

British think tank fronts right-wing “academic freedom” campaign—Part 2

By Thomas Scripps
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This is second and concluding part of a two-part series. The first part was published on August 24, 2020.

Another author on the Policy Exchange report is Eric Kaufmann. A professor at Birkbeck University in London, Kaufmann spoke in defence of Noah Carl during the Cambridge campaign. He is the author of a book, *Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities*, which argues that Western politics is being defined by “the tug of war between white ethno-traditionalism and anti-racist moralism,” that anti-racism is a “repression of ethnic instincts,” and that white people should be able to assert “their own racial self-interest.” Kaufmann has recently called for giving preference to white people in a points-based immigration system.

The appeal to far-right, social Darwinist layers, is made explicit in the “Academic Freedom” report. The passage deserves to be cited at length for its insistence on the “positive intentions” of advocates of race science:

“It is difficult to imagine that black students would or should be unmoved at news a professor in their department is pursuing a line of research ‘proving’ black people are inherently less intelligent than white people, for instance, all under the umbrella of academic freedom. Or that a student of Indian heritage might not be deeply offended by a professor or lecturer teaching in class that British colonialism was the best thing that ever happened to the Indian people. ...

“However, the question ultimately boils down to whether we aim to build an academic community and wider society which operates on the good-faith assumption of positive intentions in others or one that operates on the assumption of nefarious intentions. ...

“Furthermore, with British institutions, including universities, now under a microscope following the outpouring of anti-racist protests and initiatives after the heinous killing of George Floyd in America, it smacks of the implausible that any rational scholar interested in a successful academic career would consider propagating racist beliefs to be a wise or even just beneficial career path.”

These ideas and their advocates have a major influence among leading government figures. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has ruminated on the significance of innate IQ differences for human equality. His closest advisor, Dominic Cummings, has written a 200-plus-page paper for the Department of Education insisting on the importance of genetics in children’s academic success and was responsible for the hiring of a self-professed “eugenicist” as a special government advisor. As social inequality reaches obscene levels, this ideology is regaining its central place in the thinking of the ruling class.

The unholy alliance behind the “Academic Freedom” report is completed by the author of its foreword, former Labour MP Ruth Smeeth. Part of the Blairite core of the Labour Party, Smeeth’s most significant political role has been as a key player in the anti-Semitism witch-hunt against the Corbynite “left.” She has been at the forefront of criminalising criticism of Israel through enshrining the International Holocaust Remembrance Association’s definition of anti-Semitism. Between 2005

and 2007, Smeeth served as director of public affairs and campaigns for the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM), a pro-Israel lobby group. She was exposed by WikiLeaks in July 2016 as a “strictly protect” United States asset in leaked diplomatic cables.

In 2018, Smeeth had long-time anti-racism campaigner Marc Wadsworth thrown out of the Labour Party after alleging he had engaged in anti-Semitic conduct towards her. At a party meeting, Wadsworth had seen a *Telegraph* reporter passing one of his leaflets calling for the deselection of right-wing Labour MPs to Smeeth and commented, “We can see who’s working hand in hand.” Now Smeeth comes out in favour of a campaign with the *Telegraph*’s fingerprints all over it!

Smeeth endorses the Policy Exchange report in her capacity as recently selected CEO of the Index on Censorship, set up by former Labour member Trevor Phillips who now serves as chair of its board of directors. Phillips managed to criticise Tony Blair from the right, denouncing him for promulgating “multiculturalism.” In an interview with the *Times* in 2004, he called for a rejection of multiculturalism and for the government to “assert a core of Britishness.” He said in 2016 about immigration to the UK, “Rome may not yet be in flames, but I think I can smell the smouldering whilst we hum to the music of liberal self-delusion” and referred to the “dark side of the diverse society.” He was thrown out of the Labour Party for Islamophobic comments earlier this March.

In the last few years, Phillips has worked closely with the Policy Exchange, and now heads its History Matters project. In June, he was considered by Munira Mirza to lead a government race inquiry, having already been appointed to an earlier inquiry into how the pandemic affected BAME communities.

Like Smeeth, Phillips was a leading figure in the Labour anti-Semitism campaign, writing in the *Financial Times*, “Labour’s inaction on anti-Semitism is shameful.”

In arguing for the freedom of reactionaries to speak unchallenged, the forces marshalled behind the Index on Censorship intend to use government intervention on the campuses to suppress criticism of Israel and its criminal abuse of the Palestinians—a touchstone issue for British imperialism. The right-wing press frequently cites protests against visiting Israeli officials as evidence of a culture of “censorship” and “intolerance”.

This is a view shared by *Spiked*’s editor Brendan O’Neill, who is a keynote speaker for pro-Israel advocacy organisation StandWithUS. He penned an article in 2018 titled, “Why do you hate Israel? The question that hangs over the left.”

The final seal of approval was put on the Policy Exchange report by Toby Young and Nigel Biggar, writing in the *Telegraph* and the *Times*, and by their “Free Speech Union,” founded in the wake of Noah Carl’s resignation. Report authors Remi Adekoya and Eric Kaufmann are on the union’s advisory council, along with Claire Fox. Trevor Phillips delivered a speech at its launch.

Academia and the international class struggle

The relentlessness of this campaign is rooted in the turn of the ruling class towards dictatorial methods and ideologies. A deepening world crisis of capitalism, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, confronts the elite with ever more explosive geopolitical conflicts and domestic social struggles. They are seeking a stranglehold on the universities to lay the intellectual groundwork for a vicious counterrevolutionary assault on the working class.

