

Draft Minutes of
THE EMERGENCY MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE
6th Week Michaelmas Term 2018
Wednesday 1st October 2018
President's Office, 1:00

Present:

The President (Mr Stephen Horvath, *New College*), **The Librarian** (Ms Genevieve Athis, *Christ Church*), **The Treasurer** (Mr James Lamming, *Exeter College*), **The Secretary** (Mr Nick Brown, *Magdalen College*), **The Elected Member** (Ms Rebecca Collins, *Balliol College*), **The Elected Member** (Ms Sara Dube, *St Hugh's College*), **The Elected Member** (Ms Gemma Timmons, *Magdalen College*), **The Elected Member** (Mr Harry Webster, *Worcester College*), **The Elected Member** (Ms Anisha Faruk, *The Queen's College*), **The Elected Member** (Ms Mahi Joshi, *Trinity College*), **The Elected Member** (Mr Maxim Parr-Reid, *Trinity College*), **The Chair of the Consultative Committee** (Mr Patrick Cole, *Lady Margaret Hall*), **The Chair of the Debate Selection Committee** (Lee Chin Wee, *Trinity College*), **The President-Elect** (Mr Daniel Wilkinson, *Oriel College*), **The Librarian-Elect** (Mr Brendan McGrath, *Oriel College*), **The Treasurer-Elect** (Ms Amy Gregg, *Magdalen College*), **The Returning Officer** (Ms Louise Kandler, *Lady Margaret Hall*), **The Senior Librarian** (Mr Sean Power, *Oriel College*), **The Senior Treasurer** (Mr Stephen Dixon, *Downing College, Cambridge*), **The Bursar** (Ms Lindsey Warne), Mr Michael Li (Ex-President, *Magdalen College*), Mr Shanuk Mediawaka (Ex-Secretary, *Lincoln College*).

Attending:

Mr Hugh Bellamy (Secretary's Committee, *Lady Margaret Hall*), Mr Kofo Braithwaite (*Christ Church*), Mr Patrick Gwillim-Thomas (*The Queen's College*), Mr Adam Watson (Ex-Standing, *Hertford College*), Mr Conor O'Sheehan (*Merton College*), Mr Ray Williams, (Ex-Standing, *Wadham College*), Mr Alex Kumar, Ms Alyssa Nathanson-Tanner, Ms Grace Davis (*Hertford College*), Mr Tom Gould, Mr George Penny (DRO, *The Queen's College*), Mr David Graham (*St John's College*), Mr Samuel Burns (Ex-Secretary's Committee, *St John's College*), Mr Jack Hunter (*Wadham College*), Mr Stephen Marks (Ex-President), Mr Joe Inwood.

Apologies:

The President opens the meeting at 15.10.

To discuss and vote on whether the Standing Committee should direct the President to disinvite Steve Bannon

The President asks the signatories to the requisition to speak.

The Secretary introduces the character of Steve Bannon: a racist white nationalist on record claiming both sides were at fault in the Charlottesville march. He argues that Mr Bannon no longer holds his positions of influence. In contrast to Alice Weidel, he has no pre-existing platform - the Union would be providing him with one. He notes that the Standing Committee was not informed of this invitation, which was evidently a controversial one which the Standing Committee should have been able to consider. He laments that the event was announced, to the public and to the Standing Committee, a mere two days before the event.

The Treasurer-Elect notes that the purpose of the meeting is to discuss disinviting Steve Bannon, rather than strictly to disinvite him. She explains that the Standing Committee is held responsible for this type of decision, despite in this case it not being consulted. She concedes that we may not be privy to security details, but argues that we should have been consulted.

Ms Faruk argues that the speech of some infringes on the speech of others, particularly underrepresented voices. She claims it is a privilege, not a right, to speak at the Oxford Union - Mr Bannon therefore has no right to speak at the Union. She continues that to allow Mr Bannon to speak would make the Union complicit in the negative effects of his speech.

The Senior Librarian introduces himself, and notes that the Trustees are committed to the principle of free speech. He highlights the conditions which speakers must adhere to, including the requirement to accept questions. He says that the Trustees are satisfied that all these conditions are met in this case. He is concerned about the reputational risk to the Union of disinviting him. He argues that the Union is the best place to challenge Mr Bannon's views.

The President emphasises his wish not to speak at length, and explains his behaviour in relation to the event. The invitation to Mr Bannon was sent over the Summer, though it was not immediately accepted. A conversation took place with an aide explaining the possible formats of the event. He claims that the event was not included in the term card because the event had not been confirmed by the printing deadline. The event was confirmed in October, at which point the President revealed to sitting Officers that there would be an unnamed high profile American political speaker on a certain date. He notes that at this point no motion of Standing Committee mandated him to reveal the name. A slightly broader group of key committee members were informed at the beginning of November, at which time the announcement date was discussed. He reasons that he could not tell the Standing Committee, as its meetings are public and such a telling would constitute an announcement. He notes that he had no grounds to move the meeting *in camera*. He was confident that the Rules allow the President to choose speakers at his discretion. He discusses possible action that could be taken against him by dissatisfied Members. One is to bring a complaint of misconduct against him. Another is to move a formal motion of condemnation in The Standing Committee, which he claims the Members are welcome to do. Another is to change the Rules to mandate the President to reveal speaker names to The Standing Committee. He argues that disinviting Mr Bannon is not an appropriate action.

