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FREE SPEECH UNION

THE FREE SPEECH UNION
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FREESPEECHUNION.ORG

Free Speech Union Statement

18th November 2020

We state without apology our commitment to freedom of speech

The Free Speech Union stands for freedom of speech, of conscience and of intellectual enquiry, which we regard as the essential pillars of a free society. These are the foundational freedoms on which all the others depend. We believe that human beings cannot flourish outside a free society, which means they cannot flourish in the absence of free speech. Free speech is how knowledge is developed and shared, as well as our views about morality, religion and politics. Robust debate – appealing to reason, evidence and our shared values – is also the best way to resolve disagreements about issues big and small without descending to violence or intimidation. And free speech is the most effective bulwark against abuses of power by politicians, with history demonstrating that its denial is both the aim of tyrants, because it stops people criticising them, and an ominous precursor to the removal of other freedoms.

In light of the recent murder of Samuel Paty, we would like to express our solidarity with France and reaffirm our commitment to free speech. If Mr Paty's murder has shocked too few young people here in Britain, this is because adults have failed to convey the importance of free speech to the younger generation. We need to persuade them that without freedom of speech we cannot think for ourselves, express our beliefs without fear of retribution, engage in meaningful discussion and debate and combat the hatred that poisons contemporary politics. Too many young people think free speech is a right that only benefits the powerful, when history teaches us that its main beneficiaries have been the disadvantaged.

We must put serious work into developing arguments for free speech that can convince young people of its fundamental importance. Freedom of speech is not just a universal right: it is the pre-eminent democratic virtue. Each time it is attacked, and we fail to defend it, we diminish our democracy and strengthen those who would destroy it.

It is vital that all schoolchildren and college students learn how to discuss sensitive political, religious and moral issues without being drawn into sectarian conflict. This includes teaching them how to respond when exposed to ideas that they fundamentally disagree with and even those they find offensive. They need to experience the thrill of free inquiry, of intellectual challenge, of seeing someone else's point of view and of persuading others to see theirs.

At the Free Speech Union, we are determined to support all efforts to defend free speech and educate young people about its value. We must ensure Samuel Paty did not die in vain.

Toby Young
General Secretary, The Free Speech Union