

**AUGUST 2008**

---

**NO  
PLATFORM**

---

**ABIGAIL  
ROSS-JACKSON**



**DEBATING MATTERS**  
**TOPIC**  
**GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

**MOTION:**

**“STUDENT UNIONS  
ARE JUSTIFIED  
IN RETAINING  
‘NO PLATFORM’  
POLICIES”**

# CONTENTS

**Introduction**

**Key terms**

**The no platform debate in context**

**Essential reading**

**Backgrounders**

**Organisations**

**In the news**

# INTRODUCTION

1 of 7

# NOTES

1  
1  
2  
4  
5  
5  
6

Student Unions have for some time used ‘No Platform’ policies to refuse the right to speak to groups whose views they find unacceptable. Instituted in the late 1970s to prevent racist groups from standing in NUS elections, the discussion has resurfaced recently, due to a resurgence of Student Unions across the country debating No Platform. The Oxford Union found itself at the centre of controversy in November 2007 [Ref: [Independent](#)] when a decision was taken to invite BNP leader Nick Griffin and David Irving, a British historian who was jailed in Austria for Holocaust denial [Ref: [BBC News](#)], to debate free speech. Students found themselves divided, and since then similar scenes have occurred across the country. Also in November 2007, students at the University of East Anglia voted to campaign to end the NUS’s No Platform policy [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Debates have also taken place at Warwick and Bath, where No Platform policies were voted down [Ref: [Warwick blogs](#)]. However, at Sussex and Exeter students voted to retain their No Platform policy [Ref: [Exeter media](#)]. The NUS has maintained its stance that it supports No Platform in the interests of the safety of all its members [Ref: [NUS](#)]. But are Student Unions justified in implementing these policies, or are they unnecessary?

## KEY TERMS

- [Fascist](#)
- [Freedom of Speech](#)
- [Hate Speech](#)
- [NUS No Platform Policy](#)
- [Racial and Religious Hatred Bill](#)

## What is the role of a Student Union?

Central to the No Platform debate is the question of the role of the Student Union [Ref: [The International Education Site](#)]. In the UK the purpose of Student Unions is to organise student activities and to provide advice and services to students. Unions are also the home of student debating and campaigning within universities. Those that support the No Platform policy say that the first responsibility of the Student Union is to provide a safe place for all its members. Allowing fascist groups onto campus, they argue, will lead to an upsurge in violence and make universities unsafe for certain groups. They maintain that the Union is ultimately a private members club and consequently has the right to ban any individuals or groups whose views it disagrees with from speaking. Without No Platform, they fear groups such as the BNP and Hizb ut-Tahrir would also have access to Union funding to set up societies and hold meetings, thereby gaining legitimacy on campus and beyond. But opponents of No Platform state that the primary purpose of Student Unions is as democratic representative bodies and that such decisions fall significantly outside the Union's remit of providing student support and services – they are not political bodies. They further suggest that the role of the Union is not to protect its members but to help them get the most out of their university experience. Banning certain people from campus only serves to open up the divide between opposing groups and stifles debate on fundamental issues. Some also dispute the notion that allowing fascist groups to speak on campus increases violent attacks, claiming that there is little evidence to back this up.

## How does the No Platform debate relate to the wider context of free speech?

The No Platform debate raises wider questions about free speech. Is free speech an absolute, or do certain circumstances warrant its limitation? In 2007, the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill came into force, meaning that it became illegal for people to incite racial or religious hatred, even if their actions had no physical manifestation [Ref: [Home Office](#)]. Some argue that criminalising someone for what they say is taking things too far, and that it undermines our freedom of speech and our right to be offensive. Yet public support for anti-terror legislation that criminalises certain speech acts seems to suggest that free speech becomes a secondary issue when society is faced with social conflicts. Is the right to speak without limitation a right we should be so willing to compromise? Though many would hold that the value of free speech is meaningless if it is not universal, there are also those who believe that some things are better left unsaid. Behind the No Platform debate is a set of issues about what the right to free speech entails, how far it extends and whether or not it needs to be curtailed in the face of danger.

## Should Student Unions be talking to such groups?

Some think that talking to these banned groups is a waste of time. In the words of Gemma Tumelty, former NUS President, 'they are still homophobic, sexist and racist'. Not only do these groups have deplorable views, but neither side is likely get anything out of the discussion. Supporters of No Platform are also concerned that allowing the BNP and others the right to speak may bring sympathisers at the university out of the woodwork and encourage unacceptable, perhaps even violent,

## THE NO PLATFORM DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

3 of 7

NOTES

behaviour. But opponents think that it is always necessary to challenge unacceptable views and that as intelligent and critical agents university students are ideally placed to take on this challenge. They have confidence that students will not be swayed by poor arguments and irrational fascist beliefs. They also think that if sympathisers do emerge as a result of talking to certain groups on campus, it puts students in a much better place to challenge these views, rather than leaving them to flourish underground. Violence and intimidation are illegal regardless of No Platform policies, they point out, and the prospect of it should not frighten people into censoring themselves or others.

## ESSENTIAL READING

Bath says no to 'No Platform'

Mark Wright *The National Student* 3 March 2008

Ban the bombers?

