

COMMENT

A victory for freedom at Cambridge shows the woke mob can only win if we let them

An organised majority at the university saw off an attempt by a tiny minority to undermine free speech



JULIET SAMUEL 11 December 2020 • 7:13pm

[A victory for freedom at Cambridge shows the woke mob can only win if we let them \(telegraph.co.uk\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk)

My god, are these the people we've been afraid of all this time? Cambridge University academics, those well-known defenders of conservatism, have seen off an attempt by a tiny band of radicals to impose a policy of blanket censorship on campus. In the process, they have revealed that the "woke" activists are not, as they claim, a grassroots movement commanding overwhelming majority support, but a small sect of fanatics. This sect has been defeated, roundly, abjectly, in its own intellectual breeding ground.

The argument began in March. Under pressure from the Cambridge student union, university authorities decided to introduce a new "statement on freedom of speech" that, in true Orwellian fashion, did the opposite of what its title suggested. It would have required that everyone on campus, scholars, speakers and students, "be respectful" of "differing opinions" and "diverse identities". What this "respect" should entail was not defined, but it is clear that it would not mean respecting the "differing views" of [Cambridge fellows like Noah Carl, who was fired last year](#) for defending sceptical attitudes towards immigration and arguing for free scientific inquiry into genes and intelligence. The new policy, for example, listed various grounds on which the university could ban speakers, including the idea that they might threaten the "welfare" of anyone on campus, again without defining what this meant.

Alarmed at the implications, a philosophy don called Arif Ahmed decided to take a professional risk. He was already on the advisory council of an outfit called the Free Speech Union (as am I), but he had not yet done anything to attract special attention from woke activists. Nonetheless, he set about gathering 25 signatures from fellow academics needed to force a vote on the matter. Doing so was not easy. Academics were afraid of being attacked by the same mob who had gotten Dr Carl fired. Eventually, however, he reached his target.

He and his allies tabled amendments to the policy, replacing the demand for "respect" with a requirement for "tolerance", deleting the list of reasons to ban speakers and replacing it with a commitment to allow all speakers so long as they didn't break the law, libel or harass anyone. At this point, Cambridge could have decided to negotiate. It would have been a straightforward matter for the university council to endorse the uncontroversial idea of "tolerance" or else solicit the views of its faculty and students outside the coterie making the decisions. Instead, the council dug in.

Months later, Cambridge finally staged the vote. The result, thought to be unprecedented in its 800 year history, was a monumental defeat for the university bigwigs. Out of nearly 1,700 academics who voted, just 162 supported the new policy. Over 200 voted for no change and 1,316 voted to introduce the tolerance policy proposed by Dr Ahmed. His allies ranged from radical

feminists to Christian conservatives, libertarians and old-school Left-wingers worried about the free speech rights of university staff. If vice chancellors were MPs, then [Cambridge's Stephen Toope has just become the Michael Portillo of the academic world.](#)

Like Portillo in 1997, Professor Toope ought to be feeling thoroughly ridiculous. The strident woke activists, who argue that “speech is violence” or biology is “transphobic”, turn out to be a tiny minority even among the faculty of Britain’s most famously reformist academic institution. They have been winning battles to disinvite speakers and fire people not by broad-based support, but by convincing institutional elites of their power using aggression and intimidation. Like a chump, Cambridge’s top governing body fell for it.

Thankfully, in this case, the university rulebook took the decision out of their hands. But that isn’t usually how it works. The usual playbook is for activists to bamboozle administrators and PR departments with petitions, threats and online pile-ons, frightening, guilt-tripping and shaming people into submission. Those who refuse, like Sophie Watson, a radical feminist Cambridge student who supported Dr Ahmed’s campaign, find that erstwhile friends “have simply stopped talking to me”, leaving her with “a sense of unease” on campus.

This “unease” is a potent weapon. Rather than make their case in open argument, the enemies of free speech prefer to isolate their opponents, attacking their backgrounds and labelling them untouchable “bigots”. If their attacks seem beside the point under discussion, it is because they are not aiming at the point. They are aiming at the opaque levers of power wielded by corporate procedures and human resources departments.

But the Cambridge vote gives reason for hope. The woke activists aren’t as powerful as they seem. They play on a sense of fear and people’s need to belong. But it turns out that they, in fact, are the aberration, the affront to decency and reasonableness, whose power comes only from our belief in it. What if universities, multinationals and public bodies, confronted with a demand to fire someone for questioning [“white privilege”, debating colonial history or reading Right-wing newspapers,](#) simply said “no”? Perhaps the sky wouldn’t fall in.

The [Free Speech Union](#) has been trying to turn the tide of attacks on free expression, often by writing to public or corporate bodies to point out their obligations under their own codes of conduct or their legal duties to employees. Sometimes, you have to fight procedure with procedure, defining and enforcing the laws that protect our freedoms, especially when a person’s livelihood is at stake.

Ultimately, however, the argument against “no platforming” and its ilk will be won by the very thing it tries to suppress: open debate. Most people don’t subscribe to gender or critical race theory or intersectionality or whatever other ideology these activists deploy. They understand the world is complex, that most “categories” of people have some good and some bad in them. Once our bureaucratic elites grasp that they are being petitioned by a tiny but noisy group of extremists, perhaps they will find the courage to withstand the assault. Our institutions are cowering before a paper tiger.

Top Reader Comments

Paul Stephenson 11 Dec 2020 7:56PM

I find it literally unbelievable that a minority of people can effectively silence, and even destroy, those with whom they disagree. What has this country come to, and who is going to do something about it?

Cord Webster 11 Dec 2020 8:18PM

@Paul Stephenson

Arif Ahmed just did! It takes guts to risk your livelihood and reputation. I wish I'd have the same strength in his situation. Well done sir!

NJ Ratnieks 11 Dec 2020 8:35PM

Just over three years ago, I watched an interview with an unknown Canadian academic- a man standing up to free speech and institutionally legalised censure and control. He seemed to be a lonely man about to be tossed to the wolves and I was amazed by his stoic resolve to stand by free speech and not to be coerced into accepting the Orwellian use of language demanded by those who bayed for his blood. I was at the time, pleased to see that there were a handful of brave academics prepared to make a stand and try to keep universities places for open and free debate and a focus for real knowledge and learning.

A couple of months later, this man who had just published a book was interviewed on Channel 4 news, where it was clear, the news anchor, Kathy Newman had decided she was going to cut this man down to size- and for no other reason than that he was standing up to what I have outlined above. Of course, we all know how that ended up and the interview became an internet sensation and really put this academic and his book firmly on the map and has been viewed over 20 million times.

The man, is, of course Professor Jordan Peterson whose visiting fellowship was rescinded by Cambridge in 2019. Need I say more? This was the action of cowards and intellectual pygmies.

JP Edwards 11 Dec 2020 8:12PM

As Douglas Murray says, the silent majority should not remain silent.

It's time to organise and speak up against this highly motivated and noisy minority. Safety in numbers.

Alistair Bryson 11 Dec 2020 7:39PM

What is required to defeat the "woke" approach is straightforward informed common-sense.

It's a public war and this is what is appreciated by the public most of all.

Kind regards,

ReJohn Banner 11 Dec 2020 8:11PM

Wokers only have sound-bites, they do not, however, have reason, brains or tolerance.