



FSU
FREE SPEECH UNION

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Professor George Boyne
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By email: boyne@abdn.ac.uk

Dear Professor Boyne,

The No-Platforming of Mr Alex Salmond

I am writing to you about the no-platforming of Mr Alex Salmond 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. The FSU recently opened a Scottish office and has many distinguished public figures on its Scottish Advisory Council, including Ms Joanna Cherry QC MP, Mr Murdo Fraser MSP, Professor Lindsay Paterson, Professor Adam Tomkins and Mr Jim Sillars, the former Deputy Leader of the SNP.

As I am sure you know, Mr Salmond was due to speak at the Aberdeen University Student Union Golf Club on the evening of 22nd April, but was no-platformed at the last minute, forcing him to give his talk in a car park outside the venue.

A spokesman for the Golf Club released a statement saying the booking had been cancelled because at the time it was made the Club "did not have a full understanding of the political nature of the event" – an implausible excuse, given Mr Salmond's lifelong involvement in Scottish politics.

Mr Salmond told [The National](#) that the reason he was no-platformed was because transrights activists at the University who disagree with his position on proposed reforms to the Gender Recognition Act had petitioned the Golf Club to cancel the event. That analysis was confirmed when Alisa Koester, the student President of the Aberdeen University Students Association, told the paper: "AUSA stands in full solidarity with the trans community who raised concerns about the event. Our campus should be a safe place where all our students feel welcome."

It was also confirmed by the Golf Club spokesperson, who went on to say: "We are an inclusive club that supports the diversity of our members. Golf is a sport enjoyed by a variety of people no

matter their background and identity, and we are very proud to offer accessible golfing for all students.”

Evidently, the Golf Club and the Student Association believe that if Mr Salmond had been allowed to speak it would have made trans students feel unsafe and unwelcome on the University campus. Not only is this a completely unevidenced and implausible claim, it would be an illegitimate reason to no-platform Mr Salmond even if it were true. If some members of the Aberdeen student community genuinely think that the presence on campus of someone who does not share their views about a contentious issue will render them unsafe, it should be explained to them that they are mistaken and, in fact, a university is a ‘safe space’ for robust disagreement about controversial issues.

We believe the no-platforming of Mr Salmond was contrary to Scottish law, contrary to the University of Aberdeen’s own free speech policy and a breach of his right to freedom of expression under the European Convention on Human Rights.

Section 26 of the [Further and Higher Education \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#) provides that all higher education providers (HEPs) must “uphold (so far as the body considers reasonable) the academic freedom of all relevant persons”. “Relevant persons” are defined as “persons engaged in – (a) teaching, or the provision of learning, at the body, or (b) research at the body” and “academic freedom” is defined as including “freedom within the law to do the following things – (a) hold and express opinions, (b) question and test established ideas or received wisdom, (c) develop and advance new ideas or innovative proposals, [and] (d) present controversial or unpopular points of view”.

Should you be in any doubt about how to interpret this statute, the Equality and Human Rights Commission Scotland issued [guidance](#) on freedom of expression for Scottish higher education providers in 2019. It said, among other things:

Sharing ideas is crucial for learning, and allows students to think critically, challenge and engage with different perspectives. In Scotland, universities and other higher education providers have legal duties to protect free speech. (p.5)

Student complaints and protests should not result in HEPs imposing limits on course content or speaker events... (p.13)

The starting point to approach any event should be that it is able to go ahead. ... [HEPs] should only consider cancelling an event if there are no reasonable options for running it. (p.29)

The University of Aberdeen has committed itself to upholding free speech. It’s [Institutional Ethical Statement](#) states that “the University supports academic freedom within UK law...” In the [University’s Disciplinary Procedure](#), ‘academic freedom’ is defined as the freedom to:

- a) *Hold and express opinion;*
- b) *Question and test established ideas and received wisdom; and*
- c) *Present controversial or unpopular points of view*

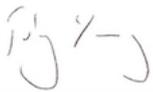
I think it goes without saying that the content of Alex Salmond's proposed talk fell well within the law. Indeed, at no point did any of the people or organisations involved in no-platforming him claim that allowing his talk to go ahead would have been unlawful.

It is also worth pointing out that no-platforming Mr Salmond is contrary to [Article 10](#) of the European Convention on Human Rights, which defines Freedom of Expression as including the "freedom to hold opinions and receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority". The students who were planning to attend Mr Salmond's talk had a right to hear what he was going to say and by cancelling the talk the University Golf Club – and the University Student Association, insofar as it forced the hand of the Club – was interfering with that right.

It goes without saying that Alex Salmond is entirely worthy of an audience at the University of Aberdeen, whether you agree with his particular point of view about the Gender Recognition Reform Bill or not. He was the First Minister of Scotland from 2007 to 2014 and has been the leader of the Alba party since 2021. Before that, he served two terms as leader of the SNP, from 1990 to 2000 and from 2004 to 2014. In addition, he holds several honorary degrees, including doctorates from the University of St Andrews and the University of Glasgow.

In light of the above, we politely request that you ask the Aberdeen University Student Union Golf Club to apologise to Mr Salmond and reschedule his talk as soon as practically possible. We also ask you to make a statement in which you affirm the University's commitment to free speech and point out to the student activists who no-platformed Mr Salmond that trying to silence those you disagree has no place at any university, let alone one as distinguished as the University of Aberdeen.

Yours sincerely,



Toby Young

General Secretary

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Cc Ms Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Scotland

Mr Fraser Hudghton, Director, FSU Scotland