



**FSU**  
FREE SPEECH UNION

THE FREE SPEECH UNION  
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Ms Heather Hancock  
Head of College  
St John's College  
Cambridge  
CB2 1TP

12<sup>th</sup> May 2023

Dear Ms Hancock,

I am writing to you in my capacity as General Secretary of the Free Speech Union, a non-partisan, mass membership public interest body that stands up for the speech rights of its members and campaigns for free speech more widely.

This letter concerns the cancellation of the screening of Stephen Shaw's film *Birthgap – Childless World*, which had been due to take place at St John's College today.

We are writing on behalf of Charlie Bentley-Astor, a student at Hughes Hall, who had organised the event. We are concerned to see, from correspondence between Ms Bentley-Astor and College officials, that the College has cancelled the event on the grounds that the noise from protesters outside would be too disruptive, after having initially sought to impose the full burden of policing that protest on the event organiser.

The actions of St John's College in this matter fail to uphold the College's duties with respect to freedom of speech, or to observe University regulations on the same. We are therefore asking you to allow the event to go ahead as originally planned.

### Background

Ms Bentley-Astor has faced considerable hostility from student activists who, we understand, object to the showing of the film on the grounds that the film's director appeared on a podcast hosted by Professor Jordan Peterson. These demonstrators have used a range of tactics to try to obstruct the event, including block booking tickets<sup>1</sup> under false names to prevent students and staff from attending.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://twitter.com/astor\\_charlie/status/1653381422617378817](https://twitter.com/astor_charlie/status/1653381422617378817)

In addition to this campaign of disruption from her fellow students, Ms Bentley-Astor has had to contend with increasingly onerous stipulations from College officials, including a demand that she pay all the security costs related to the event.

As she is unable to cover these costs, the Free Speech Union has offered to pay the sum of £528 via the Mactaggart Programme, a new grant-giving project we administer which seeks to foster a culture of open debate, independent thinking and free expression amongst young people, and which offers funding to individuals, societies and other groups that wish to provide opportunities for debate, open discussion and intellectual exploration.

Having met this demand, she was then asked to provide a risk assessment, which asked her as the event organiser to control any protest that might take place *against* her own event. Your staff asked her to provide details on how she would “minimise disturbance to other users of the event venue... This should cover noise disturbance (from outside the event venue and from within), and prevention of access or access inconvenience to other users of rooms in the Old Divinity School” and take steps to “to minimise disruption to students in adjacent accommodation”: “This should include noise disruption and room access prevention or inconvenience.”

It is inappropriate for the College to require a student to, in effect, police a protest against herself. This Kafkaesque exchange became even more absurd when Ms Bentley-Astor duly submitted the risk assessment, only to be told that “the risk assessment has further highlighted the large scale of the planned protest for this event and the disruption it would inevitably cause” and the event would therefore be “postponed”.

Given that the headline speaker at the event is flying from Japan to the UK and has already purchased his plane ticket, it cannot be rearranged and, therefore, a postponement is tantamount to a cancellation.

### University regulations

The University’s ‘Statement on Freedom of Speech’<sup>2</sup> is clear:

The University’s policy, in line with its duty under section 43 of the Education (No. 2) Act 1986, is that any speaker who has been invited to speak at a meeting or other event, on University premises or at the Students’ Union, must not be stopped from doing so unless: they are likely to express unlawful speech, or their attendance would lead the host organisation to breach other legal obligations, and no reasonably practicable steps can be taken to reduce these risks.

And:

The University will not unreasonably either refuse to allow events to be held on its premises or impose special or unreasonable or onerous conditions upon the running of those events.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.governanceandcompliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/governance-and-strategy/university-statement-freedom-speech>

It is readily apparent that by allowing student protesters to effectively veto the screening of this film and cancel the proposed talk, St John's has failed to uphold its legal duties with respect to freedom of speech or the free speech policy of the University.

### Disciplinary breach

As per the university's 'Advice for students intending to protest',<sup>3</sup> student protesters must not "Disrupt authorised University or College events; e.g. preventing speakers from talking, **others from attending, or doing anything designed to stop the event continuing**" (my emphasis).

The Student Disciplinary Framework states unambiguously in 2. (b) that "A registered student must not... interfere in the freedom of speech or lawful assembly of a member of the collegiate University community or visitor to the University."<sup>4</sup>

There is a *prima facie* disciplinary case that student protesters, insofar as they have successfully stopped the event from continuing, are in breach of these rules. I am therefore copying in the Vice-Chancellor and Senior Proctor to this letter so the University can pursue an investigation.

### Further action

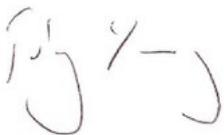
The actions of St John's College have already been condemned in the House of Lords<sup>5</sup> as the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill completed its passage through Parliament. That piece of legislation, as you will be aware, will significantly enhance your duties with respect to freedom of speech. Among other things, it will impose an obligation on universities and students' unions not to ask student societies to bear any of the security costs of their events other than in "exceptional circumstances".

We are seeking your immediate assurance that the event can go ahead on Friday 12 May as originally scheduled. We remain willing to meet the security costs up to the value of £528 to ensure that this is possible.

It would be a damning indictment of St John's if an event as uncomplicated as this has been cancelled by the College because of the threats of a handful of student activists. As the Head of the College, I hope you will do what you can to uphold the University's free speech policy, as well as the College's legal duties with respect to freedom of speech.

I look forward to your prompt response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'J. Y. J.', is written over a horizontal line.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/student\\_protest\\_guidance.pdf](https://www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/student_protest_guidance.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/sdp\\_-\\_oct\\_19.pdf](https://www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/sdp_-_oct_19.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://twitter.com/Fox\\_Claire/status/1656397684884865028](https://twitter.com/Fox_Claire/status/1656397684884865028)

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- cc. Dr Anthony Freeling, Acting Vice-Chancellor, University of Cambridge  
Dr Seb Falk, Senior Proctor  
The Right Hon Gillian Keegan MP, Secretary of State for Education  
Ms Claire Coutinho MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children, Families and Wellbeing  
Ms Susan Lapworth, CEO, Office for Students  
Lord Wharton, Chair, Office for Students