

AUGUST 2010

**EXTREMISM
ON CAMPUS**

DOLAN CUMMINGS



DEBATING MATTERS
**TOPIC
GUIDES**

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MOTION:

**“EXTREMIST
RELIGIOUS AND
POLITICAL GROUPS
SHOULD BE BANNED
FROM UNIVERSITY
CAMPUSES”**

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INTRODUCTION

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Universities have often been centres of political radicalism historically, and the campus radicalism of the 1960s in particular did much to shape the image of students as idealistic and rebellious young people keen to challenge the ideas of their elders [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In recent years, however, the term ‘radical’ has taken on a sinister aspect, and is more often associated with Islamist terror groups than anti-war activism or left-wing politics [Ref: [Prospect](#)]. The British government has been concerned about Islamist extremism in universities for some time. And following the revelation that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab – who tried to blow up a plane in Detroit on Christmas Day 2009 – had formerly been president of the Islamic Society at University College London, the pressure on universities has been stepped up [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Some have called for universities to ban extremist groups, or at least to monitor their activities more closely and prevent them inviting outside speakers who are deemed dangerous [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Meanwhile, many student unions, including the National Union of Students, have long operated a ‘No Platform’ policy for the BNP and other groups considered racist or otherwise undesirable, including the Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)].

Others, however, argue that universities ought to be places where ideas are openly debated, and that rather than censoring extremist groups, students and academics should challenge their ideas [Ref: [Times Higher Education](#)]. For those opposed to bans, such measures are both against the spirit of free intellectual enquiry, and counterproductive because they reinforce disaffected groups’ sense of persecution and leave their ideas unchallenged.



What is 'extremism'?

Any political idea can be taken to extremes, but the term extremism tends to be used mainly for particular ideas at odds with mainstream politics, especially where there is an association with violence, whether racist or in the cause of animal rights. The form of extremism really driving the current debate, however, is 'Islamism', or 'political Islam', the ideology that seems to be behind most high-profile terrorism today, from the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington in 2001 [Ref: [BBC](#)] to the 7/7 attacks in London in 2005 [Ref: [BBC News](#)] and the recent attempted bomb attack in Detroit. Al-Qaeda, the group that claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks, is thought to be based mainly in places like Afghanistan - where international forces are still fighting their allies the Taliban - and Yemen, where the failed Detroit bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab is said to have trained. But Abdulmutallab previously studied in London, where he was president of UCL's Islamic Society, and it is thought that many other terrorists, including the 9/11 attackers, were first 'radicalised' at Western universities [Ref: [UCL](#)]. For this reason, some argue that extremism must be tackled on campus, as well as in overseas wars. It is not clear, however, that all 'extremist' Islamic groups have associations with violence. The most prominent Islamist group on British campuses, Hizb ut-Tahrir, espouses an extreme version of political Islam, but does not endorse terrorist violence in the West [Ref: [Hizb ut-Tahrir](#)]. For those who want to ban them, however, this does not matter, as the more widely extremist ideas are disseminated and tolerated, the more likely it is that some individuals or groups will turn to violence in their name [Ref: [Times Higher Education](#)]. Moreover, some argue that Hizb ut-Tahrir, like the allegedly

racist BNP, create an intolerant and intimidating atmosphere on campus, regardless of whether they endorse violence, and they should be banned for that reason [Ref: [Student Rights](#)]. Critics counter that it is not the job of universities to police ideas, however extreme, but to explore and debate them [ref: [spiked](#)]. It is also argued that some extreme ideas that challenge the status quo might be valuable and worth considering, while others should be roundly defeated through debate, so the best thing is to have an open battle of ideas and allow students to make up their own minds.

What is 'radicalisation'?

The case for banning extremist groups is often based on the idea that they serve to 'radicalise' people, identifying individuals who are dissatisfied with mainstream society, and pushing them to take ever more extreme views [Ref: [MI5](#)]. For example, someone who disapproves of the 'war on terror' might be persuaded to support the 'resistance' in Iraq or Afghanistan, or to endorse or even take part in terrorist violence domestically [ref: [BBC News](#)]. In the past, campus radicalism tended to mean left-wing politics, often focused on international issues, from demonstrations against the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s to the campaign against apartheid in South Africa or in support of the Palestinians [Ref: [Palestine Solidarity Campaign](#)]. More recently, however, campus radicalism has tended to mean Islamist politics, and someone attending a protest in support of the Palestinians is as likely to rub shoulders with Islamists as socialists. This is particularly true if that person is part of the Muslim community, and there is concern that idealistic young Muslims are being targeted by extreme groups, and encouraged

to abandon mainstream politics, moderate Islam and British values in favour of radical Islam. Those who want to ban extreme groups from campus argue that students need to be protected from such people, often warning that they are skilful at identifying especially vulnerable individuals [ref: [Student Rights](#)]. Critics answer that this is a patronising view of students, who are in fact capable of thinking for themselves [Ref: [The Free Society](#)]. As well as monitoring or banning extreme groups, the official response to radicalisation often involves encouraging potential recruits to get involved in mainstream politics, and supporting more moderate forms of Islam [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Critics argue that this is not what universities are for, and warn against undermining a healthy tradition of campus radicalism, which has involved famous figures like Tariq Ali and even Jack Straw, who went on to become a government minister [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

What are universities for?

