

Crackdown on university students who hinder free speech or another case of smoke and mirrors?



According to the [Times of London](#) Universities Minister of three months, Sam Gyimah, will announce tough guidance on the issue of free speech on campus, at a meeting today.

“A society in which people feel they have a legitimate right to stop someone expressing their views on campus simply because they are unfashionable or unpopular is rather chilling,” he said before the meeting.

The new watchdog, the Office for Students or OfS came into being on April 1 of this year. It will use its powers to impose government guidance by naming, shaming or even fining institutions for failing to uphold rules.

Under this initiative students will be banned from refusing speakers a platform at their universities. This would be the first UK government intervention on free speech on campus for 30 years.

Citing Voltaire's famous words 'I wholly disapprove with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it', Gyimah says free speech is an "essential part of a thriving democracy, a civil society, and a fulfilling university experience."

Ministers have grown alarmed at the number of "safe spaces" on British campuses which we are told, were originally intended to ensure that debate remained respectful, but safe spaces have also been used to silence opinions seen as "offensive."

Campaigners against abortion, Christian groups, feminists opposing transgender self-identification, and events on Israel and Palestinian statehood have all had a hard time getting a hearing on campus and at times have been disrupted or prevented from taking place.

"There is a risk that overzealous interpretation of a dizzying variety of rules is acting as a brake on legal free speech on campus. That is why I am bringing together leaders from across the higher education sector to clarify the rules and regulations around speakers and events to prevent bureaucrats or wreckers on campus from exploiting gaps for their own ends."

The Times says, "the new rules signal the seriousness with which the government is taking free speech on campus."

The key word here could be 'signal'.

[After the 'Windrush scandal](#) which was nothing if not a pantomime of 'signalling' can we trust that the tide is turning?

A commenter at the Times noted:

...the Tories want a cheap shot of publicity (so) they can re-announce that free speech is good, and students are bad, and the Times will write it up and everyone here will say 'at last the Conservatives are doing something right' and 'what a sad reflection on universities' and all that sort of thing. But no one actually seems to know what the policy is or to have thought it through.

Hmm. We'll have to watch this space.