

²¹ The OIAHE wrote by email to the author on 8 January to say, ‘if the applicant for the higher degree is unhappy with the process that has been followed, they may wish to fill in our complaint form so that we can make a more detailed assessment of whether this is something we can review further. A person can submit a complaint to us without having been directed to us by their provider (by means of a Completion of Procedures letter); in this case, it would be helpful to explain on the complaint form that the provider does not consider them to be a student and that this is why there is no Completion of Procedures letter.’

²² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/584734/Factsheet_on_Degree_Awarding_Powers_and_University_Title.pdf

²³ William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, B. xv. 373.

²⁴ OUA, NW 1/11 (1810).

²⁵ A definition of a graduate was given by Oxford’s Assistant Registrar on 13 October 1941. It was ‘someone who has proceeded to a degree after qualifying for it by residence and examinations’, OUA, WP Beta/20/8, p.142.

²⁶ Keeper of the University Archives.

²⁷ WP Beta/20/8, pp69 ff. (Lane Poole, p.1)

²⁸ WP Beta/20/8, pp69 ff. (Lane Poole, p.2)

²⁹ *Statutes* (1939), Tit II sectio VIII, p. 13. The University Archive provides a helpful summary of the development of ‘MA status’ at https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/199664/MA-Status.pdf

³⁰ *Report of the Commission of Inquiry* (1997), Vol. I, Recommendation 13.

³¹ There: ‘A possessor of the status of Master of Arts: (a) shall have the same privileges as a Master of Arts with regard to the Libraries (other than the University Library), the Museums, and the Botanic Garden of the University; (b) shall be entitled to wear the M.A. gown without strings, but not the hood; (c) for the purpose of keeping terms by residence, may certify his or her own residence; (d) shall not be subject to the regulations for motor vehicles or the regulations for bicycles and boats.’

Free speech at Oxford: do women have the right to defend their sex?

MICHAEL BIGGS

THREE female academics spoke about women’s rights at Oxford on 25 October to an audience of about two hundred, composed mainly of feminists. Such a meeting would have been unremarkable in 2009, 1999, 1989, or 1979; even in 1969 it would have caused bemusement rather than outrage. Today, however, the meeting was so controversial that the University of Oxford deserves credit for allowing it to go ahead. Indeed, similar events were recently cancelled, or re-arranged, by Massey University in New Zealand and Simon Fraser University in Canada. At stake are two fundamental principles. The first is whether women have the right to defend their sex – to preserve, for example, female-only rape shelters and sports competitions. The second is whether we have a right to question fashionable doctrines of gender.

The event at Oxford – entitled ‘A woman’s place is at the lectern’ – was arranged by Woman’s Place UK (WPUK). This organization was formed in 2017 by left-wing feminists after an attendee, Maria MacLachlan, was physically assaulted on the way to a meeting discussing the government’s proposal to amend the Gender Recognition Act. To quote from WPUK’s manifesto:

‘We are against all forms of discrimination. We believe in the right of everyone to live their lives free from discrimination and harassment. Women face entrenched and endemic structural inequality. ... This is why sex is a protected characteristic in the Equality Act (2010) which we believe must be defended.’¹

It helped WPUK to book a room in Examination Schools for the meeting, for which it paid the normal rates. The Proctors’ Officers warned of a substantial risk of physical disruption. WPUK’s first meeting in Oxford, at the Quaker Meeting House in April 2017, was besieged by

about fifty shouting protesters.² Demonstrators outside the WPUK’s previous meeting, in Brighton, blocked the entrance and tried to kick in the windows.³ Therefore the University insisted that the organization pay for six private security guards as well as four University staff and obtain liability insurance for £10 million.

The meeting featured three speakers: Professor Selina Todd, Professor of Modern History at Oxford; Dr Susan Matthews, Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Roehampton; and Raquel Rosario Sanchez, doctoral student at the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol. The chair was Alison Bailey, a criminal defence barrister at Garden Court Chambers who, incidentally, grew up in Cowley.

When the meeting was announced, transactivists (activists campaigning for the transgender cause, most of whom do not identify as transgender but style themselves ‘cisgender allies’) reacted with predictable outrage. Trans Action Oxford emerged as a new account (@transactionox) on Twitter. It asserted ‘a direct correlation between the proliferation of groups like “A Woman’s Place” and the rise in transphobic abuse in the UK’.⁴ To quote from their statement of 17 October:

‘A proper commitment to academic freedom uplifts voices from all marginalised groups, including those of trans people. It recognises that freedom of expression does not extend to bigotry, and that bigotry serves to silence the vulnerable.’

According to Trans Action Oxford, then, anyone who disagrees with their doctrines has no right to speak – and, as we will see, must be expelled from the University. There is a real asymmetry here, because WPUK has never denied

freedom of expression to those who disagree with its principles.

