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FREE SPEECH UNION

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Professor Sir Rick Trainor
Rector
Exeter College
Oxford OX1 3DP

1st March 2020

Dear Sir,

I wish to make a formal complaint about the no-platforming of Professor Selina Todd, Professor of Modern History at Oxford, at an event that took place at Exeter College on Saturday, 29th February. Professor Todd was invited to speak at the event, which was being held to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Ruskin College's inaugural Women's Liberation Conference, but the organisers rescinded the invitation at the last minute at the request of other speakers who threatened to withdraw from the event if Professor Todd's speech went ahead.

This decision is a clear breach of the [Exeter College Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech](#), which says that members, students and employees of the College, as well as outside organisations or groups that have been given permission by the College to hold meetings or events on College premises, must ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees of the college, as well as visiting speakers. As far as I am aware, no one connected with the College made an effort to ensure Professor Todd's freedom of speech was protected. On the contrary, Jeri Johnson, a fellow of the College, introduced the event after Professor Todd had been disinvited, with the clear implication that the College, which was hosting the event, condoned this decision. Indeed, Ms Johnson was speaking on behalf of the College. Moreover, she could not claim to be unaware of what had happened since Professor John Watts, the chair of the Oxford Faculty of History, had withdrawn from the event in protest at the treatment of Professor Todd.

The decision by the organisers to no-platform Professor Todd – at 6pm the evening before she was due to speak – was particularly egregious given that she had helped to get the conference put on, having enlisted the support of the Oxford History Faculty in the form of student helpers, facilitators and some funding. She had also helped the organisers publicise the event.

This morning, Exeter College issued the following statement on Twitter:

In May 2019, Exeter College, Oxford, agreed to provide the venue for the Women's Liberation at Fifty conference, in enthusiastic celebration of all that the feminist movement stands for, and in recognition of the symbolic importance of the former Ruskin College site, which now houses Exeter College Cohen Quad. Exeter College has played no role at any stage in the taking of decisions about the programme or its speakers.

Exeter College is committed to the open and respectful discussion of ideas and to providing a supportive and inclusive environment in which the rights and dignity of all its staff and students are respected and valued, and in which people can work and study, without fear of discrimination or harassment.

The first paragraph of this statement is an inadequate defence of the College's behaviour. The claim that the College "played no role... in the taking of decisions about the programme or its speakers" is a tacit admission that the decision to no-platform Professor Todd was wrong. Otherwise, why would the College try and wash its hands of it? It was indeed wrong, but the fact that the College "played no role" does not excuse its behaviour. Paragraph 18 of the College's Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech states: "In any case where the College is proposing to grant permission to an outside organisation or group to hold a meeting or event on College premises, the provisions of this Code apply." In other words, the College has a responsibility to ensure the Code is upheld even if it has "played no role... in the taking of decisions about the programme or its speakers".

The second paragraph is equally inadequate. If the College is "committed to the open and respectful discussion of ideas", why did it tacitly condone the no-platforming of Professor Todd? Is the College trying to imply that Professor Todd is not committed to "providing a supportive and inclusive environment in which the rights and dignity of all its staff and students are respected and valued, and in which people can work and study, without fear of discrimination or harassment"? If that is what is being implied, it is a disgraceful attack on the character and integrity of Professor Todd. In this paragraph, the College seems to be accepting the twisted logic of some of the speakers who objected to Professor Todd's presence at the event, namely, that merely allowing a gender-critical feminist to speak was tantamount to a form of discrimination and harassment against trans students and staff. That is clearly nonsense. Professor Todd may respectfully disagree with some of the positions taken by some trans activists, including some of the attendees at the event, but respectful disagreement does not constitute harassment.

Perhaps the College truly does believe that because Professor Todd is a gender-critical feminist, merely allowing her to speak does constitute a form of discrimination and harassment against trans people. Clearly, such a view would be mistaken, but if that is what the College believes it could have registered its objection to Professor Todd being invited when the organizers first proposed to include her in its original line up of speakers. When Professor Todd was first approached by the organisers last October she drew their attention to the fact that some trans activists might object to her presence on the roster and gave them an opportunity to reconsider, but they assured her they would not be influenced by such protests, telling her they were open to many different points of view being expressed at the event. Given that the organisers decided to go ahead and include Professor Todd's speech in the official event programme, the College surely had an obligation to ensure she was not then disinvited.

This point is 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 is within its rights not to invite a particular speaker, but once it has extended an invitation it should not then withdraw it at the behest of protestors because to do so would be a violation of s43 of the Education (N° 2) Act 1986 which imposes a legal duty on higher education providers to protect freedom of speech. Section 43 of the Education (N° 2) Act 1986 is also referenced in Exeter College's Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech.

Clearly, when the other speakers at the event threatened to withdraw if Professor Todd's invitation wasn't rescinded, the organisers should have told them they would not be bullied into no-platforming one of the invited speakers. I do not know whether these threats were conveyed to the College before the organizers decided how to respond, but if they were the College should have made it clear that to rescind Professor Todd's invitation would be a clear breach of its Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech and, by implication, its legal duty under s43 of the Education (N° 2) Act 1986, as well as the EHRC's official guidance on freedom of expression. In any event, when the College learnt of this decision it should immediately have withdrawn its permission for the event to go ahead.

The fact that it did not, along with the fact that a fellow of the College introduced the event, puts the College squarely in breach of its own Code of Practice, as well as its legal duty.

Paragraph 2 of your Code of Practice states: “An intentional reckless or negligent breach of this code of Practice may constitute an offence under the College’s Disciplinary Code and members of the College are reminded that alleged breaches of this Code may be the subject of disciplinary action.”

I trust that this breach of the Code of Practice will be thoroughly investigated by the College and the appropriate disciplinary action taken against all those responsible. In the meantime, I believe you should apologise to Professor Todd and offer her the same facilities on the same basis to organise an event of her own.

I am copying this letter to the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, the Chair of the Office for Students and the Secretary of State for Education. I look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,



General Secretary

The Free Speech Union

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Press statement by Selina Todd issued on 1st March 2020

I am shocked to have been no-platformed by this event, organised by Oxford International Women’s Festival and hosted at Exeter College. I was asked to participate in October 2019, and I explained to the organisers that some trans activists may object to my being there. I was then told that trans activists had already expressed hostility towards the event because they claimed second-wave feminism is inherently trans-exclusionary. However, the organisers decided that because I am a historian of feminism and working-class women, they would like to invite me, and were open to many different points of view being expressed at their event. I was delighted. I am deeply interested in the history of the WLM – my first academic article focused on it – and my parents met at Ruskin shortly before the first conference was held there. Participating had personal and scholarly significance.

Between October 2019 and February 2020 I helped the organisers to get support from Oxford History Faculty – in the form of student helpers, facilitators and some funding – and to find media contacts. I was stunned to receive a phone call at 6pm on the evening before the conference telling me that I had been no-platformed. The organisers say this is because of pressure from trans activists and Feminist Fightback. I refute the allegation that I am transphobic, and I am disappointed that the organisers have refused to uphold our right to discuss women’s rights – one that the original organisers had to fight hard for.