

5 July 2025

## **Recommended free speech candidates in Cambridge Chancellorship election**

### **Summary**

- Cambridge alumni can vote in the upcoming election for the Chancellorship of Cambridge University to support candidates who stand for the protection of free speech, and thus demonstrate that free speech matters to alumni.
  - Alumni For Free Speech (“**AFFS**”) has written to the candidates requesting information about their position on free speech.
  - Based on AFFS’ review and analysis of candidates’ responses, the **candidates among the apparent frontrunners** for the Chancellorship who **AFFS and The Free Speech Union (“FSU”)** **jointly recommend** to those who care about free speech are (in alphabetical order):
    - **Lord (John) Browne**
    - **Dr Mohamed El-Erian**
  - **Other candidates who appear to be strong free speech supporters** and who appear to be the most suitable to support are identified below.
  - Given that neither of the preferred front-runners is hugely ahead of the other in free speech terms, effective use of transferable votes is likely to be critical. Whichever candidate alumni initially vote for, we also recommend that they ensure that their **transferable vote goes at some stage to (ideally) both Lord Browne and Dr El-Erian, or at least to one of them.**
  - *Our recommendations are based solely on factors relating to free speech protection. We are politically neutral as regards the candidates.*
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Cambridge alumni can vote in the upcoming election for the Chancellorship of Cambridge University to support candidates who stand for the protection of free speech and academic freedom, and thus demonstrate that free speech matters to alumni.

AFFS has written to the candidates requesting information about their position on free speech. AFFS' letter can be [found here](#).

All candidates were asked the same questions. These are set in the Appendix below (with some additional comments) and [can also be found here](#).

AFFS has shared its questions and the answers it received, and its review of those answers, with other organisations committed to free speech at universities.

This document sets out the **joint recommendations of AFFS and the FSU**, based on AFFS' review and analysis of the candidates' responses, to those Cambridge graduates thinking of voting in the Chancellorship election and for whom candidates' commitment to free speech and academic freedom is an important consideration.

*Our recommendations are based solely on factors relating to free speech protection. We are politically neutral as regards the candidates.* Other factors will, of course, matter to individual voters. It is not for us to comment or give recommendations regarding wider considerations, and we do not do so.

## **Recommended candidates based on their support for free speech**

The **candidates among the apparent frontrunners** for the Chancellorship who we recommend to those who care about free speech are (in alphabetical order):

**Lord (John) Browne of Madingley**

**Dr Mohamed El-Erian**

**Other candidates who appear to be strongest free speech supporters** and who appear to be the most suitable to support are (in alphabetical order):

**Dr Ayham Ammora**

**Professor Wyn Evans**

Given that neither of the preferred front-runners is hugely ahead of the other in free speech terms, **effective use of transferable votes is likely to be critical**. Whichever candidate alumni initially vote for, we also recommend that they ensure that their **transferable vote goes at some stage to (ideally) both of Lord Browne and Dr El-Erian, or at least to one of them**.

Some candidates have not engaged with our detailed questions, and some have shown signs of not understanding aspects of the problem, or being less supportive of (or even in practice hostile to) the effective protection of free speech at our universities in some areas at least. An example of this is whether they agreed with the need for a senior, non-conflicted free speech officer to advocate for and work to protect free speech at Cambridge. Another example is their

responses to questions relating to the interaction of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (“EDI”) agendas and free speech, and the regular infringements of the latter in the name of the former.

AFFS has shared this report with other organisations committed to free speech at universities.

## **Our process and the responses: comments on the candidates from a free speech perspective**

The information below is based on AFFS’ review and analysis of candidates’ responses, candidate statements and any other public information available to us.

Most, but not all, of the candidates replied to AFFS’ questions. Some replied specifically to AFFS’ questions, and some with more general statements. Information on the replies and candidates’ positions regarding free speech is set out below, with links to their replies where given. Where candidates preferred to submit more general statements, AFFS has given its thoughts on this.