Paul Sims *New Humanist* 5 September 2007

### FOR

Sussex Students uphold 'No Platform'

Lee Vernon *The Socialist* 14 May 2008

No platform

*Voices off camera* 18 January 2008

Why there must be no free speech for Nazis

Anindya Bhattacharyya *Socialist Worker* 4 December 2007

Campus Radicals

Shiraz Maher *Prospect Magazine* 9 September 2006

Free society still has limits

Brian Walden *BBC News Magazine* 10 February 2006

### AGAINST

A forward motion

Abigail Ross-Jackson and Luke Gittos *Culture Wars* 13 June 2008

Academic freedom means free speech and no 'buts'

Dennis Hayes *The Free Society* 4 March 2008

No to 'No Platform'

George Eaton *On-Line blog* 7 February 2008

Just say no to 'no platform'

Richard Reynolds *spiked* 26 November 2007

Extreme free speech

James Ball *Guardian* 16 November 2007

### IN DEPTH

Bill Rammell lecture: Academic Freedom in the 21st Century  
Lecture

Bill Rammell *Fabian Society* 27 November 2007

The uprising against fascism: Students storm Oxford Union  
debate

Andy McSmith and Jerome Taylor *Independent* 27 November 2007

There is no martyrdom in this pathetic denouement

David Cesarani *Guardian* 22 February 2006

Protect the freedom to shock

Kenan Malik *New Statesman* 13 August 2001

4 of 7

NOTES

## BACKGROUNDEERS

5 of 7

NOTES

This muddled terror law limits free speech and wrecks innocent lives

*Guardian* 22 July 2008

Debate on Raw Radio - Warwick delegates vote for No Platform at NUS Conference

Hannah Smith, Andrew O'Brien and Alex Fowles *Raw News* 20 May 2008

Education Minister undermines NUS

Sarah Clark *The Journal* 3 December 2007

NUS: Shame on the Oxford Union for tolerating intolerance

Gemma Tumelty *Guardian mortarboard* 28 November 2007

'No Platform' and free speech

Violet Martin *Workers' Liberty* 23 March 2006

Give the BNP a platform – and kick it from under them

Jackie Ashley *Guardian* 1 May 2002

Why 'No Platform' is No Good

*Far Left Watch*

## ORGANISATIONS

Academics for Academic Freedom (AFAF)

Student Academics for Academic Freedom (SAFAF)

Unite against fascism

## IN THE NEWS

Nottingham scholar held for 6 days under anti-terror law  
*Times Higher Education Supplement* 29 May 2008

Hezbollah 'No Platform' motion defeated by CUSU  
*Cambridge Student Online* 1 March 2008

UEA votes against a NUS policy on fascism  
*Get Hobsons* 27 November 2007

East Anglia students reject NUS policy on fascists  
Anthea Lipsett *Guardian Education* 27 November 2007

Howard leads attacks on controversial forum  
*Independent* 27 November 2007

Protesters force their way into Oxford Union  
*Guardian* 26 November 2007

Row as Oxford Union votes to hear Irving  
*Observer* 25 November 2007

'Lyrical Terrorist' found guilty  
*BBC News* 8 November 2007

Race row Nobel scientist James Watson scraps tour after being suspended  
*Times Online* 19 October 2007

Plans to outlaw inciting gay hate  
*BBC News* 8 October 2007

Iran president in NY campus row  
*BBC News* 25 September 2007

Leading British institutions gripped by racism rows  
*Independent* 9 May 2007

Students back OUSU in No Platform showdown  
Rachel Bennett *The Oxford Student* 26 April 2007

Academics call for unfettered free speech  
*Guardian* 6 December 2006

Cabinet rethinks race hate laws after jury frees BNP leaders  
*Guardian* 11 November 2006

New terror law comes into force  
*BBC News* 13 April 2006

Adding their voice to the debate  
*Guardian* 4 April 2006

Hundreds join free speech rally  
*BBC News* 25 March 2006

Campus storm over 'racist' don  
*Observer* 5 March 2006

Ministers urge action on campus extremism  
*Guardian* 20 July 2005

6 of 7

NOTES

## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas & Pfizer Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

[www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

## FIND OUT MORE

Debating Matters engages a wide range of individuals, from the students who take part in the debates, the diverse group of professionals who judge for us, the teachers who train and support their debaters, and the young people who go on to become Debating Matters Alumni after school and help us to continue to expand and develop the competition. If you enjoyed using this Topic Guide, and are interested in finding out more about Debating Matters and how you can be involved, please complete this form and return it to us at the address below.

Debating Matters Competition  
Academy of Ideas Ltd  
Signet House  
49-51 Farringdon Road  
London  
EC1M 3JP

- Yes, I'd like to know more. Please send me further information about the Debating Matters Competition:
- I am a teacher and would like further details about events in my area and how to enter a team
- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
- Other (please specify)

First name

Surname

School/company/  
organisation

Professional role  
(if applicable)

Address

Postcode

Email address

School/work phone

Mobile phone



**“DEBATING MATTERS  
TEACHES A WAY  
OF THINKING.  
INTELLECTUAL  
ARCHITECTURE  
IS CREATED BY  
ENGAGING WITH  
IDEAS”**

**TRISTRAM HUNT, HISTORIAN & BROADCASTER**