Trans Action Oxford's statement was signed by several bodies including various groups within Oxford University Student Union and the Oxford University LGBTQ+ Society. Other signatories were Beyond the Binary, a project at the Pitt Rivers Museum (paid £91,000 by the Heritage Lottery Fund⁵), and the Queer Studies Network, funded by the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH). Should academic units of the University attempt to prevent one of their own colleagues—Todd—from speaking?

Fortunately the transactivists decided to hold a rally in Broad Street rather than to intimidate people entering the meeting. The meeting proceeded without disruption. Todd emphasized the persistence of sex discrimination in the university sector. Matthews argued that we need to question the beliefs underlying gender ideology in the same way that earlier feminists exposed myths of their own time. Rosario Sanchez traced the transmutation of Women's Studies into Gender Studies and urged a return to its roots. The speeches were followed by a lively question-and-answer session.⁶

What was said during the meeting would not surprise anyone who has encountered second-wave feminism. Nevertheless, three of the four women on the platform have been targeted for harassment.⁷ As a founding supporter of LGB Alliance, a new group for homosexuals and bisexuals, Bailey received a torrent of abuse and even death threats online.⁸ Complaints were made to her Chambers, instigated by Gendered Intelligence—an organization which Oxford pays to train staff—and she is now under investigation.⁹ Rosario Sanchez has been bullied by students at her university ever since it was announced that she would chair a WPUK meeting in Bristol in 2018.¹⁰ She has been forced to run the gamut of masked protesters at meetings inside her university campus and has faced almost two years of threats by students to assault her at multiple events, both inside and outside her university.¹¹ Rosario Sanchez and Bailey's experiences, incidentally, perfectly illustrates the perversity of today's identity politics. We are exhorted to defer to oppressed groups, but when orthodoxy is challenged by a woman from the Dominican Republic and a black lesbian, then their dissident voices must be silenced.

Todd has likewise faced a persistent campaign of harassment. Because the perpetrators are staff and students at Oxford, it should be of particular concern to readers. Trans Action Oxford's subsequent statement (28 October) literally demands her sacking:

*'Todd refuses to grant trans women the same status as cisgender women. A person who is so openly transphobic should not be in the University's employment, let alone in a teaching position where she is directly interacting with students ... We demand that it [the University] review its employment of Selina Todd.'*¹²

The authors—'A collective of undergraduate and postgraduate students, and staff, of the University of Oxford'—lack the courage to sign their names. The statement was retweeted by the Oxford Feminist Society. The Society also tweeted using the hashtag #FuckTerfs.¹³ The acronym stands for Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists, and the associated Twitter traffic is often accompanied by threats of violence.¹⁴ Ponder the paradox

of anonymous 'intersectional feminists' hurling obscenities at a feminist scholar because she believes that women face discrimination on account of their sex.

As Selina Todd has told me, abuse is not confined to social media. After the WPUK meeting, activists planned to disrupt her lecture to undergraduates, causing the History Faculty to ask the Proctors for security. The front row of the lecture theatre was occupied by several transactivists displaying slogans. Such overt intimidation goes far beyond the bounds of any normal academic disagreement or political debate. Moreover, there is reason to conclude that transactivists are targeting Todd as a woman. She and I share similar views on the subject of sex and gender; if anything, I have been more outspoken.¹⁵ Although I have not altogether escaped criticism, I have not faced anything like the continual campaign of harassment which she has endured, which, she tells me, has included an official complaint to St Hilda's—dismissed as without foundation—as well as relentless defamation on social media, for over a year.

The University of Oxford deserves real praise for allowing the WPUK to hire its premises. (The only other British university to do so is Northumbria.) The Vice-Chancellor's reply to Trans Action Oxford struck just the right balance: Oxford 'prioritises protecting academic freedom and robust expression of opinion and debate, while not tolerating any form of unlawful discrimination or harassment.'¹⁶ But, in my view, the University has not done enough to protect Todd from harassment. It has neither defended her reputation as one of the leading scholars of women's history with a long record of mentoring female students, nor refuted the defamatory claim that her presence is 'directly detrimental' to the 'well-being and safety' of trans students.¹⁷ Although the University has adopted robust principles on free speech (written by Professor Timothy Garton Ash and Lord Ken Macdonald), it evidently allows—as in the case of Trans Action Oxford—student groups and even academic units to violate those principles.¹⁸ The debate around sex and gender is inevitably heated because fundamental rights are really at stake.

Needless to say, members of the University have an absolute right to disagree vehemently with Todd and to repudiate her views. It should not be acceptable, however, to call for a colleague and teacher to be sacked for believing that sex matters.

¹ <http://womansplaceuk.org/wpuk-manifesto-2019/>

² <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/FreeSpeechOxford.shtml>

³ 'Activist says protest was "not peaceful" at WPUK meeting', *Argus*, 27 September 2019; <http://www.theargus.co.uk/news/17930420.activist-says-protest-not-peaceful-wpuk-meeting/>

⁴ <http://archive.is/QMWV6>

⁵ <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/beyond-the-binary>

⁶ Video is posted on <http://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-zFqsUqDzyXEQMJVy42NwUw/videos>

⁷ I wrote about the harassment of feminist scholars in *Oxford Magazine*, Second Week, Hilary Term, 2019, p. 15.