Mr Jack Hunter enters the room.

The Librarian says she largely agrees with Nick in his evaluation of Mr Bannon, and with Stephen's suggested recourse to changing the Rules to avoid this type of situation. She argues that the best method for dealing with such individuals is to challenge them in open debate, rather than letting their views fester undebated.

The Treasurer-Elect argues that, because the Union has no obligation to invite a speaker, it must make a cost-benefit analysis about inviting some speaker. This should include Member engagement, security costs, and so on. She argues that it is the Standing Committee who should properly be making this analysis. She continues that this analysis can still be made, even a day before the event.

The President agrees that a cost-benefit analysis should be made, and notes that the late stage of the decision should be counted as a cost.

Ms Faruk highlights the existing reputational damage to the Union of choosing to invite Mr Bannon in the first place.

The Treasurer asks the Treasurer-Elect why the Standing Committee is not typically consulted in the invitation of speakers.

The Treasurer-Elect responds that this would be a reasonable system, but that the Committee should nevertheless have the power to disinvite speakers after the fact.

The President says that he informed OLDUT of the invitation only because of his formal requirement to do so.

The Secretary argues that, merely because an individual spouts racist views, that does not make them 'representative' of those who hold those views in the meaningful sense. He agrees with Amy that there is a distinction between the handlings of the Weidel and Bannon events: the Standing Committee did not feel compelled to discuss disinviting Ms Weidel, despite advance notice being given. He notes that the President never mentioned that the unnamed high profile American speaker was never revealed to be controversial - he points to the many uncontroversial high profile speakers which could have been the one in question. He argues that the objective of the Union is not solely to protect free speech, but to contribute to the education of the Members. He further contends that Mr Bannon's event could never help to educate the Members.

The President argues for the principle of hosting such events as the Bannon address. He claims it is obvious that no one has a right to speak at the Union, and insists that the previous speakers make 'real arguments'. He walks through potential reasons for not wishing to host a speaker, including the fact that hosting the speaker would trigger some Members. He claims that Mr Bannon plays an important role in shaping American politics. He argues that these speakers are uniquely educational, because they exhibit underrepresented views. He claims that speakers with whom we disagree are educational, citing the Jordan Peterson event at the Union. He points to the intellectual value of critically digesting Mr Bannon's views. He argues, contradicting the Secretary, that he would in fact be able to hold Mr Bannon to account, claiming that he has performed well in his previous interviews with controversial speakers.

Mr Mediawaka notes that Mr Bannon has already been invited, and that this constitutes a substantial difference from deciding whether to invite him in the first place. He argues that Mr Bannon is still relevant - that, if the Standing Committee did not disagree with Bannon's views, they would be thrilled to host a former Chief Strategist to the White House.

The Senior Treasurer cites previous controversial speakers, noting that the buildings are still standing. He emphasises the value of challenging these speakers.

The President cites further controversial speakers who have visited the Union.

Ms Faruk argues that speakers may still be invited if they are done so on the basis not of their political views but because of their achievements in other fields. She continues that the BNP received a surge in support after their advocate appeared on TV, despite it being widely acknowledged that he had performed poorly in the TV debate. By providing a veneer of respectability, these platforms allow these speakers to draw support for their racist views. She points to cases where removing a platform for racist figures has successfully diminished their influence.

The Librarian contends that she was able successfully to question a recent controversial speaker. She laments that an event in the previous term saw a controversial speaker not adequately questioned, and expresses a desire that the Standing Committee have a role in formulating approaches to interviewing speakers.

Mr Watson claims that the Union is getting new Members as a result of inviting Mr Bannon.

The President-Elect contends that there have similarly been Members who have resigned their membership as a result of inviting Mr Bannon.

Ms Collins references the inadequate questioning of the Iranian Ambassador, and asks what measures the Standing Committee can take to ensure that the President is not similarly held to have inadequately questioned Mr Bannon.

The President argues that the President should not press speakers excessively when they lie.

Ms Collins agrees with this approach generally, but emphasises the risk that horrendous views are not sufficiently questioned - that there must be an infrastructure to ensure that Mr Bannon is held to account.

The President states that, if he is unable to get genuine responses from Mr Bannon, he will resign. He believes he can do this, and repeats that, if he fails in his trust to ask the right questions, he will resign. He notes that Mr Bannon enjoys debate, and being challenged.

Ms Joshi insists that the President consider the impact of hosting Mr Bannon, not just on the Members in the chamber, but on the broader world. Even where the Members critically digest Mr Bannon's views, nevertheless he is provided with a veneer of legitimacy.

Ms Faruk recalls decisions in the vac no to invite some speakers, and wonders why these standards were not applied to Mr Bannon.

