



Where to take the 'Yes' vote

The week of frenzied campaigning is over. The results are in. York is set to retain its affiliation to the NUS. The referendum was a healthy and well-organised exercise in democracy and was rewarded with a turnout of nearly double that needed for quoracy, a rare event in almost any student plebiscite. The result is also a good one. This paper endorses the NUS as an organisation and its principles of collectivism and strength through unity. We backed the 'Yes to NUS' campaign and commend the lengths they went to make the case to students.

But friends need to be frank with each other. The campaign is over. President Tumelty and her retinue of have left campus and, having worked hard to keep York in the fold, are unlikely to return for a while. They have taken with them whatever glamour this sort of politicking affords. The 'Yes' campaigners should pat themselves on the back for a well won victory but also remind themselves that they are York representatives not NUS apparatchiks.

To the 'No' camp's credit they forced a vigorous debate on the merits and failings of the NUS. It is time for the 'Yes' camp to look to the future, especially the Extraordinary Conference called for December, and remind themselves that the NUS is far from perfect, and to get on with the job of making sure that it works for the students of York.

This process should start within weeks. One of the most biting criticisms of the NUS is its gaping democratic deficit and the almost laughably small mandates many of its decision-makers enjoy. York is worse than most – less than 50 people, almost all YUSU insiders, voted in the last round of delegate elections.

YUSU should capitalise on the interest the referendum has sparked and use its momentum to encourage as wide a field of candidates for the Extraordinary Conference as possible. They should throw also throw down the gauntlet to the 'No' camp. If they are truly interested in student governance and were not just acting out of a reactionary anti-union instinct, then they should be amongst the most vigorous candidates for the upcoming delegate election, and must work to change the NUS from within.

The darkening storm

The sky outside the Nouse office seems to be black with stormclouds of litigation. The week started with almost-incoherent threats of libel from the bar crawl company Carnage for a story which quoted one of their sellers as saying "Do you think I care about third world kids? You should see my overdraft." It isn't surprising that Carnage is falling all over itself to try and disown the comment. Interestingly, they have made no effort to instead prove that their t-shirts are made in anything resembling ethical conditions. Their case is as laughable as their attempts to organise a bar crawl.

But if the first instance was good for a chuckle the second is enough to wipe away smiles both in the media and the Union. A member of University staff threatening to sue YUSU is a serious matter for all involved. If the case is as strong as the individual makes out then it could potentially cost students in terms of funding for societies and services. YUSU moved quickly to block further stories in the hope of calming the situation. Their actions are, in some ways, understandable. But in moving so fast and bluntly they have damaged the credibility of the media, weakened its ability to demand accountability and set a dangerous precedent for the future.

YUSU would be well advised to remember that just because a potential lawsuit isn't reported on the front page doesn't mean it's gone away, nor that the individual wielding it will give it up as a tool of leverage after a single, hugely successful, usage.

Meanwhile in the real world

The recent events at the Nag's Head serve as yet another reminder that campus life isn't quite as close to 'real' life as we'd perhaps like. We spend so much time engineering our peaceful co-existence. Political correctness and tolerance abound. Not an edition of this paper passes by where a University faction isn't up in arms against some injustice, however small. Isn't that how we want it to be? Constantly assessing and re-assessing our social balances?

That may well be, but outside of our campus bubble it's just not the case. We so often forget the continued prevalence of many social prejudices, in particular homophobia. The fact that we question everything is a true asset to our student community, but it's important that we don't appear too startled in the harsh light of day. It's so easy for us to get stuck over-intellectualising social situations and forget the reality.

Matt Pallas should be commended for attempting to bridge that gap between university life and the big wide world. If he follows through on his promise to see what actions YUSU can take then he is avoiding the head in the sand attitude that the Union are guilty of taking on other issues.

However this ends up, the Nag's Head are treading on thin ice. The allegations of homophobia may remain unsubstantiated but if one person feels victimised, chances are others do too. We need to address these problems head-on, forcing people to be accountable for the consequences of their actions and their attitudes.

Comment & Analysis

Oxford's actions highlight the issues of free speech

We should not take this liberty for granted



Jonathan Fransman
Contributing Writer

Freedom of speech debates have a tendency to infuriate me. People have a knack of logically deducing, from a series of overused, emotive clichés, that freedom of speech is intrinsically invaluable. When one mentions Martin Luther King or quotes Voltaire it is impossible not to be stirred; raw emotive force or eloquence act as a cop-out for having the debate in the only way it should be conducted; coldly and objectively.

