

Speaking at the Cambridge Union: Julian Assange and the Village Gossipers

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*“As always, it seems Julian Assange has exposed divisions right in the heart of the establishment.” James Wells and Adam Crafton, *The Tab*, Oct 11, 2015*

When will these village gossipers understand that a platform for speech has rarely anything to do with a person’s character so much as ideas? The gallery of history’s personalities are filled with the unpalatable and questionable. The question then falls for those debating unions at prestigious universities as to whether a certain person should, or should not, speak.

It was just a matter of time before Julian Assange’s name made an appearance as a possible suggestion for the Cambridge Union’s speaker list, a debating society that advertises itself as the oldest in the world, the largest in Cambridge, and one “celebrating 200 years of free speech and the art of debating.”

The result of even having Assange as a consideration certainly tested the free speech aspect of the body, having precipitated what is often termed in institutional circles a “meltdown” among committee members. It is unclear whether Assange was the cause of it, but there is little doubt that he cast his disruptive shadow from the Ecuadorean embassy.

The Union committee on Friday decided after a prolonged six hour discussion to go ahead with an online referendum which will be held on October 22. It reads: “Do you agree with that the Cambridge Union should host Julian Assange via video link on November 11th at 7pm?”

The Women’s Officer, Helen Dallas, had a sanctimonious moment over the affair and resigned. There were suggestions that she might have been prompted to ask questions of Assange during proceedings. A spate of resignations also followed, though it is by no means clear whether these were related to Assange.[1]

Oliver Mosley, the term’s President, gave an insight into the committee’s world. “Many suggestions were made to make the hypothetical event as balanced a forum as possible to ensure marginalised voices were heard, including asking the CUSU Women’s Officer to ask the first question.” Perhaps potential GCHQ and MI5 recruits might have been asked as well – they, no doubt, feel marginalised in a WikiLeaks-Snowden world.

Let us take the obvious point that seems to have troubled committee members: Assange’s character. The Cambridge Union is hardly alien to presenters unsavoury and unpleasant. Former terrorists, outcasts and activists have taken the podium.

Then come the self-censorship platforms that decide to quash discussion because of a

suggestion, rumours, or allegations. Such gossiping tendencies even afflict forums with a two hundred year history dedicated to “free speech”. The suggestion that someone with Assange’s resume should surrender himself willingly to Swedish authorities on allegations that are themselves suspect is the height of clean linen absurdity. This attitude is outrageously naïve, suggesting an objective, uninfected legal approach to a political, and politicised figure.

Even the Swedish Court of Appeal found in 2014 that the prevaricating prosecutor in the case had breached her duty in refusing to progress with questioning Assange after 5 years. But appearances in the world of village gossip have little to do with evidence. Hints, suggestions, and rumours, tend to have the gangly legs, while leaden facts languish. And sex, or allegations as to how it is engaged in, have the longest ones.

Whether the village gossipers hold sway over allowing Assange to speak at the Cambridge Union is not a trivial point. It is the same tactical line that intelligence agencies, bureaucracies and corporations use to kill conversation and noisy queries. Do not trust Chelsea Manning because of gender confusions. Do not trust Edward Snowden because he is a plant and fled to Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Do not trust Assange because he might, just might, have pressed the flesh in Sweden, irrespective of a notoriously muddied, bungled case. Besides, he is a bolter.

More to the point, it is the personalising of an individual’s character that is used against their ideas and merit, if those ideas even fly with the establishment. This is the whistleblower’s dilemma, to have the message obscured by allegations of dubious credit and personal deficiency. Forget the pertinent information; forget revelations of the uninhibited surveillance establishment, gross violations of privacy or hidden atrocities. The village gossip’s brief trivialises and ultimately dismisses.

The Cambridge Union’s Assange affair also casts light on another dangerous trend that seems to have radiated through university campuses (though Oxbridge shuns the term). It is an aversion to ideas whose time, in such circles, are said not to have come. There is a voluntary self-cleansing of the ideas stable. Cathedrals of learning are having their altars stripped.

University class rooms are now replete with “trigger warnings” – will you be offended by a graphic image in class, or a text in the vernacular that might turn your middle class sensibility into black pudding? Campus culture, as Laura Kipnis suggested in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* back in February, is riddled with the politics of sexual paranoia, “offensive environment” guidelines, humour policing and a general indifference to converse with the dangerous.[2]

Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt have also taken that baton up in September’s issue of *The Atlantic*, noting how, “A movement [in US colleges] is arising, undirected and even driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.”[3]

Complaints are made by the sensitivity mafia that certain subjects should not be taught – no “rape law” for the faint hearted please. Only a highly streamlined form of comedy is tolerated – sensitive college students have become the humourless vanguard in holding comedians at bay, with Chris Rock and Jerry Seinfeld noting the constipated air of “non-offensive” culture on campuses.

So, for those getting online to vote later this month, consider how not allowing Assange to speak might just be a total acquiescence, not merely to the dystopia of the mindless regulated university run by behavioural juntas and speculative gossips, but to State powers who do not see the public as worthy citizens so much as submissive, monitored, and ultimately daft subjects.

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Notes

[1] <http://thetab.com/uk/cambridge/2015/10/11/resignations-revealed-is-the-union-in-meltdown-58219>

[2] <http://chronicle.com/article/Sexual-Paranoia/190351/>

[3] <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>

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