It will in the end be for the reader to form their own views about the candidates’ seriousness about protecting free speech and knowledge of the relevant issues, and as to: the extent to which statements addressed or avoided the specific free speech issues which AFFS raised; and what should be made of candidates’ failure or unpreparedness to address particular questions.

AFFS conducted some basic wider research in respect of the views and actions of some of the candidates as regards free speech, in particular where there is publicly available information which highlights potential inconsistencies with a commitment to protect free speech (whether in the university setting or more generally). While, of course, AFFS has endeavoured to provide correct information, it (and the FSU) cannot guarantee the accuracy or completeness of the information provided. Where particular matters raised are of importance to voters, we recommend that they independently investigate and verify them further in publicly accessible sources.

Based on their replies and any other relevant publicly available information it is aware of, AFFS scored candidates according to the following, admittedly fairly simple, “Free Speech Ratings”: FS+2, FS+1, FS 0, FS-1, FS-2.

We provide links below to the candidate statements and Wikipedia pages relating to each candidate (where found), to provide some further information about them.

AFFS and the FSU takes no responsibility for the completeness or accuracy of the information in candidates’ responses to AFFS or their candidate statements, or on Wikipedia.

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### **Dr Ayham Ammora – FS +1.5**

Dr Ammora replied to our questions: you can [see his reply here](#).

Dr Ammora's answers are consistently supportive of free speech and are strong, thought-through, personal not generic, and credible. While his responses include some worldwide examples, his replies are very much focused on UK universities and their issues and in places recount personal efforts to ensure rigorous debate.

Examples are:

- (To "Should there be a designated officer for free speech"?) "Yes. A non-conflicted, senior officer should own this brief. It cannot sit with HR or PR. It must be empowered to challenge internal policies and support those under pressure." (It is interesting that an earlier version of his "First 100 day action plan" included "Explore appointment of an Independent Advisor on Academic Freedom", and that this has since been removed. We guess he is playing it safe, not wanting to put off potential voters, which caused a bit of a reduction in how impressed we were.)
- (Re questions about the interaction of EDI and free speech) "I support EDI that empowers talent, expands access, and removes bias. But when support for Stonewall or Athena Swan becomes a required belief, not an optional affiliation, it crosses a line. Job candidates should be assessed on merit and fairness, not on alignment with advocacy groups."

Dr Ammora has held executive roles at Shell, Gulf Oil and Chevron having obtained his PhD in Chemistry at Cambridge. AFFS is not aware of Dr Ammora having had recent close engagement with university issues. His answers imply that he thinks he will have more executive power and day-to-day influence than will actually be the case.

His [candidate statement is here](#). No Wikipedia profile is available for this candidate.

### **Mr Ali Azeem – FS -0.5**

Mr Azeem did not reply to our questions. We therefore have given him a default free speech rating of -0.5.

Mr Azeem is a former policy advisor, consultant and is Global Head of Growth at Access Partnership focusing on tech policy consulting. Whilst at Cambridge, he served on the Cambridge Union committee and was Director at Varsity Newspaper. Mr Azeem has recently engaged with his former college to increase support for neuro-diverse students.

His [candidate statement is here](#). No Wikipedia profile is available for this candidate.

### **Mr Tony Booth – FS +0**

Mr Booth did reply directly to our questions, and [this can be read here](#).

Mr Booth's responses are quite hard to assess. They were thoughtful, engaged and made us smile in places. They were positive in principle about free speech, and some gave encouraging direct replies: for instance, in response to our asking "If someone is expressing views which are unpopular or offensive to some, but which were not illegal, would you consider they should be free to hold and express them?", he replied: "I think it absurd to hold people accountable for their thoughts or the committing of thought crimes. I think it is important that there are opportunities for people to publicly express their thoughts within the law. I expect everyone to take responsibility for what they say and do, and not to seek to gratuitously abuse others even when it is legal to do so".

In many cases, however, Mr Booth's answers did not directly address our questions (an example is his reply to our question about institutional neutrality); while some contain problems from the point of view of evidencing understanding of the depth and nature of the issues, and the need for forceful, detailed protection.

Some of his replies are really worrying if you care about free speech.