Before I take a stand on the metaphorical soap box, it's important to clarify exactly what I mean when I use the term 'freedom of speech'. It's a common misconception that it stands for the right to say anything you want, to whoever you want, whenever you want. Swearing at someone in the street because you dislike their attire or the way that they look, for example, is not you exercising your right to freedom of expression, it's assault. Shouting racist abuse at a passer by is not someone's right, it is impinging upon another's personal freedom and is, like the last example, assault. The difficult question is where exactly we draw the line.

Another dilemma is provided by our friends from the school of utilitarianism. Should freedom of speech only be accepted when it results in an overall benefit for society? Perhaps a trickier question is whether or not freedom of speech is always entirely beneficial for all those concerned, whatever the situation might be at the actual point of speech.

To apply this to the Oxford Union, I wholeheartedly support the decision of the Union to invite their two controversial speakers. Nick Griffin, Chairman of the BNP, has the right to take a stand and let his political views be known to the world. I would like to think that I have the nous to consider his argument objectively and without bias before coming to my own personal conclusions. The only way to truly re-affirm one's own beliefs is by allowing others to attack them. I am a self-confessed lefty, and a devoted Guardian reader, but I nonetheless find that by far the most interesting conversations that I have are with those on the polar opposite side of the political spectrum.

There is also an inherent danger with the Government introducing legislation to try and silence these people. "Incitement to racial hatred" is just a weak cover for trying to shut up unsavoury views. A healthy society challenges these views head on and contests them in a public forum rather than letting them reach boiling point under the surface.

To stray briefly away from the point,

I think that the rise of the BNP signifies a major underlying problem with our modern, centrist British politics. From Thatcher to the present day, British politics has been focused on middle-class England and the standard everyday voter. Politicians have, sadly, neglected the inner-city working class whites who as a result are dangerously disillusioned with the current political landscape that is not just unaccommodating, but doesn't even seek to represent them at all.

The BNP has recognised this gap in the market and is all too happy to fill it. Immigration conveniently provides the explanation as to why the disillusioned, white working class are trapped in a low-income cycle. This is a failure of British politics; the BNP may be opportunist racists but the problem was there in the first place and it is no wonder they have

'The only way to truly re-affirm one's own beliefs is by allowing others to attack them'

sought to profit from it. It is now up to the government and society as a whole to tackle the problem at its core. Silencing the movement will be detrimental and merely serve to lay even greater foundations for their cause, making it harder to find a solution when facing the issue finally becomes inevitable and entirely unavoidable.

All of this, however, is just a fragment of the picture as a whole. I didn't write this to prove conclusively the intrinsic value of free speech. What I want is to re-start the debate. We should take nothing for granted - everything is up for discussion. Challenge the beliefs that you have, up until this point, accepted unquestioningly. Cut through the rhetoric and hyperbole and argue every minor detail to the death; the survival of our society depends on it. I believe freedom of speech is essential for society; please, prove me wrong.



Francis Borman
Contributing Writer

Well, the votes are in and the students have spoken. The NUS is here to stay. With an overwhelming 72% of the 1389 votes cast in favour of continued affiliation, it's time for those of us who disagreed originally to now look for posi-

Cowardice is getting us nowhere

Preventing the media from reporting on a legal threat to the Union won't make it disappear



Steph Dyson
Comment Editor

The threat of a defamation lawsuit is a useful tool if you are trying to scare a newspaper out of printing something unpleasant about you. In an inversion of almost every other element of the British justice system, the onus is on the defendant to prove their innocence. If a newspaper is unable to disprove the charges of inaccuracy levelled at it then it will be found guilty, and the stacked odds are often enough to convince cautious proprietors to pull major stories.

The bar crawl company Carnage tried it in the crudest and most amateur terms. They spent the first part of this week hurling erratic accusations designed to prevent this paper from quoting their reps' embarrassing indifference to the conditions in which their merchandise is produced. The whole affair was a pathetic scramble to try and disown a flippant comment made by one of their staff. They would have done better to have put out an official statement saying that a student illegally selling t-shirts in James College doesn't speak for the company. Or better still, they shouldn't have bought their t-shirts from sweatshops in Egypt in the first place.

To YUSU's credit they laughed off Carnage's threatened libel suit for the joke that it was. In a buoyant Exec session, Union officers, who have already had their own run-in with Carnage, had a brief giggle about the barcrawl organisers' hysterical protests before moving on to issues more worthy of their time, like squabbling over Toff's gold cards.

The second legal threat, reported on this edition's front page, is a more serious matter altogether. Whereas Carnage were flapping and amateur, the University staff member threatening YUSU with legal action has compiled his case with exacting precision. He has built



up a dossier extensively documenting the student media's coverage of his actions over the past few years and is now claiming to have built up a legal case based on accusations of both defamation and harassment.

