

Lord John Browne

Statement on free speech, prepared for 'Alumni for Free Speech'

25th June 2025

Dear AFFS,

Thank you for your email and questions. I hope you will forgive me for providing instead the broad position statement below which sets out my beliefs, approach and priorities in this area. As I hope you can appreciate, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on specific cases or policies, particularly where they rightly fall within the remit of the university's executive leadership or its regulator. Nevertheless, I trust that the statement below will leave you with no doubt about my position on the topic of free speech at UK universities, and about the advice I would give to the University's leadership if elected Chancellor.

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To equip our societies and leaders to weather the challenges ahead, we must urgently focus on two things: building knowledge and resilience. Universities are critical institutions to facilitate both. There is much to be hopeful for in our world today and universities provide a window of possibility. They should be places where people can debate different points of view, disagree with each other, and still remain civil: a training ground for future leaders to hone their negotiating skills, open their minds and foster understanding. They should create space to challenge conventional wisdom; to apply due scepticism to those who claim change is impossible; to reject fatalism, the greatest enemy of progress; and to look forward with a sense of great optimism that good change can happen.

The University of Cambridge has always been at the forefront of this approach, offering its scholars, researchers and students freedom of intellectual investigation and debate and the extensive resources to support it. The University has set out its mission and core values. The first of these 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.

The principles of free speech and fact-based analysis have always underpinned my approach to business. At BP, for example, I broke ranks with the rest of the industry to acknowledge the threat posed by climate change, and to pledge to do something about it. It made me the object of much personal derision and criticism, and it would have been much simpler – but wrong – to fall in line with my peers. That was a formative experience for me, and helped to make BP a place where controversial or unpopular points of view were welcomed and nurtured.

In leadership roles at the Francis Crick Institute, the Courtauld Institute of Art, Tate, the British Museum, the Blavatnik School of Government, Stanford University and the Royal Academy of Engineering – I have been deeply involved in questions of free speech, primarily as it relates to fundraising decisions and student activism. Here, as at BP, my approach has been consistent: to welcome disagreement, debate and protest within the boundaries of the law, as a way to help

decision-making bodies reach better decisions. I am not aware of ever having spoken or acted in a way that could be seen as hostile to lawful free speech and academic freedom. In business and my personal life, I actively seek the company of those with the capacity to challenge perceived wisdom and put forward unpopular points of view.

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.

I was on a leave of absence from the House of Lords during the passage of the HEFSA Bill through the Upper House, and was therefore prohibited from voting; but am happy to put on record that had I not been on a leave of absence, I would have supported it. The subsequent suspension of some of the main provisions of the Act was inappropriate.

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.

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.

I welcome the role that AFFS plays in public life, and hope to discuss these matters with you in greater detail in the years ahead.