- In respect of the case of Kathleen Stock being hounded out of the University of Sussex for her views, he said: "Cases such as that concerning the free speech of Kathleen Stock need to be resolved wherever possible through sensitive dialogue since they involve balancing the rights of one individual with the duty of care that an institution has, to both staff and students." I.e., no appreciation that a university should be taking prompt and firm action to stop monsterings of people for their view.
- In response to our question on whether asking for evidence of support for "EDI" or campaigns (such as Stonewall or Athena Swan) in job application and promotion processes has any free speech implications, i.e. contains a clash (to the detriment of free speech) with EDI agendas, he replied "Discussion of EDI policies is in danger of involving a rhetorical game which gets called 'a culture war' in some circles, though it has very little to do with deep culture. People have to support equalities legislation and avoid discrimination against people based on their protected characteristics under the law. But they should also go beyond the law to avoid discrimination because it is the right thing to do." This does not really engage with the issues raised. As is evidenced in AFFS' recent report on requirements for evidencing EDI support in the recruitment process ("**AFFS EDI-on-recruitment report**")<sup>1</sup>, there are major legal and regulatory compliance problems in this regard.

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<sup>1</sup> See *University Recruitment: EDI requirements causing free speech compliance failures* at <https://affs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/AFFS-Report-re-EDI-on-jobs-FINAL-23.05.25-1.pdf>

- Re HEFSA, he says: “The barriers to free speech and expression require careful analysis and I do not think that is reflected in HEFSA and may not be ameliorated by legislation.”

Mr Booth said: “If you publicise what I have written, I hope you will represent my voice fairly by giving examples of my actual words rather than only your interpretation of them, so as not to unwillingly restrict my freedom of speech.” We hope that we have done this. Alumni are encouraged to read the detail of his replies.

Mr Booth has had a long career in education, and is a former Research Fellow at the Cambridge Centre for Commonwealth Education and has lived in Cambridge for over fifty years.

His [candidate statement is here](#). No Wikipedia profile is available for this candidate.

### **Lord (John) Browne – FS +1**

Lord Browne did not directly respond to our questions (which we view as a negative), but submitted a letter which was very positive, albeit in general terms. The [letter can be found here](#).

This statement was of particular interest:

“At universities across the UK, there have clearly been some cases in which the views of staff, students and faculty have been inappropriately suppressed. These are the exception rather than the norm, but they serve to undermine the reputation and integrity of the whole sector. This means that – as in so many areas of leadership – constant vigilance is needed. I have been clear that if elected Chancellor, the defence of Cambridge’s core values would be one of my primary responsibilities.”

This is otherwise a very positive statement, although we do take issue with the idea that free speech problems are the exception rather than the norm: the AFFS EDI-on-recruitment report indicated that the majority of the 100+ universities reviewed were likely to be acting unlawfully as regards free speech protection, and that Cambridge was likely one of the more egregious offenders.

In respect of EDI and the enforcement of contested agendas under the banner of legally required, legitimate concerns – a major problem for free speech as has been evidenced in the AFFS EDI-on-recruitment report – Lord Browne says:

“When it comes to “EDI”, I have been a consistent supporter of inclusion as an input, with equality and diversity following as outputs. When leaders pursue radical inclusion of ideas and people, they are working in support of free speech. When they pursue equality and diversity as inputs (rather than outputs), including by mandating the forms of training to which the AFFS

refers, they risk undermining it. In my experience, where freedom of speech and thought is allowed to flourish, “EDI” always follows.”

This needs careful reading – we suspect it has been carefully worded to offend no-one – but we take a very positive core message from this. Albeit it does not demonstrate understanding of the depth and technical nature of the problems that can be caused. We take considerable comfort from his statement that:

“Universities must be first and foremost places of uncompromising excellence. This means that decisions regarding employment, funding and student admissions must be taken on the basis of merit and merit alone. It is the responsibility of university leadership to deal swiftly with anything which might present a risk to the pursuit of excellence, either actual or perceived.”

