

University Forum

Alan Elsner*

Race, Tolerance and the NUS

It was three years ago, in April 1974, that the National Union of Students voted, by 204,619 to 182,760 to 'recognise the need to refuse any assistance (financial or otherwise) to openly racist and fascist organisations' and that it 'believed it necessary to prevent any member of these organisations from speaking in colleges by whatever means are necessary (including disruption of the meeting).'

This was the beginning of what has become known as the 'no platform' debate which still excites much heat and passion at NUS conferences, though opposers of the 'no platform' position have so far not succeeded in reversing the policy. At the time, the decision met with considerable criticism – so much so that the then NUS president, John Randall, tried to clarify the position. 'We are not going,' said Randall, 'to send round a heavy squad to break up meetings.' However, even assuming the 'no platform' policy does constitute a necessary and effective tactic in combating racial hatred, problems still remain. Who is to decide who is a racist and who is not? The ejection of Sir Keith Joseph from last December's NUS conference heightened the fear that the 'no platform' policy could be used as a means of silencing people whose views might be controversial or unpopular. Their opponents have only to declare them racist or fascist and it then becomes legitimate to ban them. In the light of this, it was perhaps inevitable that, sooner or later, the policy would be turned against Zionists. Over the past few months, several university and polytechnic student unions have debated the Middle East. There appears to be a coordinated propaganda campaign with the aim of having Zionism declared as a form of racism by the NUS conference,

so that the 'no platform' policy can be extended to supporters of Israel. Anti-Zionist motions have been passed at Salford, Lancaster, York and Essex universities – though they were rejected at several others.

To give the flavour of the kind of resolutions being put forward, here are a few sample clauses from the 43-point indictment of Salford University Students Union:

This Union believes that Zionism is a discriminatory, racist and unjust ideology which from the start to the present day discriminates between Jew and non-Jew.

That Israel is committed to defending the interests of Imperialism.

That Zionism, like apartheid, is and always will be a racist ideology.

That the essence of racism is the mythical belief in race superiority. The South African racists, the Zionists and fascists share this belief in common. Each professes to be the Chosen People.

Not surprisingly, the debates are invariably bitter and acrimonious affairs. There is little or no constructive argument and the result depends primarily on how many supporters either side has managed to drag along to the meeting. Understandably, neutrals tend to stay out of what they see as a private feud of no concern to them. What they fail to realise is that the issue under discussion is concerned not only with the Middle East. It also involves the basic democratic structure and practices of the student union.

What happens when the motion has been passed? Not all student unions are willing to face up to the undemocratic implications of the motion. At York University, for example, the local Jewish Society was summoned to a meeting of the union council and asked whether it was Zionist.

The society replied that it was. However, the council balked at the prospect of banning Jewish Society meetings. Eventually, a way out of the impasse was found. The council voted that the Jewish Society was not Zionist, even though the society itself continued to maintain that it was.

Other student unions, however, have had fewer scruples. At Salford University, Zionist meetings have been banned and the Jewish Society has been forbidden to set up a bookstall or to distribute pro-Israel leaflets. A rabbi has been banned from speaking there on the relationship between Judaism and Zionism. That such behaviour is a distortion of the intentions behind the original 'no platform' idea is well understood within the NUS. Few would recognise, in the innocuous members of Salford Jewish Society, the 'apostles of racial hatred' referred to by Randall back in 1974. In fact, Charles Clarke, the retiring president of the NUS, went out of his way to condemn 'unions which have sought to remove union rights from those of their members whose views the majority do not like. This may be because the selected minority are adjudged as racists or as Zionists or for any other convenient grounds. This kind of thought control is no part of a democratic students' union . . .'

However, just one day after this speech was made, the anti-Zionists showed their contempt for Clarke's defence of the democratic rights of Zionists by attempting to have leaflets, that were being distributed to the conference by the Union of Jewish Students, banned as racist. Their attempt failed, but the incident provided a stark warning of what will happen if a motion declaring Zionism to be racism is ever passed by an NUS conference.

Racism perhaps is difficult to define, but these days in Britain it is easy to recognise. With the National Front threatening to put forward 318 candidates at the next general election, with their recent results in the local elections, with their appearance even in higher education and with the explicit threat that all this implies to immigrant communities, now is hardly the time to quibble about whether Jewish societies should function or not. The threat of racism needs to be met by a united front of anti-racists determined to fight together against the Front.

Anti-Zionist propaganda is a crude attempt to present the Middle East as a kind of black and white world, where good confronts evil and the forces of light do battle against the forces of darkness. As such, it is a profound insult to the intelligence of students, and at variance with the basic concept and purpose of a university.

The universities of this country might have been one of the few places in the world where Arabs and Jews could come together and try to discuss their problems in an atmosphere of tolerance. Instead, they seem condemned to hurl slogans and insults at each other, to score meaningless propaganda points off each other, to fight their own private Middle East war on British campuses. And it is the absolute futility of the whole exercise that is perhaps the saddest aspect of the whole affair.

*Alan Elsner is fieldworker to the Union of Jewish Students.