

It was not the picture that caused Magdalen College problems

I have no problem with the postgraduate students at Magdalen College Oxford choosing what pictures to place on their wall. Rotating your pictures or finding one you like better is an enjoyable luxury to have.

The problem came with the way the MCR decided to make or allow this to become a political issue and a matter of national debate. Their explanation of why a picture of the Queen was not suitable gained the approval of some and the condemnation of others. A student common room which needs to allow all its members of whatever view or background to feel valued and respected ended up dividing opinion by being too free with its explanations. Had they said if anyone had bothered to ask they just wanted a change or a different decorative effect there would have been no story. Now monarchists there may feel on edge.

I raise this to frame a wider debate. It is most important our universities themselves are strictly independent of political opinion or intellectual bias. There should not be a collective student view formed by a majority on the role of the Queen and what she symbolises. There should be no College or university view of which democratic parties are worthy of support. There can and should be many different student views of politics, with individuals and issue based societies seeking to make converts and expressing their views as they see fit within the law. The university, the College, or the debating society needs to offer platforms for the main strands of thought and democratic politics so young people can hear for themselves and dispute with believers. The danger is universities become too narrow in a collective view, and no platform people who represent legitimate and often popular positions.

Today there is a feeling amongst populists who favour national democracies and more individual freedoms that universities are hostile to them and unwilling to hear their case. As someone who is not a voter for AFD, Lega, the US Republicans or National Rally, who does not support all their views and who keeps out of expressing individual views on foreign elections, I nonetheless am uneasy if UK universities think representatives of these parties and viewpoints should be excluded from the global debate. A majority of students may well have disliked President Trump and disapproved of some of his views, but they should be willing to hear the case of the supporters of someone who commanded millions of votes in the world's most powerful democracy. Currently in the EU some anti EU parties are front runners in opinion polls. University people need to understand why and to hear the arguments, even if they do stay resolutely in favour of the EU project.

Democracy thrives on lively exchanges of varied viewpoints and on free votes to determine who has made the most successful popular appeal. In an age of scepticism about a ruling elite of rich business people, powerful officials and a gilded group of establishment politicians Universities need to understand both their aims and why so many people disagree with their

consensus .