This is an international phenomenon. In Germany, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality has led a six-year-long struggle against efforts to transform universities into centres of state propaganda for militarism and far-right politics. These centre on the work of professors Jörg Baberowski and Herfried Münkler to rehabilitate the Third Reich and the militarist crimes of the German Empire, and on the growing prominence afforded to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) on campus.

Last year, these forces received cross-party state support in the form of a book, printed by the right-wing German publisher Wilhelm Hopf, *Academic Freedom and its 'Enemies.'* The book included essays from Baberowski, Münkler, anti-migrant ideologue, social Darwinist, and SPD politician Thilo Sarrazin, AfD politician Marc Jongen, and head of the Association of University Lecturers Bernhard Kempen. Oxford's Nigel Biggar contributed a chapter. The most abhorrent political arguments and vicious conspiracies against the population, developed in close collaboration with the state, are reincarnated as shining examples of a democratic commitment to free speech and academic debate.

The pernicious role of identity politics

In Britain, this campaign relies wholly on posing as an opposition to the pseudo-left purveyors of identity politics on campus. Time and again, right-wing commentators cite examples of “no platforming” as evidence of student “intolerance.” The Policy Exchange report refers specifically to the efforts to no-platform gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell, feminist Germaine Greer, and Oxford Professor Selina Todd, all on the charge of advancing transphobic views.

It says everything about the forces grouped around the Policy Exchange that the report does not mention by far the most outrageous, anti-democratic use of this practice. Namely, the effective blacklisting of the most significant journalist of the 21st century, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange—or anyone who dared speak in his defence—on the basis of discredited, state manufactured sexual assault smears. In 2012, George Galloway was banned by the National Union of Students on the grounds of being a “rape denier” for defending Assange. In 2015, Cambridge Students' Union attempted to ban Assange from speaking on campus, and Sheffield Students' Union tried the same in 2016. Both efforts were overturned by the popular demand of students.

The authors of the “Academic Freedom” report do not raise these events because they do not disagree with them. Students should reject with contempt any suggestion that the Policy Exchange is genuinely opposed to such anti-democratic campaigns. Their criticisms of no platforming are a means to a reactionary end.

For that end to be averted, students must carry out their own fight against identity politics, on the basis of a turn to socialist politics and the international working class. No-platforming as a tactic began in the 1970s and was able to gain a broader sympathy among students because it targeted fascists and the far-right. Even then, however, the practice had dangerous political implications in that it was often linked to appeals to the state to intervene, when history has shown repeatedly that measures nominally introduced against the right are then more regularly and savagely deployed against the left. The advocacy of no-platforming was generally the province of pseudo-left groups, such as the Socialist Workers Party, hostile to a struggle for socialism in the working class.

The subsequent development of the pseudo-left—their constant lurch to the right—has exposed more clearly the reactionary implications of no-platforming.

It has increasingly been bound up with the ferocious promotion of identity politics, socially rooted in an affluent layer of the middle class and based theoretically on a rejection of the Enlightenment—in particular, its crowning achievement in the historical materialism of Karl Marx. Above all, the proponents of identity politics are hostile to and seek to conceal the fundamental division in society, social class.

The term is never used except as an entirely subjective concept referring to a form of prejudice, “classism.” It is ranked far below the three primary “identities” of race, gender, and sexual orientation, used as leverage in a petit-bourgeois jostle for well-rewarded positions and preferential treatment by the state and big business.

This is a wholly reactionary, disorienting, and divisive politics, hostile to a socialist fight for equality and democratic rights. The implications are most starkly revealed in the protests against the police murder of George Floyd in the United States. This event triggered international outrage and opposition, across supposed racial divides, against state violence and racism.

The response of advocates of identity politics such as Black Lives Matter was to insist that what was posed by the killing was a purely racial question, going so far as being demonstrably hostile to the involvement of non-black youth in the protests—identified as “privileged” due to their “whiteness.” Any reference to the need to mobilise a broader struggle of the working class was met with the same pejoratives.

Just how useful this rotten politics is to the ruling class was indicated by a *Telegraph* article published on Monday. Made the leading Op-Ed in the newspaper's print edition and given the top spot on its online edition, the article, authored by Nick Timothy, is titled “The racist and sexist language of the Left is hopelessly hypocritical,” with the by-line, “The ‘Oppression Olympics’ has reached a new low, as an extreme, divisive lexicon is imported from America.”

In what follows, an advisor to former Prime Minister Theresa May—whose government orchestrated huge assaults on democratic rights and working people—is able to posture as a defender of civil liberties and point out that “Social class is often overlooked, even though the education and prosperity of our parents is the biggest determinant of our life chances”!

Without a socialist political challenge to the divisive politics of identity, the far-right will continue to make gains. The government is well-prepared to act on the Policy Exchange's signal. Johnson took the Tory Party into the 2019 general election on a manifesto promising “to strengthen academic freedom and free speech in universities.” This February, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson threatened in the *Times*, “If the universities can't defend free speech, the government will.”

In March, the head of the OfS said that universities must take “practical steps to secure freedom of speech,” and the government indicated it was looking to strengthen the 1986 Education Act—brought in by the Thatcher government to suppress protests against Enoch Powell and politicians from Apartheid South Africa—to allow for direct policing of student unions and societies.

In July, Tory MP Robert Halfon, chair of the Education Select Committee, said that universities could be required to fund security for “controversial speakers” to protect free speech. The same month, Williamson announced that universities in financial difficulty would have to provide “assurance that [they] are fully complying with their legal duties to secure freedom of speech” to receive government loans.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality calls on students to wage the necessary struggle against the attempt to enforce a right-wing agenda on campus through government intervention. This must be done on the basis of an entirely opposed perspective to the advocates

of competing identities—that is, a turn to the one political force capable of combatting these state-backed schemes, the international working class.

Concluded

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