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FREE SPEECH UNION

THE FREE SPEECH UNION
85 GREAT PORTLAND ST.
LONDON W1W 7LT

FREESPEECHUNION.ORG

Ms Brid O'Donnell
The Auditor
Trinity College Historical Society
Graduates Memorial Building
Trinity College Dublin
Dublin D02 KS83

30th September 2020

By email to: auditor@thehist.com

Dear Ms O'Donnell,

I was disappointed to read reports that you have decided to rescind an invitation to Professor Richard Dawkins to address the Hist. If, as reported in the *Irish Independent*, it is true that you have disinvented Professor Dawkins on the grounds that you value the “comfort” of your members “above all else”, could I ask you to reconsider? On your website you say that the Hist has: “an unrivalled tradition of promoting discussion stretching back 250 years.” Surely, “discussion” means talking to people with whom you disagree, not no-platforming them because their views may make your members feel “uncomfortable”?

I was particularly disappointed because I have always admired the Hist for the willingness of its members to discuss *uncomfortable* ideas. This tradition was distilled by one of your past members, Oscar Wilde, who said: “I may not agree with you, but I will defend to the death your right to make an ass of yourself.” Wilde’s spirited defence of robust public debate seems a more likely source of inspiration to students in the pursuit of intellectual challenge than offering them a blanket of sanitised “comfort”.

I note that in 2009 Noam Chomsky was invited to speak at the Hist, although he is no less controversial a figure than Professor Dawkins. His invitation was not rescinded. I would draw your attention to Professor Chomsky’s trenchant defence of free speech:

Goebbels was in favour of free speech for views he liked. So was Stalin. If you’re really in favour of free speech, then you’re in favour of freedom of speech for precisely the views you despise. Otherwise, you’re not in favour of free speech.

Here at the Free Speech Union we recognise that it is only in hearing the views of those with whom you disagree that you can learn how best to challenge those ideas and develop your own. As J.S. Mill said: “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that.” Free speech is the lifeblood of a democratic society and that is why it is especially important in our most distinguished universities, such as Trinity College.

Trinity's long tradition as a beacon of intellectual freedom and open inquiry is enshrined in its Policy on Academic Freedom, which states:

Academic freedom encourages the exploration of new ideas, the testing of received wisdom and, ultimately, the search for truth; it is a *sine qua non* for free inquiry.

Trinity's Policy on Academic Freedom refers to the 1997 Universities Act, which "explicitly recognises the role of academic freedom in teaching, research and public life" because of the importance given to the right to "question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions".

In addition, the 2010 Consolidated Statutes of Trinity College Dublin and of the University of Dublin include a provision that "guarantees to respect, defend and vindicate the traditional principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression", recognising that "such freedoms are fundamental to the pursuit of knowledge and the advancement of truth".

Not only is freedom of expression one of the foundational principles of Trinity College, it is also enshrined in the Irish Constitution, which guarantees free speech in Article 40.6.1:

The State guarantees liberty for the exercise of the following rights, subject to public order and morality:
i) The right of the citizens to express freely their convictions and opinions.

Ireland is a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Irish Government therefore has an obligation in international law to protect freedom of speech in accordance with Article 10 of the Convention. As I'm sure you know, Irish courts under the European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003 must interpret Irish legislation (such as the Universities Act 1997) in line with the ECHR.

Of course, none of this means that the Hist is obliged – either by its own traditions, the University's policies or the law – to offer a platform to people its members disagree with. But it does mean that once you have extended an invitation to a speaker, you are under an obligation not to rescind it. For a student society to withdraw an invitation to a speaker at the behest of other students who disapprove of the speaker's views endangers freedom of speech on campus because it effectively gives groups of activists and protestors the power of veto over viewpoints they disagree with.

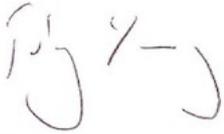
The Hist's decision to no-platform Professor Dawkins is particularly disappointing because this debate would have been a perfect opportunity for those who disagree with him to challenge him and engage him in robust debate, something I'm sure Professor Dawkins would relish and which would be in keeping with the best traditions of the society.

I would make one final point. I note that the Hist recently said, by way of explaining its new attitude to free speech: "We must prioritise accessibility and inclusivity above free speech." That is a false opposition. Free speech is often portrayed as a right that benefits the privileged and the powerful at the expense of historically disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Nothing could be further from the truth. Historically, it is the right to free speech that has enabled disadvantaged and marginalised groups – whether women in the 19th Century, African-Americans in the 20th Century, or trans people in the 21st Century – to make the case for a fairer and more inclusive society in the public square. As the ex-head of the American Civil Liberties Union Ira Glasser said: "The only important question in free-speech cases is: who gets to decide? And the answer for oppressed people is: not you. Never you. Never me."

In the absence of free speech, it is always the most powerful who get to decide who speaks, which means that upholding the right to free speech – not letting the powerful decide who speaks – is a *sine qua non* of achieving social justice.

I very much hope you will re-consider your decision and continue to promote discussion of a wide range of different views, including those that make many people *uncomfortable*, as the Hist has done for 250 years.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Toby Young'.

Toby Young

General Secretary

The Free Speech Union

toby@freespeechunion.org

cc Professor David John McConnell, President of the Hist
Dr Patrick Prendergast, President and Provost
Professor Mary Robinson, Vice-President of the Hist
Dr Gary H. Holbrook, Professor of Argumentation, Metropolitan State University, Denver
Ms Mary McAleese, Chancellor