Lord Browne says, earlier on:

“The first of [Cambridge’s] core values – listed alongside “freedom from discrimination” – is “freedom of thought and expression”. A critical responsibility of the Chancellor is to uphold these values through their actions, their words, and the advice they give to the University’s executive leadership.”

Lord Browne’s campaign website states his No. 1 priority if elected would be to “Uphold the university’s defining values of free speech, intellectual freedom, fact-based analysis, and freedom from discrimination. It is all too easy to backslide, so we must never take these values for granted.”<sup>2</sup>

Lord Browne’s public statements about free speech that we have seen have been positive in support of free speech and demonstrate a commitment to academic freedom at the university level. In an article earlier this year, he stated: “Universities must be places where people can disagree respectfully, and build resilience through reasoned debate – because that is how knowledge advances and societies grow stronger.”<sup>3</sup> His support for the OfS as an independent regulator also makes him a convincing candidate as far as free speech is concerned.

So, how to assess Lord Browne as a free speech candidate? While not having engaged with the detail of ADFS’s questions is a negative, the evidence we have is overall strongly positive while indicating that he perhaps does not currently have a full appreciation of the severity and complexity of the issues and concerns at universities over recent years. We believe that he really is serious about upholding free speech at Cambridge as a “critical responsibility”, and that he will engage on the detail of the issue beyond comfortable platitudes.

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<sup>2</sup> Lord John Browne, ‘My Priorities If Elected Chancellor’, <https://lordjohnbrowne.com/cambridge/priorities/>

<sup>3</sup> See ‘Beyond BP: John Browne on the oil company’s green U-turn’, *Financial Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/4ed1c4a7-97f3-4c93-bbea-d35dc2b16a>

Lord Browne is a former BP CEO (1995-2007) and crossbench peer. Browne joined General Atlantic as a senior advisor in 2021 and is co-founder and Chairman of BeyondNetZero. In October 2010, the Browne Review was published under the title *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*: this looked at university funding.

His [candidate statement is here](#). Here is Wikipedia's page about this candidate: [Lord Browne – Wikipedia](#)

### **Dr Mohamed El-Erian – FS +1**

Dr El-Erian replied to our questions, and [you can see his replies here](#).

In an introductory statement, Dr El-Erian says that his campaign “is rooted in the conviction that we need an active, engaged Chancellor who will defend [academic freedom and freedom of speech] not only in rhetoric, but in practice”.

Dr El-Erian made some strong replies to our questions 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 14. It is worth mentioning a few less-strong ones.

- In response to our question 3 (about Cambridge’s performance from a FS perspective), he did not address the detail, and talked about the Union quite a bit. He did not address our question about the Helen Joyce affair at all. Our guess is that he was careful not to offend or create hostages to fortune. He got a minus mark for this.
- His reply to question 11 (requiring evidence of support for EDI in recruitment) was very underwhelming, and did not really address the issue. As we have said above, the AFFS EDI-on-recruitment report indicated that the majority of the 100+ universities reviewed were likely to be acting unlawfully as regards free speech protection, and that Cambridge was likely one of the more egregious offenders.
- His reply on question 12 (dedicated free speech officer) was a bit weak: while he thought that there should be one, he thought it should be the Vice-Chancellor. That person is profoundly conflicted as a result of having to deal with pressures from all directions, and very busy, so will never act as a dedicated advocate for free speech and defender when there is a fight. While all staff will have free speech responsibilities in the future, universities need someone whose primary responsibility is to protect free speech.
- His reply on question 13 (mandatory EDI-related training) was again underwhelming.
- A couple of answers referred to “respectful” discourse. This concept gets weaponised as a free speech suppressant – an argument will involve disrespect. What should be focused on is tolerance.

So, overall, Dr El-Erian gave a fairly strong showing. We do get a feeling that he has been careful not to offend. While we understand that he has a life to live in Cambridge, and doesn't want to lose possible voters in this election, it causes us to conclude that, while we believe in his strong support for free speech, and that he will advocate for it and will use his influence positively, he may not be a fearless defender of it.

