

THE CONVERSATION



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Even extremists have a right to freedom of speech on campus



Who's attacking who? Freedom via alexskopje/Shutterstock

There may well be an outcry from student unions and lecturers' organisations against proposals in a new counter-terrorism bill from home secretary Theresa May for a new statutory duty on universities and colleges to "prevent individuals being drawn into terrorism". These include having to put in place "extremist speaker policies" alongside ministerial powers "to issue directions to organisations that repeatedly invite extremist speakers or fail in the duty in other ways".

It's a blatant attack on academic freedom. But any criticism from students and academics of the new powers needs to recognise that free speech is already under attack on campuses by people intent on banning every group or individual, newspaper, magazine or club that they label as "extreme" or "offensive".

May's proposals are likely to find ready support and no complaint from universities already used to being legally compliant. Most already enforce bans on "extremists" including Islamic groups and speakers, often in alliance with student unions in order to ensure that students are "safe".

Student clamp downs

Groups of supposedly "radical" feminist students have called for bans of people and speech they disagree with – some even taking to book burning in protest. One ridiculous recent case involved a successful campaign by feminist students who called for a debate about abortion to be cancelled in Oxford because the two speakers were male.

Students today need to feel safe and comfortable and happily cocooned in cotton wool by universities. Although student unions are held to be independent of the universities whose name they use, no university has publicly criticised its union for attacks on freedom of speech.

The police are already active through the Prevent programme in supporting “vulnerable” students through safe discussion and debate, and it’s ironic that in combatting “extremism” in universities through debate, the police are more sensitive to the essence of academic life than the home secretary or universities and student unions.

Long-fought battle

Compare the new proposals with the arguments of Bill Rammell, now vice-chancellor of the University of Bedfordshire, when he was minister of state for lifelong learning, further and higher education. Rammell gave a speech to the Fabian Society in November 2007 entitled “The last shadow of liberty? Academic Freedom in the 21st Century” in which he defended debating with extremists:

I say let’s give people the chance to challenge their views through free debate. Not the criminals, but those whose words remain within the law, whether they come from extreme religious groups, the BNP, the Animal Liberation Front or elsewhere. And let their views be exposed and challenged for the falsehoods they are. By not allowing them to be heard we undermine the unsaid.

With some prescience he continued: “And in any case, banning extreme groups pushes them underground, into covert operations which operate in secret, or in intimidating environments. Universities must be open to the light of free debate and free inquiry. Because if they are not, they will become places of darkness, obscurantism and fear.”

Universities not to blame

Times have changed since Rammell’s speech and subsequent campaigns against students union “no-platform” policies and academic boycotts. According to the home secretary, Britain is facing new threats from Islamic State to Boko Haram, Al Qaeda in Yemen and Al Shabaab in East Africa, to home-grown extremists who have been radicalised here in Britain.

Some readers might well feel that the vacuum Western involvement created in many of these places allowed extremists groups to flourish and encouraged Western youth to go and fight against the evils Western leaders denounced. We only have to remember the then foreign secretary William Hague’s denunciations of Syria’s president Bashar al-Assad and it may become clearer where the blame for recent radicalisation lies – and it is not in the universities or mosques. If we denounce Assad as a tyrant who must be dealt with and threaten to take military action against him, it’s possible that could contribute to “radicalising” concerned young people.

What has really changed are the attitudes of politicians towards ordinary people. They have a diminished sense of us as human beings. We are all potentially victims and all vulnerable. Politicians, civil servants, the police, university managers, students unions and some students all have a similar view that students need protection.

Students can challenge extremists

Students are no longer thought of as robust adults who are capable of standing up to the arguments and hectoring of so-called extremists. Ordinary students are quite capable of arguing with religious radicals and any of the others labelled “extremist” such as UKIP, the Socialist Workers Party or “climate change deniers”.

We have to allow extremists to speak because freedom of speech is the foundation which defines the university. It is the basis of the professional notion of “academic freedom”. If academics and students don’t oppose all attacks on freedom of speech, their own precious freedom to research won’t last long. Whether or not May achieves her goals, in the current climate of conformism we may well see funding for social science and other research carrying “combatting extremism” as part of the required “impact” aims of bids.

The home secretary may well be represented as an interfering, illiberal Tory who is attacking the very basis of academic freedom. This is true. But many of the individuals and groups attacking her in the coming days need to have a look in the mirror. They are just as illiberal and censorious.