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Professor John Finch  
Head of the Adam Smith Business School,  
Room 558b,  
Adam Smith Business School (North)  
University of Glasgow

7<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Dear Professor Finch,

The No-Platforming of Professor Gregory Clark

We, the undersigned, are writing to express our concern about the cancellation of a seminar due to be given by Professor Gregory Clark at the Adam Smith Business School on February 17<sup>th</sup> and to urge you to reschedule the seminar at your earliest convenience.

The reason for cancelling the seminar remains unclear. According to an [article](#) in the *Glasgow Guardian* on 18<sup>th</sup> February, a newspaper published by the University of Glasgow, it was due to “pressure from student groups” who were unhappy with the title of Professor Clark’s lecture – *For Whom the Bell Curve Tolls: A Lineage of 400,000 Individuals 1750-2020 Shows Genetics Determines Most Social Outcomes*. It seems they believe Professor Clark’s research underestimates the impact of environmental factors in determining social outcomes, such as inherited wealth.

Others report that the seminar was cancelled after objections were raised by some members of the University’s academic staff, presumably because they, too, disagree with the conclusions Professor Clark has drawn from his research. A third reason was alluded to by Professor Clark himself in an [article](#) in the *Scottish Times* on 25<sup>th</sup> February. He told the reporter that the date of the seminar coincided with the publication of the university’s report *Understanding Racism, Transforming University Cultures*, setting out an action plan to create “an inclusive space for all” and his talk was regarded as a “provocation”, although by whom he did not say.

Neither reason was a lawful ground for cancelling the seminar, as the University of Glasgow has a legal obligation to uphold free speech.

Section 26 of the [Further and Higher Education \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#) provides that all higher education providers (HEPs) must “uphold (so far as the body considers reasonable) the academic freedom of all relevant persons”. “Relevant persons” are defined as “persons engaged in – (a) teaching, or the provision of learning, at the body, or (b) research at the body” and “academic freedom” is defined as including “freedom within the law to do the following things – (a) hold and express opinions, (b) question and test established

ideas or received wisdom, (c) develop and advance new ideas or innovative proposals, [and] (d) present controversial or unpopular points of view”.

Should you be in any doubt about how to interpret this statute, the Equality and Human Rights Commission Scotland issued [guidance](#) on freedom of expression for Scottish education providers in 2019. It said, among other things:

Sharing ideas is crucial for learning, and allows students to think critically, challenge and engage with different perspectives. In Scotland, universities and other higher education providers have legal duties to protect free speech. (p.5)

Student complaints and protests should not result in HEPs imposing limits on course content or speaker events... (p.13)

The starting point to approach any event should be that it is able to go ahead. ... [HEPs] should only consider cancelling an event if there are no reasonable options for running it. (p.29)

Glasgow University has committed itself to the paramount importance of free speech. Its [statement on academic freedom](#) issued in 2018 claims that “freedom of expression, the right to disagree... are at the very heart of our mission”. It continues:

The University supports the right of individuals, groups and societies to arrange events, conferences, lectures and seminars on challenging topics with speakers who may be controversial. We will seek at all times to enable and encourage free speech, as long as this takes place within the law and without incitement of violence, discrimination or hatred. Staff, students and members of the public can be assured that their safety and wellbeing is paramount at the University of Glasgow. However, freedom of speech can sometimes mean upholding the right of some to offend others through their publicly expressed views or beliefs.

We trust that the University will not make the implausible argument that Professor Clark’s talk would have incited violence, discrimination or hatred or would have in some way breached the Equality Act 2010.

Both the *Glasgow Guardian* and the *Times* quoted from an email that was sent to those who had signed up for the seminar that offered yet another reason for cancelling the seminar. It said it had been cancelled due to a “high degree of interest beyond that which could be accommodated in a seminar”. It seems eccentric to cancel a seminar at a university because an unusually large number of students wanted to attend, particularly as the event was due to take place on Zoom, meaning there were no physical limits on how many people could attend.

In the *Times* article, Professor Clark says that he spoke to you and you offered to reschedule the seminar if he agreed to change the title of his lecture. We infer from this that the controversial character of Professor Clark’s talk was the reason for its cancellation, not the Business School’s inability to accommodate all the students who wanted to hear it. Quite understandably, Professor Clark did not agree to change the title of his lecture and to ask him to do so, and make that a condition of rescheduling the talk, is incompatible with your legal duty to uphold academic free speech, as well as the University’s commitment to the right of academics to give seminars on “challenging topics with speakers who may be controversial”.

It is also worth pointing out that cancelling the seminar, or asking Professor Clark to change it in some way, is contrary to [Article 10](#) of the European Convention on Human Rights, which defines Freedom of Expression as including the “freedom to hold opinions and receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority”. The students who signed up for the seminar had a right to hear what Professor Clark was going to say and by cancelling his talk, and subsequently asking him to change its title, you were interfering with that right.

It goes without saying that Professor Clark, who grew up in Scotland, is entirely worthy of an audience at a respectable university such as the University of Glasgow. He is a Professor of Economics at the University of California, Davis, a Research Associate at the Center for Poverty Research at Davis and a Visiting Professor at the LSE. His PhD is from Harvard and he has held faculty positions at Stanford and Michigan. He has given seminars at dozens of universities around the world and his most recent book, *The Son Also Rises* (2015), was the winner of the Economic History Association's Gyorgy Ranki Prize. His seminar was going to be on the subject of his next book, also called *For Whom the Bell Curve Tolls*.

In light of the above, we politely request that you reschedule Professor Clark's seminar as soon as practically possible. If any students or academics protest, we urge you to invite them to attend the seminar where they would be welcome to robustly challenge Professor Clark's research and engage in a well-mannered discussion about it. Trying to silence those you disagree with by no-platforming them has no place at any university, let alone one as distinguished as the University of Glasgow.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Hauptert, Professor of Economics, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Executive Director, Economic History Association

John Joseph Wallis, Professor, University of Maryland, President, Economic History Association

Ann Carlos, Professor of Economics, emeritus, University of Colorado Boulder, incoming President, Economic History Association

Cormac O'Grada, Professor of Economics, Emeritus, University College Dublin, ex-President, Economic History Association, Member Royal Irish Academy

Deirdre McCloskey, Distinguished Professor of Economics, History, English and Communication, University of Illinois at Chicago, ex-President, Economic History Association

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Niall Ferguson, Millbank Family Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University

Monique Borgerhoff Mulder, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig

Robert Tombs, Professor of French History, Emeritus, University of Cambridge

Matt Ridley, author of *How Innovation Works: And Why it Flourishes* (2020)

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Donald J. Boudreaux, Professor of Economics, George Mason University

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John V.C. Nye, Professor of Economics, George Mason University

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