Dr El-Erian's campaign website states that one of his top three priorities if elected Chancellor will be "rigorously protect[ing] academic freedom and free speech". In his candidate statement, he also pledges to support academic freedom to help "encourage open conversations and a diversity of viewpoints and approaches".

Dr El-Erian is the President of Queens' College and has served as a chief economic adviser at Allianz since 2014. He is a professor of practice at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and Senior Global Fellow at the Lauder Institute.

His [candidate statement is here](#). Here is Wikipedia's page about this candidate: [Dr Mohamed El-Erian – Wikipedia](#)

### **Professor Wyn Evans – FS +1.5**

Professor Evans replied to our questions, and [you can read it here](#).

Professor Evans was very comprehensive, with a lot of thoughtful and specific responses in favour of free speech.

Professor Evans set up the 21 Group, and says it is a "a UK-wide campaign and support network addressing bullying, harassment and abuse in higher education. It aims to empower victims, raise awareness and push for independent investigations—calling for systemic change in how higher education handles bullying and harassment. The 21 Group has helped 100s of victims of bullying and harassment in UK academia. This includes many individuals who were and are facing victimisation through expression of protected beliefs." While claims of "bullying", harassment and the like are often used as a weapon to silence legitimate speech, Professor Evans showed no signs of supporting that.

As part of Group 21, he publicly supported Professor Jo Phoenix in her Employment Tribunal Case against the Open University for its multiple failures in supporting her during a monsterring she received for her views.

Professor Evans appears to be very aware of the current issues that affect free speech and academic freedom at universities, although in some cases through the lens of anti-bullying, which is a wider and overlapping concern. (Claims of "bullying", harassment and the like are often used as a weapon to silence legitimate speech, but Professor Evans showed no signs of supporting that.) In some cases, his replies focus on the enforcement of certain viewpoints through funding, HR decisions on

departmental grants and harassment and the like: while this is a specific aspect of free speech, he does show considerable sensitivity to the wider problems.

He is very keen on universities having free speech champions, describing this as “a vital step”. Part of his manifesto is for a university ombudsman to safeguard free speech – this is encouraging for those who care about free speech.

He said “I am not aware of any UK university that has any requirement of support for Stonewall or Athena SWAN in job applications or promotion”: while it is not thus, it is perfectly reasonable for people not to know that such practices are going on at other universities, and he concluded with “It would be contrary to employment law”, which shows he understands the issue.

Professor Evans is an astrophysicist at Cambridge. He is a member of the *Board of Scrutiny*, part of the University’s governance, and leader of the *21 Group* set up in Cambridge in 2023 to campaign against bullying and harassment in academia.

His [candidate statement is here](#). No Wikipedia profile is available for this candidate.

### **Dr Mark Mann – FS +1.25**

Dr Mann did reply directly to AFFS’ questions, and you can [read it here](#).

Dr Mann’s replies are intriguing, in that they get stronger as they go along. His replies to four of the first 5 questions say good-ish general things but do not demonstrate engagement with the detail of the on-the-ground free speech problems at our universities or Cambridge in particular, so they are not especially strong answers.

But Dr Mann then goes on to give some full and really positive replies (for those who care about free speech) later on.

His responses to questions 7 (“If someone is expressing views which are unpopular or offensive to some, but which were not illegal, would you consider they should be free to hold and express them?”), 8 (institutional neutrality), and 11 are very positive.

Re question 11 (“Do you consider that there are any free speech implications in asking for evidence of support for “EDI” or campaigns (such as Stonewall or Athena Swan) in job application and promotion processes, ...?”), his reply is exemplary (in part because of its concision): “Yes. Requiring pledges or compelled speech risks ideological filtering. Candidates should be assessed on their ability to contribute to an environment where all can excel, not on affiliation with particular advocacy organisations. A focus on inclusive practice rather than ideological alignment preserves both diversity and freedom.”

His answer to question 10 (about the tension between EDI agendas and free speech) sums up the difficulties of assessing his responses: “EDI and free speech are born from the same goal: providing a platform for more voices [a whiff of blather]. The tension

arises when EDI – which should be an apolitical objective viewed through the more hard-nosed take that EDI encourages organizational divergent thinking necessary for growth and innovation – is instead politicised. The solution is to frame such initiatives as invitations to engage and evolve, not creeds to be assented to, and to welcome critical questioning within them [a lot here for those who care about free speech to like]”.

