

Cambridge Academics Have Just Won an Important Battle for Free Speech

By [Nick Cohen](#)

Global Research, December 14, 2020

[The Spectator](#) 10 December 2020

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Academics at Cambridge won a cheering victory for free speech today when they voted by an overwhelming majority to reject plans from the vice-chancellor to change the rules governing debate at the university.

They rejected the university's proposals to insist [that](#) students and staff be 'respectful' of opposing views. They decided, instead, that the rules should say students and staff must 'tolerate' opposition. The [result](#) was as close to conclusive as you can get. Only 162 academics voted in favour of the university's plan, while 1316 voted in favour of the change. (A further 208 academics wanted neither.)

As I explained in [The Spectator](#) last week, the distinction between respect and tolerance goes to the heart of today's raging debates on free speech. To tolerate an opponent is to refrain from punishing him or her for their views. You remain free to offend and challenge them. You most certainly have no obligation to respect ideas you regard as ignorant or dangerous or both. 'Respect,' by contrast, is a slippery concept that should set off alarm bells. Respect can be hard earned and freely given. Yet gangsters also demand it at the point of a gun. What version of the word did Cambridge mean when it said staff and students must 'respect' differing opinions?

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