



FSU
FREE SPEECH UNION

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Proctors' Office
University Offices
Wellington Square
Oxford OX1 2JD

6th March 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

I wish to make a formal complaint about the no-platforming of Amber Rudd, the ex-Conservative MP and former Home Secretary, at Christ Church, Oxford on Thursday, 5th March. Ms Rudd was invited to speak at the College by the UNWomen Oxford UK Student Society as part of the Society's UN Women's 2020 Trailblazer Series in the run up to International Women's Day on Sunday, 8th March. The event, described as "In Conversation: Amber Rudd", was due to take place at 7.30pm on 5th March, but at 6.30pm, the Society's Facebook page issued a [statement](#) announcing that the talk had been cancelled. Ms Rudd [said the following day](#) that she was only notified of this decision 30 minutes before she was due to speak, by which time she had already travelled to Oxford at her own expense.

The decision by the Society to rescind its invitation to Ms Rudd is a breach of Oxford University's [Code of Practice on Meetings and Events](#), as approved by the University Council on 20th July 2016. The Code states that "freedom of speech and academic freedom are central tenets of university life" and says that the University will "protect robustly civic and academic freedoms" and "foster an academic culture of openness and inclusivity, in which members of our community engage with each other, and the public, in debate and discussion, and remain open to intellectual challenge and change". The Code then goes on to refer to the legal duty of UK universities to protect free speech, as set out in the Education (N^o 2) Act 1986, which was passed, in part, to prevent the no-platforming of visiting speakers at British universities. In particular, the Code mentions s.43(a) of the Act, which requires universities to "take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees of the establishment and for visiting speakers."

Paragraph 5 of the Code says it must be followed by "all members, students and employees" of the University and applies to "all meetings and other events" held on University premises, as well as to "all meetings and other events" which are "affiliated" with the University or "branded" as such. Since the UNWomen Oxford UK Student Society is composed of students, is an official student society included on the Oxford University Students' Union [website](#) and carries Oxford's brand, the Code clearly applies to the Society.

While the UNWomen Oxford UK Student Society is under no obligation to invite anyone to speak at its events, once it has extended an invitation to a particular speaker it is under an obligation not to rescind that invitation at the behest of other students who disapprove of the speaker or disagree with the speaker's political views, which appears to be what happened in this case. According to [a report in the Oxford Student](#) published on 5th March:

“It is believed that the UNWomen Oxford UK Society received heavy criticism for inviting Rudd who has a controversial legacy after resigning following the Windrush Scandal when it was revealed that at least 83 people who arrived in the UK from the Caribbean had been deported.” The fact that the Society issued an [apology](#) on its Facebook page on 5th March “for all and any hurt caused to our members and other wom*n [sic] and non binary people in Oxford over this event” indicates that its decision to cancel it was prompted by complaints from other students.

For a student society to withdraw an invitation to a speaker at the behest of other students who do not share the speaker’s politics or who disapprove of the speaker’s behaviour in the past, endangers freedom of speech on campus because it effectively gives groups of activists and protestors the power of veto over the expression of viewpoints they disagree with. This is a point made clear in the guidance produced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission last year entitled “[Freedom of expression: a guide for higher education providers and students’ unions in England and Wales](#)”. According to this guidance, a higher education provider, or a student society, is within its rights not to invite a particular speaker, but once it has extended an invitation it should not then withdraw it and if it does so it may be in breach of s.43 of the Education (N^o 2) Act 1986.

Amber Rudd was clearly upset by the manner in which she was treated by the UNWomen Oxford UK Student Society. Following the experience, she [tweeted](#): “Badly judged and rude of some students last night at Oxford to decide to “no platform” me 30 mins before an event I had been invited to for #IWD2020 to encourage young women into politics. They should stop hiding and start engaging.”

