

# Minister Donelan addresses Policy Exchange

Good morning, and thank you for inviting me here to speak today. We have gathered today in support of freedom of speech – the cornerstone of Western democracy.

But supporting free speech is no longer enough. Free speech is now something that has to be defended.

It is a change of mindset for most of us who have grown up taking it for granted that we could express ourselves freely. After all, Britain is the home of free speech. Free speech is the beating heart on which all of our other freedoms rest.

And we are a country with a proud democratic history, where we settle differences of opinion through honest, open debate and the ballot box.

And we could not be in a more fitting setting to discuss these issues. Policy Exchange rightly prides itself on its independent, evidence-based research, whether on the pupil premium and free schools, to the importance of history, to our topic today – free speech and academic freedom.

I want to take a moment to thank you for all that you do to advance research, promote new ideas and deliver a stronger society. And I would also like to thank Lord Godson for his personal championing of this important issue.

You have, for many years raised alarm at the growing, real threat, that academic freedom in these institutions is being undermined in a way that endangers our entire democracy.

For hundreds of years, universities have been instrumental in promoting our traditions and our values. They have played a role in fostering debate, sharing ideas – even if contentious – and they have advanced society in the process.

Many of the fundamental ideas that helped to build today's society were once considered controversial, fringe ideas that only reached prominence through open debate on the campuses of universities up and down the country.

Where would we be now if the views of 100 or 200 years ago had never been challenged? As a woman, I doubt I would be an MP, let alone Minister for Higher and Further Education.

But, sadly, where once we found critical debate and arguments were won on their merits, today we see an upsurge in physical threats and complete intolerance of opposing ideas.

We witness examples of professors being harangued and hounded out of their jobs. We see prominent, well-respected, guests no platformed. We find

academics self-censoring themselves out of fear.

Progress is no longer considered progress unless it conforms to an increasingly narrow ideology. And let's be honest for a moment, successive governments have not put up enough of a fight. There has been a lot of talk and warm words, but not nearly enough solid action.

I am here today to tell you that this government is different. We are putting pen to paper in legislative action to once and for all challenge the forces that shut debate down. We are standing up for free speech and the open exchange of ideas in our universities like never before.

I will make sure each of our universities remains a fortress of ideas, putting an end to the nonsense of cancel culture by wielding the crucial majority that the British people gave us, and fulfilling their wishes for a more open, fairer and freer Britain. But before I go onto the specifics of this ground-breaking Bill, let me tell you why this is so important to me personally.

Like many people who were the first in their family to go to university, for me university was about more than learning. It was an experience that gave me the confidence to go out into the world knowing I had a world-class, high-quality education under my belt. And something I ask myself now is: would I be able to say that if free speech was not such an intrinsic element of our universities?

Look at the list of the Top 100 universities in the world. Overwhelmingly the world's best universities are in countries that rank highly on the free speech index.

In fact, the entire top 10 on this list are found in countries with strong free speech scores. It is absolutely no coincidence that what keeps the United Kingdom and United States so dominant in higher education is our commitment to academic freedom.

Authoritarian countries limit their students to a narrow view of the world and teach their students what to think rather than how to think. And they pay a hefty price for it in the long run.

Who would you rather employ? An inquisitive, critical, open minded graduate, or a self-constrained cookie cutter graduate who is afraid to be challenged or confront new ideas?

The answer for me, and I am sure you too, is obvious. But I worry that if we allow ourselves to drift toward a more narrow definition of free speech, we risk going down that same dark path as those other countries and compromising what makes our universities world class.

Imagine the harm to aspiring young people if they grow up seeing their universities drop out of the top rankings, or find themselves unable to conduct world-leading research because the funding is going to more open countries. And the damage that the erosion of free speech causes goes well beyond the classroom.

It hits our communities, where ingenuity and diversity of ideas have flowed from throughout our country's history.

It stifles creativity, where some of our greatest artists and composers have made their name challenging the accepted wisdom of the day. The implications for our economy and our public life are catastrophic.

I find it completely deplorable that, last year, balaclava-clad protestors forced a female academic, Kathleen Stock to stay off campus under threats of physical violence.

Nor was this an isolated event. Just a few weeks later, the Israeli Ambassador was hounded by an intolerant mob outside an LSE event – facing threats and insults that no other foreign diplomat faces in the UK.

We are not talking here about peaceful protest, the right to which is sacrosanct. We are talking about threats, intimidation and harassment; the shutting down of free speech by violence and threats of violence.

Activities which, too often, university leadership turns a blind eye to and does not do enough to stop. Here at Policy Exchange, you know as well as anyone does, about this change in the culture in our universities over recent years.

Policy Exchange polling shows that a number of current and retired academics choose to self-censor. The survey found that 32% of those who identify as 'fairly right' or 'right' have refrained from airing views in teaching and research.

This is not a party-political issue: around 15% of those identifying as 'centre' or 'left' have also been self-censoring.

In addition, 200 academics reported last year that they were receiving death threats and abuse, simply for expressing views and crucially, that they did not feel supported by their universities.

This intolerant few have decided that protecting people from offence is more important than advancing human knowledge. They have decided that violence is a justifiable response to words. And ultimately, they have decided that their freedoms are more important than the freedoms of those sitting across from them.

It is sadly ironic, that humanity has never had greater access to a diverse range of opinions than we do today, yet we have to take action against people trying to limit that diversity. So let me take a moment to inform the intolerant few that their brief period of power is over.

I have no hesitation in saying that diversity of opinion is just as important as diversity of background. Freedom to disagree is just as important as freedom to agree.