We “enjoyed” his final statement: “Cambridge’s motto *Hinc lucem et pocula sacra* reminds us that illumination comes from exposure to many lamps, not one. Our task is to ensure no lamp is needlessly dimmed, and that when sparks fly, they light the way rather than scorch the earth.”

While not an apparent front-runner, we think that Dr Mann is a good candidate from the point of view of free speech.

Dr Mann is a former engineer, BBC Research & Development technologist and co-founder of ImpactU, an organisation backing mission driven ventures across the UK (including Cambridge). From 2015-2022, Dr Mann was based at the Oxford University Innovation in the role of Senior Technology Transfer Manager.

His [candidate statement is here](#). No Wikipedia profile is available for this candidate.

### **Mrs Gina Miller – FS 0**

Mrs Gina Miller did not reply directly to our questions, but submitted a statement, [which you can read here](#).

This made positive statements about free speech generally, albeit with some platitudes and quotes from American thinkers. She has not engaged with the detail of AFFS’ questions and the complex free speech problems that they refer to. Elaborate, general language in reply has left us with no understanding of where she would stand on the difficult and at times technical questions we raised. AFFS therefore struggled to be convinced of detailed knowledge of or engagement with these issues in a university context, and indeed willingness to engage when difficult issues arise, or to advocate for detailed and technical change were she elected.

Mrs Miller is a business owner, political activist and anti-Brexit campaigner. We are not aware of Mrs Miller having had close engagement with universities and their issues.

Her [candidate statement is here](#). Here is Wikipedia's page about this candidate: [Mrs Gina Miller – Wikipedia](#)

### **Lord (Chris) Smith – FS +0.5**

Lord Smith gave a thoughtful and generally positive set of answers to our questions, from the point of view of supporting free speech protection, [which you can read here](#). He was, for instance, encouragingly positive about the need for institutional neutrality.

While there is much that is encouraging, a lack of appreciation of the depth and nature of the problems was evidenced in some replies.

- He argues, for instance, that there is “no intrinsic clash between EDI policies and freedom of speech and academic freedom” as he believes they can go hand in hand. This is not the experience of AFFS and other campaigners, and this clash (to the detriment of free speech) is evidenced in AFFS’ recent report on requirements for evidencing EDI support in job applications<sup>4</sup> and the OfS’ recent huge fines on the University of Sussex for free speech failures in connection with its Trans related policies.<sup>5</sup>
- In respect of our question as to whether there are any free speech implications in asking for evidence of support for “EDI” or campaigns (such as Stonewall or Athena Swan) in job application and promotion processes, he said “I would not wish to require evidence of such activity or engagement as a necessary part of an application; but if such evidence were offered I would wish to take it into account in a positive way in considering the application”: in other words, a person who did not evidence such support would be relatively disadvantaged as a result, which was alarming.
- Lord Smith does not see the need for a senior officer with responsibilities free speech protection – rather, he considers that it should be “rest with the whole culture of the institution”. Again, the lack of a champion to scrutinise policies and challenge inappropriate actions is, AFFS and other campaigners believe, one of the key reasons for the currently poor state of free speech at our universities. So Lord Smith’s uncertainty about the benefits of an independent, non-conflicted officer to champion free speech is a concern.

A bit of a mixed free speech profile, as a result. Lord Smith is a former Labour politician, member of the House of Lords (from 2005) and has been Master at Pembroke College since 2015.

His [candidate statement is here](#). Here is Wikipedia's page about this candidate: [Lord Smith – Wikipedia](#)

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<sup>4</sup> See ‘University Recruitment: EDI requirements causing free speech compliance failures’, <https://affs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/AFFS-Report-re-EDI-on-jobs-FINAL-23.05.25-1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See ‘Regulatory case report for University of Sussex, Office for Students’, [https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/hcllxwxw/university\\_sussex\\_free\\_speech\\_case\\_report.pdf](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/hcllxwxw/university_sussex_free_speech_case_report.pdf) and the AFFS response published 14<sup>th</sup> April 2025, <https://affs.uk/campaign-news>

## Ms Sandi Toksvig – FS - 1

Ms Sandi Toksvig did not reply to our questions.

