

## **We mustn't lose sight of upholding our right to free speech**

From what I see in the news it seems that debates at university are not nearly as much fun as they were some years ago! As a student of Politics and Economics at the University of Edinburgh, I participated in debates about political ideology, feminism, issues of race and much more, and enjoyed the experience immensely.

Although there were, undoubtedly, outrageous comments made during the course of such debates, I wouldn't have said that the debates themselves were controversial. In fact, I would say that they were doing precisely what they were supposed to be doing for us as undergraduates – **“developing our moral and debating muscles”**.

Even when a fellow student seemed to hold a deeply unpopular or inflammatory opinion, they were permitted to make their point. We were also permitted to make a personal value judgement about them and their opinions based on the image of themselves they were presenting, and to choose whether to challenge their view, to try to change their mind, or to try to understand more about why they held such opinions.

It goes without saying, but there is a very important difference between saying something that is unpopular or offensive – take the topic of abortion, or whether a country should go to war – and saying something that is illegal – denying the holocaust or inciting violence. Making the distinction between the two is often not straight-forward. What is straight-forward, though, is that we mustn't make the mistake of putting our commitment to upholding our right to free speech on the back burner, as we pursue moral and earnest attempts to also protect people from unnecessary offence. A case in point is the extension of university 'No Platform' policies to avoid causing offence (rather than to avoid giving a platform to proscribed groups, as was the intention of such policies) for instance, **the University of Cape Town rescinded an invitation to the journalist who commissioned the Danish cartoons of Mohammad**.

Clearly times have changed since I was an undergraduate; we could discuss the merits of Marxism, for instance, in relative safety. We didn't have to worry about our views being quoted on social media, and the potential of being labelled forever more as a communist. 'Safe spaces' at universities are a current hot topic but, instead of providing students with a place in which to conduct such debates about difficult or potentially controversial ideas without fear of repercussion, as I was fortunate to enjoy, these 'safe spaces' are intended to provide people with a place to discuss issues without having people disagree with them, or offend them with their retort. A culture has developed in which people are now hesitant to share their personal opinions – from how they voted in the EU referendum, perhaps, to how they might vote on the topic of same sex marriage – for fear of losing their job, or social standing. Teachers and lecturers are not immune, and are often anxious to share their own opinions even within the context of a topical debate or **even when invited to by students**.

In life, everyone needs somewhere to retreat to, or a group of people to feel comfortable with, but this human need shouldn't be at odds with the equally important need to develop the cognitive ability to challenge assumptions – our own and others' – to defend our views in an intelligent way, and to critically analyse what is being presented to us by others. People can already choose whether to engage in a particular debate that is taking place, or how honest they wish to be in presenting their own views. But altering the practice of open

debates at universities, replacing it with discussions in safe spaces with a group of very like-minded people, presents a very different problem of its own.

Despite our efforts at creating an inoffensive society through political correctness, class divides are still as apparent as ever, and people from ethnic minorities still have fewer opportunities. Yet people are more aware – of terms of offence, of discrimination, of inequality – and perhaps for this reason the younger generation comes across as more sensitive. But an environment of political correctness and an underlying assumption that young people are ‘too easily’ offended may well drive people with worrying views deeper underground. If it becomes the norm that people cannot openly talk about their opinions for fear of repercussion, and so fascist opinions, for example, are only spoken about within a small group of like-minded individuals, how can we hope to offer an alternative view or to unpick these ideologies before they take root and gain momentum?

Bjorn Ihler, a survivor of the 22 July 2011 Norway terror attack on the island of Utøya, campaigns to get more people talking about extremism. His attacker, far-right extremist Anders Breivik, wrote a ‘manifesto’ which Ihler read within a week or so of the attack taking place. Ihler, surprised at its contents, reflected that “[Breivik’s] worldview was not purely driven by hatred... it was much more about a fear of what was happening to his society”.

Despite Ihler and Breivik having similar backgrounds they clearly hold very different world views, which prompted Ihler to make the point that, if Breivik had had better opportunities to discuss ideologies at school, like he had himself, “things could have been very different”. He now seeks out extremists and former extremists in order to better understand their motivations and argues that teachers have a fundamental role to play in encouraging students to share and debate ideas in the classroom, however unpleasant, so that individuals are not able to develop such ingrained extremist ideologies unchecked. He says “students need to learn to analyse the information they receive, and to understand that there are many ways to interpret information” and that he would like to see “teaching [of] critical thinking or philosophy in every school”.

This makes complete sense. It’s only when we are exposed to and given an opportunity to investigate and understand controversial viewpoints that we can hold a meaningful conversation, or public debate, and have any real hope of changing opinion, or gaining a better understanding of the people behind these opinions.

But is this possible in schools and universities today? On Ihler’s point that we need people to talk about extremism more, we have to recognise the associated risks of encouraging children to do so. **Schools have a duty to report young people who show a particular level of interest in or support for extremism** under the Prevent strategy, so how can we really encourage young people to learn to develop their debating muscles and to think critically about such important issues as terrorism – from the IRA to ETA to ISIS to right wing extremists – without recognising that to do so requires us to take on the persona of someone who has been radicalised, to see what is behind this?

Well, one of the very best opportunities we have is to increase the teaching of political principles and ideologies to all children, so that there is more widespread understanding of society at large. Another is to replicate the sorts of debating societies that we have at schools like Gresham’s. These provide a genuine safe space where children can enjoy the

sort of debating experience I had at university. They can develop the skills of critiquing and presenting arguments and, as they can be assigned a particular view to argue, and inspired by the competitive element of winning the debate, they can develop these skills free from the pressure of putting forward their own viewpoints, and the potential repercussions outlined above of doing so. Everyone involved can hear the breadth of opposing arguments and can gain a deeper understanding of an issue, without any one student being singled out for having an unpopular, offensive, or deeply concerning opinion.

While we mustn't lose sight of upholding our right to free speech, as educators we need to go even further and recognise our role in guiding children through the process of deciding what it is they want to say, and developing and practising the skills to do so effectively, at a time when, more than ever, they also need to be very careful about what they say.