The President replies that some speakers were not invited because they were implicated in ongoing legal issues, and that this would have prevented them from responding to questions.

The Secretary emphasises the results of this event: that the edifying questions from Members will not be disseminated, but rather Mr Bannon's atrocious views will be shared and celebrated.

The President claims that it is not the Union's job to counter the far right.

Mr Webster argues that Mr Bannon's invitation cannot be swept under the rug, that there will be coverage of the event either way. He regrets to say that he once held right-of-centre views, though he is now a supporter of the Green Party. He recalls that at the time any dismissal of right-wing speakers' views only served to entrench his support for them.

The President-Elect dwells on the extremely brief period of notice before the event, thereby preventing legitimate protesters from exercising their free speech right to protest the Bannon event.

The President expresses disappointment that the President-Elect previously advised him to announce on the Wednesday, rather than the Monday of 6th Week.

The President-Elect replies that he strongly advocated announcing the event much earlier, but that once it came to Sixth Week the necessary preparations simply had not been made and the announcement could not feasibly have occurred on Monday.

The President moves that TSC grant Conor O'Sheehan speaking rights

nem. con.

Mr O'Sheehan agrees that the Members can challenge Bannon, but insists that the far right instrumentalises debate to receive media attention. No one learns from these exchanges, but the far right figures become more serious, with a burnished reputation. He points to the damage to the Union's reputation of inviting Bannon.

Mr Marks recalls his invitation of Enoch Powell, that this was before his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech. He claims that after this speech he would not have invited Mr Powell. He abhors those who knowingly incite hatred, and exhorts the Committee not to spotlight those whose ideas are responsible for massacres. He sharply criticises the President for legitimizing the incitement of hatred against Jews, gay people, and other oppressed groups.

The President cites an Oxford politician who supports the platforming of Mr Bannon. He compared the situation to the visit of Malcolm X to the Union, arguing that because controversy changes speakers should not be shunned because we disagree with them. He specifically addresses the

consequences of disinviting Mr Bannon, including the possible increased difficulty of inviting other controversial speakers. He accuses the Standing Committee of using the issue to make a political point, and to receive positive attention before the election.

The Secretary moves that the Standing Committee direct the President to uninvite Steve Bannon

Seconded by the Librarian-Elect

The President moves to delay a vote on this motion for a further 15 minutes, to discuss the impact of disinviting the speaker

The motion passes with 8 for (Treasurer-Elect, Treasurer, President-Elect, President, Shanuk Mediawaka, Sara Dube, Harry Webster, Librarian); 6 against (Secretary, Anisha Faruk, Gemma Timmons, Librarian-Elect, Maxim Parr-Reid, Becky Collins).

Mr Mediawaka highlights the impact of disinviting a speaker on inflaming anti-establishment sentiment.

The President moves that TSC grant Cassandra Sullivan speaking rights

nem. con.

Ms Sullivan notes that the Oxford student body is overwhelmingly ideologically opposed to Mr Bannon, and therefore the Bannon event allows them to learn more about his views which, though they are opposed to, they ought to be familiar with. She argues that this brand of debate about disinvitations gives publicity to these speakers.

The Treasurer-Elect queries Ms Sullivan's claim to speak on behalf of SBS, asking if a vote has been held on the Bannon issue. She asks specifically whether opinions were solicited generally, or just among Ms Sullivan's friends.

Ms Sullivan responds that she has consulted a wide range of members.

The President moves that TSC grant Mr Kofo Braithwaite speaking rights

nem. con.

Mr Braithwaite claims that Mr Bannon has achieved an extremely influential position, and that his position is bolstered by being disinvited.

The President notes that a previous speaker echoed this view.

Mr Parr-Reid recalls an event which he found valuable, learning how to defeat far right politics.

The President moves that TSC grant Mr Samuel Burns speaking rights

nem. con.

Mr Burns argues for curiosity about far right politics.

The President moves that TSC grant Mr Patrick Gwillim-Thomas speaking rights

nem. con.

Mr Gwillim-Thomas argues that everyone has a right to receive information, and make a decision based on that.

The President moves that TSC grant Mr David Graham speaking rights

Mr Graham emphasises the spur to discussion the event will create.

Ms Collins asks how probing questions will be formulated without prior understanding of Mr Bannon's views.

Mr Graham reemphasises that post-event discussion will be vibrant.

The President argues that audience members will have prior knowledge of Bannon's views.

The CDSC argues that controversial speakers should not be invited when the views they represent do not constitute salient societal divides.

The Secretary moves that TSC direct the President to uninvite Steve Bannon

The motion fails with 6 for (Anisha Faruk, Librarian-Elect, Secretary, Becky Collins, Mahi Joshi, Gemma Timmons); 7 against (President, Librarian, Treasurer, Sara Dube, Shanuk Mediwaka, Maxim Parr-Reid, Harry Webster).

The President attempts to quote Milton.

Date of the Next Meeting

Monday 7st Week Michaelmas Term 2018 16:00, in the President's Office.

The President closes the meeting at 16.35

Signed,

Nick Brown
Magdalen College
Secretary