Ms Toksvig’s candidate statement is unusual in that it does not include express support for free speech, and notes that “the politicisation of free speech” is a threat facing academia. We find this worrying, as the notion that free speech is now “politicised” is itself a politicised concept and one used by people who are opposed to free speech for those they disagree with (i.e., as a shorthand for “defending right-wing bigots”). The reality is that the great majority of people under attack who AFFS has been working to support and protect identify with the *left*. Coupled with public indications of a lack of tolerance for the concerns of gender-critical women (at Cambridge!)<sup>6</sup>, this looks like a bit of a red light.

As a result of her not responding and the above concerns, Ms Toksvig gets our lowest free speech rating.

Ms Toksvig is a comedian, presenter and writer on British stage, radio and television. She co-founded the Women’s Equality Party in 2015. She stood for Chancellor of Oxford in 2003, served as Chancellor of Portsmouth between 2012 and 2017 and became the inaugural Q+ fellow at Cambridge representing the LGBT+ community in 2023.

Her [candidate statement is here](#). Here is Wikipedia’s page about this candidate: [Ms Sandi Toksvig – Wikipedia](#)

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<sup>6</sup> See Sandi Toksvig speaks at the Cambridge Union, 5th November 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i\\_JLIW1EBjs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_JLIW1EBjs)

## Appendix: questions asked of all candidates

1. Do you think there is currently a free speech and/ or academic freedom problem at UK universities? Please give reasons for your answer, if you wish.

AFFS comment: if candidates do not see a significant problem, we consider that free speech at universities cannot be a focus for them.

2. How overriding do you think protections for free speech should be? Where do you think lines between free speech and other concerns and agendas should be drawn?

3. How do you think Cambridge performs as regards:

- being a place in which controversial and/or unpopular views can be freely aired and discussed?
- promoting the importance of free speech and academic freedom?
- acting to protect free speech and academic freedom?
- enforcing its requirements for protecting free speech and academic freedom, including requirements as regards the behaviour of staff and students?

Where (if anywhere) did you stand as regards the 2023 Helen Joyce affair at Caius College: did you state any view or take any actions?

4. HEFSA:

- a. If an active politician (e.g. a Member of the House of Lords), did you support or oppose the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill (now Act) ("HEFSA") (or significant aspects of it) during its passage through Parliament? Please provide any further information you consider relevant about your stance.

AFFS comment: we consider opposition to HEFSA to be a free speech negative.

- b. Do you consider that the suspension of the coming into effects of the main provisions of HEFSA pending "review and possible repeal" by the new Labour Government in July 2024 was appropriate? Please give your reasons for your answer, if you wish.

AFFS comment: we consider approval of the suspension to be a free speech negative.

5. Please give examples of how you have actively supported free speech (including, but not limited to, in the Higher Education sector) and/or academic freedom in your public life.

If you are an academic or an officer at a university or college:

- Can you evidence your work in support of free speech at your institution?
- Have there been any controversies or other matters giving rise to free speech problems within your area of responsibility, or your institution more widely? What steps and public positions did you take in relation to them?

6. In your public life, have you done anything which could be construed (or was considered by some to be) actively hostile to free speech and/or academic freedom? For instance, have you ever made severe personal attacks on someone you disagreed with in relation to a matter of lawful public debate, or instigated or joined in an online pile-on against them? If you have, please give details and explain the reasons for your actions.

7. If someone is expressing views which are unpopular or offensive to some, but which were not illegal, would you consider they should be free to hold and express them? Please give reasons for your views, including any qualifications, if you wish.

8. Do you think that institutional neutrality at UK universities is necessary for the protection of free speech and/or academic freedom, including in the review, approval of and/or support for research plans, topics, applications and/or projects and the grant or allocation of research funding?