Opposing views on whether extremist groups should be banned from universities reflect different conceptions of what academic institutions are for. Those who oppose such bans tend to see universities as institutions for the unfettered pursuit of knowledge [ref: [Academics for Academic Freedom](#)]. They reject both political interference by the government and efforts to 'protect' students from anything they might find offensive, on the grounds that free and robust debate is the only way to develop ideas and win arguments. In response to concerns about radicalisation after the Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab incident, Malcolm Grant, the head of UCL insisted, 'Campuses are and should be safe homes for controversy, argument and debate' [Ref: [Evening Standard](#)] Those who advocate bans, however,

emphasise what they see as a responsibility universities have to reflect the values of wider society, such as tolerance, multiculturalism and liberal democracy, and to prevent the dissemination of dangerous ideas [Ref: [The Centre for Social Cohesion](#)]. Moreover, they often suggest universities have a 'pastoral' responsibility to foster a welcoming and convivial environment within which students can flourish, which is not possible when racist or other offensive views are openly expressed [Ref: [The Reporter](#)]. Depending on which view one takes, banning extremist groups from campus either undermines the core function of the university, or ensures the conditions universities need to function properly. Champions of 'academic freedom' believe all ideas should be subject to open debate, while advocates of 'No Platform' policies believe that some ideas are beyond discussion.

ESSENTIAL READING

University heads set up working group to tackle extremism

Guardian 6 January 2010

Debating Matters Topic Guide on 'No Platform'

August 2008

Degrees of separation

Paul Sims *New Humanist* October 2007

FOR

Raison d'être – Student Rights on Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab

Student Rights 2 January 2010

No platform

Voices off camera 18 January 2008

Campus radicals

Shiraz Maher *Prospect* 24 September 2006

Beacons of truth or crucibles of terror?

Anthony Glees *Times Higher Education* 23 September 2005

AGAINST

Free speech on campus? Yes. A free ride? No

Brendan O'Neill *spiked* 26 January 2010

Protect healthy extremism

Jonathan Birdwell *Guardian* 9 January 2010

No platform or no democracy?

Kenan Malik *New Statesman* 6 September 2009

Dialogue with politicians - Education, education, education

Muslim News 28 March 2008

IN DEPTH

'Hizb ut-Tahrir obsessed with radicalising students'

Shiraz Maher *The Times* 15 January 2010

British Radicalization Studies

Douglas Murray *Wall Street Journal* 8 January 2010

How UCL Authorities Ignored Islamist Extremism

Centre for Social Cohesion Press Briefing 5 January 2010

21st-century McCarthyism

Natasha Walter *Guardian* 21 September 2005

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BACKGROUNDEERS

Islam4UK: free speech is never absolute
Sunny Hundal *Guardian* 14 January 2010

Why I was not surprised about the Christmas Day bomber's UK links
Rashad Ali *Guardian* 3 January 2010

Detroit terror attack: British university 'complicit' in radicalisation
Daily Telegraph 29 December 2009

Let's Talk: Should Student Unions Take Political Stances?
Student Rights 7 December 2009

A forward motion 'No Platform' debate at Sussex University
Abigail Ross-Jackson and Luke Gittos *Culture Wars* 13 June 2008

Sussex Students uphold 'No Platform'
Lee Vernon *The Socialist* 14 May 2008

Extreme free speech
James Ball *Guardian Comment is Free* 16 November 2007

Unis urged to tackle extremism
ITN 17 November 2006

The don's watchful eye
Anthony Glees *Guardian* 17 October 2006

Free society still has limits
Brian Walden *BBC News* 10 February 2006

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ORGANISATIONS

Academics for Academic Freedom (AFAF)
British National Party
Hizb ut-Tahrir
Home Office Prevent Strategy
Student Rights
The Centre for Social Cohesion
The Quilliam Foundation
Unite Against Fascism

IN THE NEWS

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Campus Islamic extremists under police scrutiny

BBC News 4 February 2010

Grant defends freedom of speech as UCL announce first review details

London Student 26 January 2010

UCL head: London colleges must let extremists speak

Evening Standard 25 January 2010

Senior member of extreme Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir teaches at LSE

The Times 15 January 2010

Muslim school accused of extremist links hits back at David Cameron

Guardian 25 November 2009

Watchdog wants BNP to be denied right to teach

Times Higher Education 27 November 2008

Tackle extremism, academics urged

BBC News 22 January 2008

'Stand up for free speech' - Rammell

Times Higher Education 30 November 2007

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- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
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- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

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Surname

School/company/
organisation

Professional role
(if applicable)

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School/work phone

Mobile phone

**“TEENAGE CITIZENS
THINKING DEEPLY
ABOUT...SOCIAL
ISSUES”**

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

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