And democracy does not end at the gates of your echo chamber. As a government we have taken unprecedented steps to protect students' welfare, whether it is

by stamping out sexual harassment and antisemitism, by tackling poor mental health and by supporting the most disadvantaged through opportunity.

We believe that exposing students to robust exchanges of views doesn't harm their welfare, it helps make them strong, confident and engaged citizens, with curiosity and intellectual drive.

It gives them the education that I benefitted from when I went to university. As I started with today, we have a long tradition of free speech in this country, and legal protections are already in place.

But the evidence shows those protections are not strong enough – there is no effective means of enforcement.

We need to enhance and extend them, as one part of changing the wider culture.

Attempts to erode free speech need to be challenged head-on, which is what the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill will do. Yesterday, a motion was passed to enable it to be carried over to the next session of this Parliament – a restatement of this government's intention to legislate on this hugely important issue, fulfilling our manifesto promise to the British people.

The Bill will put a duty on universities to promote free speech and academic freedom, not just protect it. It will put a duty directly on Students' Unions to protect free speech.

And it will establish a new Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom on the Office for Students Board – with the power to fine universities, colleges and students' unions and recommend real redress for those who have had their speech unlawfully restricted. And it will provide a new legal tort as a critical backstop, offering a direct route to redress for individuals who have suffered loss due to a breach of the freedom of speech duties.

It is a Bill that is already, being improved and honed by freedom of speech in Parliament as we speak. From ensuring a wide definition of academic freedom, to being explicit that constituent colleges of higher education providers are bound by it, this is going to be a Bill that the rest of the world will take note of.

Our friends in the House of Lords know first hand how important free speech is, and I know that they will have much to say on this subject – I look forward to hearing the expertise they will bring.

But let's not kid ourselves, this is not just about what happens in Parliament or what happens in lecture halls.

We need to effect a culture change that will reverberate through the sector, from the SU bar right up to the Vice Chancellor's office. And let me be clear, this is not an issue for Vice Chancellors to shy away from. Frankly, this is not an issue that they will be allowed to shy away from.

And many are already joining us on the path to progress.

I would like to thank Universities UK for how constructive they have been in bringing together Vice Chancellors and sharing their insight with us. And In March this year, Professor Antony Long, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost at the University of Durham, rejected calls by students to dismiss an academic and made clear that everyone is welcome to speak on its campus.

And at Cambridge University, a grass roots campaign by staff led to the rejection of an attempt to impose a restrictive speech code on the university and instead upheld our country's proud tradition of free speech.

So Vice Chancellors, university staff, and students: do not be on the wrong side of history. Do not allow the history books to record your name as part of the small cabal of the intolerant.

Look ahead and be part of a freer, fairer and more tolerant future. Because we do have further to go. The high profile cancellations and dismissals are just the tip of the iceberg in a broader culture of self-censorship.

Now more than ever, it is imperative that we ensure our universities are free from dogma and undue influence from states that wish to curb our freedoms. The war in Ukraine is a conflict between democracy and autocracy. It is the result of a criminal, barbaric invasion of a sovereign country, by one ruled tyrannically.

It is a reminder to all of us of the ancient liberties that we in Britain hold dear and that underpin our freedom. In the Commons, the opposition to this Bill has been fractured and incoherent.

They have veered from saying it's unnecessary and bureaucratic in one breath, to claiming in the next that it doesn't go far enough. Others have tried to attack the idea of free speech itself, pointing to the most extreme examples of its misuse.

So let me be clear: there is nothing in this legislation which will give anyone the right to harass, intimidate, abuse or promote violence or terrorism.

And I am thankful that the sector as a whole has been so supportive of this issue. Getting this right has a direct impact on many of the issues this Government wants to address.

Freedom of Expression is integral to our proposals for the reform of the Human Rights Act – a strong British tradition that we are determined to uphold in our own laws.

We've committed to legislating to prevent public bodies shutting down freedoms through politically motivated boycotts and sanctions.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Justice Secretary Dominic Raab has already outlined plans that will protect against free speech being "whittled away" by what he rightly calls "wokery and political correctness".

These are the important issues that the public has entrusted this Government to tackle.

So, I am sure you will share my frustration that when there are so many real problems to address: from abuse on campus; to the use of NDAs to silence victims of sexual harassment and bullying; to poor quality outcomes; that we then hear about reports of staff time going into putting 'trigger warnings' on Harry Potter and 1984 or earnest working groups discussing whether to cancel historical figures such as Isaac Newton, Francis Drake or William Gladstone.

Instead of silencing the views of those who we disagree with, I go back to my view that each university should be a marketplace of ideas.

A place where we assess arguments on their merits, not on their popularity. A place where it is not just safe to debate, but where students and academics are encouraged to do so. A place where we advance our society by challenging ourselves and our views.

And ultimately a place where we live by the words of Evelyn Beatrice Hall, namely, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it"

I am confident that this Bill strikes the right balance, that it is a proportionate and necessary step to tackle the emerging culture that will otherwise threaten our higher education system and hold people back.

Like the British public, I believe that students and lecturers should not be silenced. This is not about the right and left.

The people who suffer when free speech is restricted are those without power. The poorest, most disadvantaged, minority groups.

History tells us that whatever short-term gains can be gained from suppressing free speech they do not last.

To quote Frederick Douglass, he called free speech, 'the great moral renovator of society and government,' and, 'Of all rights, the dread of tyrants – it is the right which they first of all strike down.'

Which is why this Government is one that is prepared to stand up for free speech. And why I remain committed to this Bill, and I am looking forward to its return to the Commons in the next session, and its passage through the House of Lords.

Thank you.