How far should institutional neutrality be taken? Should it apply to the public comments of university officials?

We would be interested to hear your reasoning.

AFFS comment: if an institution takes sides, in an area of passionate and polarised debate, with one contested position, it necessarily formally sets itself against the other position. This gives rise to an obvious risk of disadvantaging (i.e. discriminating against) or creating a hostile environment for (i.e. harassing) people who hold that other viewpoint, and creating or tolerating environments in which attacking people for their viewpoints is acceptable. A number of recent public failures (with unlawful harassment and discrimination found by tribunals) have largely arisen as a result of an underlying failure of objectivity and endorsing and enforcing (or not preventing the unlawful enforcement of) one side of a bitterly contested debate.

Universities and their representatives therefore need to maintain sufficient institutional neutrality on matters of polarised public debate, i.e. at least take an approach which is very careful to avoid actions, statements and language which risk counting as discrimination or harassment under the Equality Act or suppressing free speech contrary to Section 43 and the HRA, while of course complying with their wider relevant legal obligations.

9. **What do you think of the recent fines by the OfS on the University of Sussex? Were they appropriate? What do you think their implications are for Cambridge?**
10. **Do you think that the promotion and enforcement of programmes and policies relating to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (“EDI”) can give rise to any free speech/academic freedom issues? We would be interested in hearing your views either way.**

AFFS comment: the enforcement of contested agendas and programmes by English universities through EDI programmes and policies is highly likely to result in unlawfulness under no less than three sources of legal requirements for the protection of free speech. See BFSP’s Statement on *EDI and similar courses, training and tests: Free speech requirements and risks for English universities*, [which can be found here](#).

See also the AFFS report *University Recruitment: EDI requirements causing free speech compliance failures*, [which can be found here](#).

We asked this question to try to identify whether the candidates had any conception that there were free speech problems with this.

11. **Do you consider that there are any free speech implications in asking for evidence of support for “EDI” or campaigns (such as Stonewall or Athena Swan) in job application and promotion processes, and in the review, approval of and/or support for research plans, topics, applications and/or projects and the grant or allocation of research funding? We would be interested in hearing your views either way.**

AFFS comment: doing the above is highly likely to result in unlawfulness under no less than three sources of legal requirements for the protection of free speech. See BFSP’s detailed Statement *EDI considerations and inquiries in the recruitment and research approval process at English universities: Free speech compliance issues*, [which can be found here](#).

We asked this question to try to identify whether the candidates had any conception that there were free speech problems with this.

12. **Do you think that it is necessary for a healthy free speech environment that a university should have a senior, experienced, non-conflicted officer responsible for promoting free speech and academic freedom (and developing and enforcing policies**

**and requirements for achieving this?** We would be interested in hearing your views either way.

AFFS comment: appointing such an officer would make a significant difference to free speech protection at universities. Candidates who are serious about free speech protection would surely appreciate this.

13. **Do you think it is necessary and/or appropriate to require students and/or staff (whether in the context of matriculation in the case of students, appointment and/or promotion in the case of staff or otherwise) to be required and/or invited to undergo “training” on subjects such as gender ideology and/or aspects of Critical Race Theory? In relation to such “training”:**
- a. **Should the contents of the “training” (including questions asked of participants) be publicly available?**
  - b. **Should students and/or staff be:**
    - i. **be required to “pass” such training? and/or**
    - ii. **entitled to decline to participate in such training?**
    - iii. **be penalised for failing to “pass” or “participate”?**
    - iv. **if so, how?**

We would be interested in your views either way.

AFFS comment: the enforcement of contested agendas and programmes through practices such as compulsory EDI training is highly likely to be unlawful at English universities under no less than three sources of legal requirements for the protection of free speech. See BFSP’s detailed [statement on this here](#).

We asked this question to try to identify whether the candidates had any conception that there were free speech problems with this.

14. **Will you actively advocate for and support free speech protection and academic freedom, within the limits of the role of Chancellor of Cambridge University? Will you view such support as a material requirement for the appointment of senior officers to the University? Please give any information that you think is relevant to share.**