⁸ 'Lesbian barrister investigated over transgender views', *Times*, 28 October 2019; <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lesbian-barrister-investigated-over-transgender-views-l32b67zgf>

⁹The tweet from Gendered Intelligence (since deleted) reads: ‘We would encourage everyone to write a letter of [sic] to GCC [Garden Court Chambers] expressing your concern about the barrister in question and the new group’ (26 October 2019).

¹⁰ ‘‘Bullying by trans student at Bristol University could cost me my visa’’, *Sunday Times*, 24 August 2019; <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bullying-by-trans-student-at-bristol-university-could-cost-me-my-visa-7p3r3b7lv>

¹¹ Her supervisor, Dr Emma Williamson, has strongly supported her: <http://womansplaceuk.org/2019/08/21/statement-by-the-head-of-the-centre-for-gender-and-violence-research-at-the-university-of-bristol/>

¹² <http://archive.is/jVCvi>

¹³ <http://twitter.com/OxFemSoc/status/1187850755786641409>

¹⁴ A compilation of typical examples (though I do not subscribe to the notion of ‘hate speech’): ‘‘TERF’’ isn’t just a slur, it’s hate speech’, *Feminist Current*, 21 September 2017; <http://www.feministcurrent.com/2017/09/21/terf-isnt-slur-hate-speech/>

¹⁵ My writings on this subject are compiled at <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/sexgender.shtml>

¹⁶ Trans Action Oxford tweeted the response: <http://twitter.com/transactionox/status/1194291409349677056>

¹⁷ Trans Action Oxford’s statement of 28 October 2019, cited above.

¹⁸ The statement, recently linked from the University’s front webpage, as at <http://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/prevent/freedom-of-speech>

Spit and polish

Reading the carefully potted life,
aware of its messiness
unpotted, you know how blurbs

mislead. Disastrous forays
into the world twist easily
into adventures, odd jobs

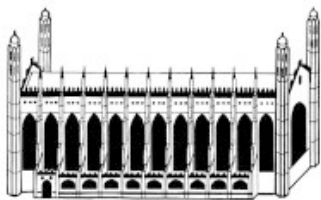
expand, gaps in the CV shrink,
and life is tidied up. Your book,
‘acclaimed’ by back-scratching friends,

sounds good, but how few did you once
beat past the post to style yourself
‘prize-winning author’? Only you know.

Just as you know, in your unworthy heart,
that ‘shortlisted for many awards’
whispers ‘failed to impress again.’

DEBORAH MASON

Deborah Mason was the Assistant Director of Oxford University Language Centre from 1998 to 2018. Her poems have been published in anthologies as well as in journals and magazines (e.g. *The Interpreter’s House*, *Pennine Platform*, *Anon*, *Other Poetry*, *Orbis*).



Notes from Cambridge

THE Cambridge *Reporter* published a short Notice on 23 January withdrawing a Notice about membership of the Regent House which had been published in the *Reporter* of 11 December. This episode illustrates some important differences from Oxford’s procedures for adding to the membership of Congregation. The *Gazette* frequently adds a few names during the course of the year, and in January the consolidated list is published for that year. Last year that list appeared in the issue for 30 January.¹

In Cambridge the Roll of the Regent House is updated only once a year. The principle was established in the University of Cambridge Act of 1856 and implemented in 1860 when the Council of the University was invented and the ‘House of Residents’ created. The rule has never changed, though it is now the Regent House whose members are thus listed. A special issue of the *Reporter* contains a Proposed Roll of the Regent House with an invitation to submit corrections by a stated date.² Disputes are settled by the Vice-Chancellor after a hearing. Then the Roll is Promulgated by publication in the *Reporter*.³

Significant changes to the rules of eligibility for membership were approved by the Regent House in the course of the previous academic year.⁴ An

‘administrative oversight’ then led to the failure to include 45 new individuals when the list was Promulgated. The Faculty affected notified the Registrary. She responded by publishing a Notice admitting and correcting the mistake and inviting further corrections.⁵

Professor A.W.F. Edwards and Professor M.C. Smith had earlier represented to the Vice-Chancellor under Statute A, IX, 1(a) that the Statute governing the process did not permit such corrections and that there had therefore been an ‘act’ in contravention of the Statutes on the Registrary’s part. The governing Statute is A, III, 9 and 10:

‘9. The members of the Regent House at any time shall be those persons whose names were on the Roll of the Regent House at the time of the last promulgation.

10. The Registrary shall promulgate the Roll of the Regent House in each year on a day appointed by Ordinance. Promulgation shall be by publication in the Cambridge University Reporter.’

It was accepted that there had indeed been a contravention of the Statutes and Regulations and the Registrary consequently withdrew the Notice: