

**MAY 2017**

---

**NO PLATFORM**

---

**ANWAR  
ODURO-KWARTENG**



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

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

**MOTION:**

**“NO PLATFORM  
POLICIES DAMAGE  
FREE SPEECH”**

## ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas 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.

# SUPPORTED BY

### PRIMARY FUNDER



### HEADLINE PRIZE SPONSOR



### REGIONAL SPONSORS



### CHAMPIONS



### QUALIFYING ROUND SPONSOR



### TOPIC GUIDE SPONSOR



### ALUMNI CHAMPION



### VENUE PARTNERS



# CONTENTS

**Introduction**

**Key terms**

**The no platform debate in context**

**Essential reading**

**Audio/Visual**

**Backgrounders**

**Organisations**

**In the news**

## KEY TERMS

[Harm principle](#)

[No Platform](#)

# INTRODUCTION

1 of 6

# NOTES

1  
1  
2  
4  
4  
5  
6  
6

This spring, students at the University of Oxford called for Radio 4 presenter Jenni Murray to be refused permission to speak at the Oxford Literary festival [Ref: [The Times](#)], because of comments she made regarding the transgender community [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. Although Murray still spoke at the festival, this was the latest incident in which attempts have been made to prevent controversial speakers from having a platform on university campuses. Conservative commentators such as Milo Yiannopoulos [Ref: [Guardian](#)] and Ann Coulter [Ref: [New York Times](#)], as well as civil rights campaigner Peter Tatchell [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and feminist Germaine Greer [Ref: [BBC News](#)], have all had speaking invitations rescinded in the UK and America, because of the offensive views they are said to hold. As such, the debate surrounding the parameters of free speech, and who should and shouldn't be afforded a platform to air their views, has become hotly contested. Supporters of no platform policies claim that: "Free expression is not and has never been limitless" [Ref: [Independent](#)], and argue that restrictions to free speech in some circumstances are necessary, and that student unions and other institutions do not have an obligation to offer people a platform, because "free speech means the right to speak, not the right to a college platform." [Ref: [New Republic](#)] For critics though, the phenomena of no platforming is indicative of a dangerous diminishing of the public sphere, where people are no longer free to express their opinions, and where students are protected from challenging ideas [Ref: [spiked](#)]. And although: "Many think the best way to tackle racism, sexism, or any other idea of which they disapprove, is simply to silence its proponents" [Ref: [The Times](#)], critics of no platform policies maintain that: "The free interchange of ideas must win out" [Ref: [New Statesman](#)] in order for us to live in a plural, tolerant and free society. Do no platform policies threaten free speech on campus?



# THE NO PLATFORM DEBATE IN CONTEXT

2 of 6

NOTES

## No platform - then, and now

Defined as preventing people who hold views that are unacceptable or offensive from contributing to a public debate or meeting [Ref: [Oxford Dictionaries](#)], no platform policies were first instituted in the UK in 1974 by the National Union of Students (NUS), and were intended to isolate the National Front and other political organisations that were known to incite racism and violence [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. At the time, it was thought that debating fascist organisations like the National Front in a public forum would legitimise their views, and render them respectable and mainstream. But today, it could be argued that the policy has been expanded – with some suggesting that rather than using no platform policies against far right political parties, it is now also directed against individuals who they disagree with. And for columnist Sarah Ditung, this is hugely problematic for free speech, because: “The ability to debate competing viewpoints is one of the foundations of democratic society, and as dissent is elevated to the status of offence and then to hate speech, the consequences become alarming.” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)] On the other hand, supporters are quick to point out that: “Freedom of expression is not an unchanging absolute” [Ref: [New York Times](#)], meaning that society has to continually appraise the parameters of speech, and no platform is an extension of these value judgements. Therefore, a key aspect of the discussion is assessing the value of public debate – are all opinions of an equal worth, or are some beyond the pale?

## Free speech, no ifs no buts?

According to critics, no platform policies on campus do not just have implications for students, but for wider society, because: “What is at stake is...free debate, the process by which good ideas trump bad ones” [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. They argue that the principle of free expression and debate is fundamental to an open society, forming the basis of progress, liberalism and democracy, as “free speech is only working properly if you can still hear the people you don’t agree with.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] And in an atmosphere where as many as 63% of university students support no platform policies in the UK [Ref: [Oxford Student](#)], some are concerned that basic Enlightenment principles are being lost, in an attempt to protect young people from ideas that they may find offensive or disagree with [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. For columnist Matthew D’Ancona, this is a mistake, because in a plural society in which people are free to hold controversial opinions, we need more robust debate, not less. And in order to counter people whose views they disagree with, students need to “take them on, repeatedly, in every conceivable setting” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], rather than no platform them. As an example, writer Alex Massie suggests that it was the controversial appearance of former BNP leader Nick Griffin on Question Time in 2009, which began the demise of the party – as his views were given a platform, and his ideas were openly debated and rejected [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Similarly, others critique the policy of no platform as being the very anathema of free speech – deciding who can and can’t speak, whose voice should or shouldn’t be heard, based on who you do or do not agree with, does not create an environment ripe for the free-flowing exchange of ideas, they argue. As one free speech advocate points out: “Universities



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

3 of 6

NOTES

are supposed to be where the ideas of the future are forged... University is supposed to be a place of debate and learning. If students can't handle the clash of ideas in a place as safe and cosy as their own campus, how will they fare when they leave university?" [Ref: [spiked](#)] Furthermore, others caution that no platform policies are the result of identity politics, and state that controversial ideas shouldn't be seen as dangerous to students, because "feeling uncomfortable, threatened, unsafe or offended...do not constitute harm." [Ref: [Aeon](#)]

### Free speech and the public good

Former president of the NUS Malia Bouattia, argues that no platform policies are not censorship or a threat to free speech, and are grounded in the philosophical harm principle established by John Stuart Mill [Ref: [Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy](#)]. Echoing Mill, she says that: "Freedom of speech exists insofar as it does not infringe upon the rights of others. If freedom of expression is a universal right for all, it is necessary that it is not used to deprive the rights of others." [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)] In this way, Bouattia claims that giving views which could be considered openly racist or homophobic a stage, risks legitimising them, and infringes on the safety of vulnerable or minority groups on campus [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)], because: "Speech has consequences", and certain types of speech, "cause real, measurable damage" [Ref: [Patheos](#)]. Similarly, activists point to the recent incident at Middlebury College in America, in which controversial author of the 'Bell Curve' Charles Murray, had a speech shut down by protesters due to his views on racial hierarchy [Ref: [Washington Post](#)]. Supporters argue that his research is used by racists to legitimise their opinions on black

and Latino inferiority, and that it is granting individuals like him speaking opportunities, rather than no platform policies, which are the real threat to liberal values [Ref: [Slate](#)]. Others reject the notion that everyone must be given a platform in order for their views to be refuted, and academic Ulrich Baer observes that: "The idea of free speech does not mean a blanket permission to say anything anybody thinks" [Ref: [New York Times](#)]. He argues that free speech is a public good, and "that means balancing the inherent value of a given view, with the obligation to ensure that other members of a given community can participate in discourse as fully recognised members of that community", and if "those views invalidate the humanity of some people, they restrict speech as a public good." [Ref: [New York Times](#)] An example of this in action, is when students at Brunel University walked out on media personality Katie Hopkins last autumn [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. They defended their actions by arguing that on balance her views are not worth engaging with, as they add nothing intellectually to serious debates taking place in society [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. So, is it vital for free speech that all opinions are given a platform so that they can be scrutinised and interrogated? Or are no platform advocates right to assert that some opinions are so offensive, divisive and harmful, that "there is no inherent value to be gained from debating them in public" [Ref: [New York Times](#)]?



## ESSENTIAL READING

[Ten arguments for and against no platforming](#)

Eric Heinze *Free speech debate* 1 March 2016

[Only the most obnoxious of speakers should be banned on campus](#)

Monica Richter *Aeon* 14 January 2016

[NUS' No platform policy](#)

*National Union of Students*

## FOR

[Students can't be allowed to curb free speech](#)

Matt Ridley *The Times* 13 February 2017

[How no platforming works, and why it's doomed to fail](#)

Martin Daubney *Telegraph* 18 February 2016

[The intolerant student left has even turned on me – a lifelong civil rights campaigner](#)

Peter Tatchell *Telegraph* 15 February 2016

[No Platform was once reserved for violent fascists. Now it's been used to silence debate](#)

Sarah Ditum *New Statesman* 18 March 2014

## AGAINST

[Why colleges have a right to reject hateful speakers like Ann Coulter](#)

[Coulter](#)

Aaron R. Hanlon *New Republic* 24 April 2017

[What 'snowflakes' get right about free speech](#)

Ulrich Baer *New York Times* 24 April 2017

4 of 6

NOTES

[The kids are right](#)

Osita Nwanevu *Slate* 12 March 2017

[Why you shouldn't be outraged that over 60% of UK universities 'severely restrict free speech'](#)

Malia Bouattia *Independent* 14 February 2017

## IN DEPTH

[Safe spaces are not about political correctness](#)

Gus Cairns *Huffington Post* 5 June 2016

[Is free speech in British universities under threat?](#)

Andrew Anthony *Guardian* 24 January 2016

## AUDIO/VISUAL

[No Platform](#)

*BBC Radio 4* 12 November 2016

[The harm principle: how to live your life the way you want to](#)

*BBC History of Ideas* 7 November 2014



## BACKGROUNDERS

5 of 6

## NOTES

[Words which by their very utterance inflict injury](#)

Conor Friedersdorf *Atlantic* 19 April 2017

[Giving Yiannopoulos a platform puts actual lives at risk, especially children](#)

Dan Arel *Patheos* 20 February 2017

[Students flee reality, and the far right rises](#)

Trevor Phillips *The Times* 19 February 2017

[Campus censorship is a big deal](#)

Benedict Spence *spiked* 16 February 2017

[The narrative on university safe spaces and no platform couldn't be further from the truth](#)

Malia Bouattia *Huffington Post* 10 February 2017

[Milo Yiannopoulos is not being denied free speech – he just doesn't deserve a platform](#)

James Bloodworth *International Business Times* 7 February 2017

[There must be free speech, even for Milo Yiannopoulos](#)

Matthew D'Ancona *Guardian* 6 February 2017

[Students were right to walk out – Brunel is better than Katie Hopkins](#)

Ali Milani *Huffington Post* 26 November 2016

[Our house, our rules](#)

Token Dahler *Huffington Post* 19 November 2016

[When people of colour ban Boris its oppression](#)

Kehinde Andrews *Independent* 25 April 2016

[Why free speech always Trumps no platforming](#)

Barbara Ellen *Guardian* 3 April 2016

[If you don't like no platforming, maybe it's you who's the special 'snowflake'](#)

Sean Faye *Independent* 19 February 2016

[We must defend free debate in our universities](#)

*New Statesman* 18 February 2016

[Hurt feelings have replaced freedom of speech](#)

Alex Massie *The Times* 19 January 2016

[We'll lose something vital if we stop debate on campus and beyond](#)

Will Hutton *Guardian* 1 November 2015

[Why I believe no platforming Germaine Greer is the only option](#)

Payton Quinn *Huffington Post* 23 October 2015

[What's new about no platform mania?](#)

Mick Hume *spiked* 8 October 2015

[Why we might want to invite Marine Le Pen to Cambridge](#)

Jihno Clement *Huffington Post* 15 February 2013



## IN THE NEWS

[Conservative groups sue Berkeley over Ann Coulter cancellation](#)

*New York Times* 24 April 2017

[Bernie Sanders condemns threats against Ann Coulter speech at Berkeley](#)

*Huffington Post* 22 April 2017

[Ann Coulter invited by UC Berkeley after school finds 'protected venue'](#)

*Guardian* 20 April 2017

[Oxford protest fails to deter Radio 4 host from talk](#)

*The Times* 3 April 2017

[Oxford students try to gag Jenni Murray as 'transphobic'](#)

*The Times* 2 April 2017

[Jenni Murray: transgender women are not 'real women'](#)

*Telegraph* 5 March 2017

[A conservative author spoke at a Liberal arts college, and left fleeing an angry mob](#)

*Washington Post* 4 March 2017

[Peter Tachell snubbed by students for free speech stance](#)

*Guardian* 13 February 2017

[UC Berkeley cancel 'alt right' speaker Milo Yiannopoulos as thousands protest](#)

*Guardian* 2 February 2017

[The moment students turned their backs on Katie Hopkins' hate speech](#)

*Guardian* 26 November 2016

[Bristol student union under fire for attempting to no-platform philosopher](#)

*Independent* 8 November 2016

[NUS president Malia Bouattia defends safe spaces and no platforming at UK universities](#)

*Independent* 27 September 2016

[63% of university students support no platforming policy](#)

*Oxford Student* 1 May 2016

[Calls to ban Greer lecture over trans comments](#)

*BBC News* 23 October 2015

6 of 6

NOTES

## ORGANISATIONS

[National Union of Students \(NUS\)](#)



**NO PLATFORM:**

**“No platform policies damage free speech”**



© ACADEMY OF IDEAS LTD 2017

**DEBATING MATTERS**  
**WWW.DEBATINGMATTERS.COM**



## ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
GUIDES**

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

### FOR STUDENTS

#### READ EVERYTHING .....

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

#### STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

#### BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

#### DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

#### DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

### FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, [www.debatingmatters.com](http://www.debatingmatters.com)

### FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX  
WORLD REQUIRES  
THE CAPACITY  
TO MARSHALL  
CHALLENGING IDEAS  
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH  
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**