

## Minutes of the KCSU Open Meeting, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2010

**Apologies:** None

**Announcements:**

Bryony: In a jumpsuit. Shell in the Niger Delta. Petitions.

Jacob: Joint KCSU/KCGS Open Meeting, Sunday at 7pm. Student representation on college council. Motion in question passed governing body once, going to again in near future. We have four representatives. They're proposing to take two away. Today the voting opened for two CUSU referenda of the whole student body. Student Support Officers. Block funding from university, funding joint CUSU GU student support officer, work within welfare network. Everyone agrees, we just need 2000 votes for it. Go to CUSU website and vote. NUS affiliation. Sunday 6pm in the bar, Chigbo and Towse will be debating this issue, whether we should reaffiliate or disaffiliate. Emails will go out on kcsu-info.

Shayan: In our open meetings, we have to vote to enable Grads to speak. All in favour? [Clear majority in favour, grads allowed to speak]

Bryony: Can both motions pass?

Tindall: They don't contradict.

Luke: That's wrong – my motion says we should remove the flag once this has happened. IF you don't pass the first motion but not mine, it still goes through.

**Motion 1: Introduction**

Stephen Downie [**Proposer**]: Motion put in to start conversation. I wanted to have a conversation about this with you guys through a motion. I'd like to see it passed. Most important thing for me is the conversation. A lot of people in former Soviet Union love this flag. Not necc bad people – all kind of people lived under it. Experience, connection. We didn't live through the Soviet Union. We've chosen to have an affinity with it. Slightly dangerous. A lot of people *didn't have a good time*. People will burst into tears at the thought of it. When my friends came to King's the other day, they were quite disturbed. It doesn't fit in with liberal ethos. Ideological statement – shotgun effect. Some people hit pretty hard by it. Dangerous symbol.

Juan: [**History**] I know that there's a lot of myth and legend surrounding this flag. I've found out about the context from college. Once upon a time, the SCR was renovated, painted red. Leftover red paint, they painted our bar red too. Students would paint red hammers, sickles and stars into the wall. When repainted, students would carry on. When bar was repainted yellow, they put this flag up here. Two fellows did this. Flag was bought for \$5.50. Murky background – fellows put it up without telling students. Impression was that a student had. Osborne and Fenlon.

Stephen: People would put hammer and sickle up on the wall, vandalism. Moment the college step in, every member of the college is supporting it without asking to take it down.

Lotte: **[reading out an email from PhD candidate Olivia Meehan]**

I am currently away from Cambridge but am astonished by the ignorance of the protagonists in this debate and the apparent lack of understanding of the serious consequences of what they propose. As a member of King's College I trust the following comments will be made clear in the 'Open Meeting'.

1. I read, "The flag of the USSR is hanging up in the bar."

It is my understanding is that there is no flag hanging in the bar.

There is an artefact of the red walls of the bar which now consists of an artwork: an image of the hammer and sickle framed, surely ironically, in gilt. The accusation of trivialisation is a familiar jibe against any work of art attempting to re-contextualise a familiar or accepted image. It holds no weight here.

2. The case for the removal of this artwork seems, by its own wording, to be based on sheer ignorance of the difference between Stalinism and Marxism or Leninism, and of the proud historical association between Kings College, Cambridge University, and the IDEOLOGY of Communism. My comments in no way undervalue the degree of suffering which vast numbers experienced during various attempts to put that ideology into practice.