Whether his case would stand up in court or not, I don't know. I haven't seen his files, nor do I have the legal expertise to assess their content if I had. It's entirely possible that at some point over the last few years someone in either of the two campus papers has defamed him.

And as the University said, if this is the case, then he does and should have the right to seek legal redress.

What is not acceptable is to use the threat of a lawsuit based on past stories to try and prevent the publication of future ones, irrespective of their accuracy. That isn't using the law to defend your reputation, it is using alleged previous injustices to hold the Student Union hostage. The story that should have been on today's front page was in no way defamatory. On its own it could never

outcome: the process is just as important.

There is little point in merely criticising from the sidelines. For those who think that the NUS needs to improve before it can meet the needs of students at the University of York, a more active approach is required. The campaign against affiliation may still be a partial success even if it did not achieve its original aim, because we can take from it positive things the NUS can do about problems such as the parlous state of its finances and the ineffectiveness of some of its campaigns.

It has been decided that we are to

have been the basis of a lawsuit. Nor could it have served as supporting evidence for other, actually defamatory stories. YUSU killed it off before it was even written, for fear that it would anger the individual concerned, that it would be "the straw that broke the camels back."

If the staff member does have a legal case (and it's worth remembering that he may not; he may be bluffing to strengthen his hand) then YUSU's current policy of 'don't say anything about him and maybe he'll leave us alone' solves absolutely nothing. The dossier won't disappear, and nor will his rancour for the student media which has been festering for several years.

Its only impact is to negate the student media's ability to call for accountability from University officials whose decisions directly impact students but are made almost entirely without their consultation. The decision by the sabbatical team to refuse to enforce a blanket media ban hands the individual in question a 'get out of jail free card', leaving him safe in the knowledge that as long as the embargo stands students are unlikely to know anything about the decisions being made on their behalf.

So what is to be gained from a front page that fans the fire without being able to give students the vital facts and details? The answer is that this paper will simply not swallow unquestioningly the bizarre concept of a blanket ban and pretend that all is well. Our Union faces a serious threat from a determined individual. To pretend otherwise would be to bury our heads in the sand. The complete absence of any mention of either the lawsuit or the almost unprecedented media embargo in *York Vision* is a sign of how effective these threats can be.

YUSU have said they made this decision with students' best interests at heart, and I believe that they genuinely think this to be the case. They acted to try and stave off a potential legal action and to protect the assets of the Union of which they are trustees. But in declaring this "media embargo" they have achieved nothing except to show those who would try to dodge accountability that a little intimidation can go a long way.

Swimming with the big fish now



Emily Kozien-Colyer
Contributing Writer

York is now in the top 100 of the World's universities, having been rated 74th. Strangely enough, this statistic didn't have me leaping for joy. I know the league compares 40,000 universities worldwide, making 74th fairly impressive, but universities that had been ranked lower than us in the UK league, were ranked higher in the world-wide rankings.

Initially this discovery had me laughing wryly at the inconsistency and unreliability of statistics. It was only then that I noticed the different criteria that made up the rankings. The top criteria in my mind had been included in the UK league table, in which we rank 8th, whereas the world review did not individually rank teaching excellence, 1st and 2.1 degrees awarded, dropout rates or A level grades demanded, statistics which had had a huge influence on my decision to come to York.

The assessments of the world rankings have pulled York into a much bigger arena, compiling all the above into the dauntingly blunt assessment of "peer review", and also including the rankings of "international staff" and "international student".

Therefore as we approach those hideous months where the grey winter skies and concrete of campus ally against us, I start to wonder, 74th? How did we manage that?! Most of campus can currently be described as a building site, with other areas begging for attention; the search results "1 book...4 requests" and "no records found" in the J.B Morrell Library are a frequent occurrence, and on Monday week 2 half the printers on campus buckled under the pressure of numerous assessed essay deadlines. Can our University truly compare to the big fish of international universities?

The development of Heslington East, it seems, can be the only basis for the massive leap of 50 places (124th to 74th), from last year. I can hardly imagine York improved, developed and expanded to the standard promised by the University News Press, but the words "new academic complexes", "new departments", and the almost unimaginable speculation of a "25 metre swimming pool", are seductive promises indeed. Plans to complete Heslington East however are estimated to take between 10-15 years, and so it'll be too late for most of us to appreciate and I, like many others, will leave University with the memory of infamously bad accommodation facilities in my first year. However, let us comfort ourselves with the reassuringly high mark of 91, in the worldwide rankings of "Employer review". For, as I'm sure is becoming more and more uncomfortably apparent to final year students, there is another world outside this semi-comfortable bubble. Let's hope we can contend with it.