme supposedly targeting radicalisation by Islamist groups.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) unequivocally oppose the government’s attempt to regulate political life on campus. State intervention must be opposed and political disputes fought out democratically among students, including, as an urgent question, how to oppose the sharp turn to the right being carried out by the ruling class.



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