What is particularly disappointing about the decision of the Society to cancel the event is that it would have been an ideal forum in which those students and other members of the University who disapprove of Ms Rudd’s politics and her handling of the Windrush Scandal could have challenged her and engaged her in robust political debate. Indeed, the Society itself seemed to have held this view until right up to the last minute. On 2nd March, it published the following [statement](#) on its Facebook page: “We invited Ms Rudd on the understanding that this would be an honest and frank conversation about how her policies have impacted wom*n [sic] of all races, religions, classes et cetera. We will not run away from mentioning any of Ms Rudd’s past comments or policies, and we ask you to attend this event to help us campaign for a truly frank feminism which is not afraid of taking such opportunities to discuss these issues with high profile figures.”

Such an approach is squarely in keeping with the University’s fundamental belief in free speech, as set out in the “Free Speech Statement for the University of Oxford/all Oxford Colleges” drafted by Timothy Garton Ash and Ken Macdonald, and reproduced word-for-word in Christ Church’s “Freedom of Speech Code of Practice”, adopted by the College’s Governing Body in June 2019. This states:

Free speech is the lifeblood of a university. It enables the pursuit of knowledge. It helps us approach truth. It allows students, teachers and researchers to become better acquainted with the variety of beliefs, theories and opinions in the world. Recognising the vital importance of free expression for the life of the mind, a university may make rules concerning the conduct of debate but should never prevent speech that is lawful.

Inevitably, this will mean that members of the University/College are confronted with views that some find unsettling, extreme or offensive. The University/College must therefore foster freedom of expression within a framework of robust civility. Not all theories deserve equal respect. A university values expertise and intellectual achievement as well as openness. But, within the bounds set by law, all voices or views, which any member of our community considers relevant should be given the chance of a hearing. Wherever possible, they should also be exposed to evidence, questioning and argument. As an integral part of this commitment to freedom of expression, we will take steps to

ensure that all such exchanges happen peacefully. With appropriate regulation of the time, place and manner of events, neither speakers nor listeners should have any reasonable grounds to feel intimidated or censored.

Clearly, allowing the event to go ahead and providing students and other members of the University with an opportunity to question and debate Amber Rudd would have been entirely in keeping with the above policy. By contrast, no-platforming her at the last minute at the behest of students who do not share her politics or who disapprove of her past behaviour is clearly inconsistent with it and contrary to the values that Garton Ash and Macdonald identify as central to “the lifeblood of a university”.

I would like to lodge a formal complaint with the Proctors’ Office about the behaviour of the student officers who run the UNWomen Oxford UK Student Society and ask that the decision to no-platform her be investigated as a possible breach of the University’s Code of Discipline, as set out in [Statute XI: University Discipline](#), one of the University of Oxford’s Statutes. This Code states that “no member of the University shall in a university context intentionally or recklessly... disrupt or attempt to disrupt the lawful exercise of freedom of speech by members, student members, and employees of the University or by visiting speakers”. I do not believe the officers of the Society are absolved of this duty because they extended the invitation to Amber Rudd in the first place. They were guilty of disrupting Ms Rudd’s lawful exercise of free speech when they withdrew their invitation half an hour before she was due to speak, even though the event had been organised by them.

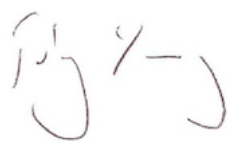
The officers of the UNWomen Oxford UK Student Society are as follows:

██████████ (President)
██████████ (Vice President)
██████████████████ (Vice President)
██████████ (Secretary)
██████████ (Membership Secretary)
██████████ (Events Officer)
██████████ (Publicity Officer)

I am filing a separate report to the Proctors’ Office using the appropriate complaints form and would like the complaint to be investigated under the [University Student Disciplinary Procedure: Non Academic Misconduct](#). I am making this complaint in my capacity as General Secretary of the Free Speech Union, but I am also a graduate of Brasenose College, Oxford and hold an MA from Oxford University. I am copying this letter to the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, the Chair of the Office for Students, the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary General of the United Nations. I am also writing to the Dean of Christ Church and the Christ Church Censors’ Office.

I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,



General Secretary
The Free Speech Union
toby@freespeechunion.org