3. A decision to remove visual material which may be offensive to some would set a precedent for the removal of visual material offensive to many more. Apart from the fact that there is no actual flag in question, in the context of the arguments offered, would King's College seriously contemplate advocacy for removing ALL flags from shared public space? E.g. the flag of St. George on St. George's Day so offensive to some Scottish and Welsh visitors to Cambridge? Does King's College seriously contemplate advocacy for removing ALL visual material relating to Christianity so as not to offend our Muslim scholars, to say nothing of the atheists and agnostics who also comprise our fellowship? We have a diverse history and more sophisticated means of reconciling this in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

4. The bar is a social space not a shared public space. This is a private domain for King's scholars and their guests. King's Scholars existing or potential, and their guests, could easily be warned, verbally or by email, or indeed in the enrolment process, that there is potential for 'offence or hurt' in the bar. There is a precedent in the arts all over the world for issuing such warnings against such potential offence. It exists for exhibitions, performances and film. If there is wide spread danger of offence then such a warning could also exist at the entrance to the student bar. There are countless examples of such warnings in far more serious circumstances e.g. for indigenous Australians there are carefully worded warnings about the presence (widespread broadcast television, film and exhibitions) of those who have passed away.

5. As an art historian and a member of King's I would personally welcome such a warning as it would offer the opportunity, via appropriate labelling, to peel away the obvious layers of ignorance that our current undergraduates have about the historical association between King's College and Communist ideology. The visual presence of the Hammer and Sickle has nothing whatsoever to being "cool" and everything to do with the preservation of King's proud heritage of dissent and diversity.

6. The removal of the artwork in question would represent not only an overt act of censorship but a very serious rewriting of history and an even more disturbing attempt to pervert the pure stream of radicalism at King's College.

**Debate:**

Floor: Flag came into existence in 1917. Only took on association with communism in that context. Star above the hammer and sickle specific to Soviet Union. No other flag. Not a general expression of communism. That flag is very specifically the flag of the Soviet Union.

Will Caiger-Smith: Who would agree with having a Nazi flag up on the wall?

[silence]

Will Caiger-Smith: IF we had a Swastika up on the wall, people would be up in arms.

Floor: I'd like to underline question. We heard a fair bit a minute ago from the last speaker about freedom of thought. If you're going to take that stance, cannot take it halfway. You cannot logically maintain a flag of the Soviet Union, but be opposed to a Nazi emblem.

Essex Matt: Flag's been up quite a while. Surely no one genuinely offended. Political correctness gone mad.

Aris: We have many misinterpretations at the same time. Analysing star 5cm above, etc, makes it flag of Soviet Union or not, etc. Issue here is: This is an artwork. Representative of this college's liberal tradition. Form of activism/political engagement. If this is offensive to visitors, let them know in advance what they are about to face. Has to do with art and how we understand symbolism in art.

Chris Perry: Re Nazi Swastika – we're not offended by symbol of swastika. We don't see it in historical context and react as if offended. Offended because displayed by people expressing allegiance/support for certain ideology. Not offended by the symbol itself. We're offended by the sentiment that expresses. Is that really the case with the artwork we have on the wall? Should be very clear that no one in this college supports all the things entailed by Stalinism. Analogy with Nazi flag = bad.

Bryony: Suggest amendment – *Permanent* national symbols.

Stephen: Accepted.

Hannah Bass: The point email raised about censorship important. What's offensive is the *recentness* of the history. There is **no** national symbol or ideological symbol you can put up that won't. Vicious imperialism and slavery carried out in name of Union Jack. Just because people amongst us aren't offended.

Floor: I suggest we keep flag, add note underneath saying "This college does not endorse communism."

[laughter]

Stephen: I say I don't think we should have any permanent national symbols in the bar. As for the question of it becoming an artwork, that sounds like the kind of perverse reasoning that could only happen at Cambridge. You can't warn someone coming into a room that 'the symbol under which your grandfather was shot is ironic'. That doesn't really wash – they won't be fooled.

Nadia: How do you think that you and people who are offended would feel if it was a more general communist/socialist symbol – not so specific.

Stephen: It'd be better – still not ideal. I don't think any ideological things in the bar a good idea.

Jess Kwong: Context from another grad on history. Nearly this exact debate occurred 5 years ago. At the time, removal was seen as an insult – stood as monument to radical history of King's. Provost Mayhew selling out college history. During these debates a number of Eastern European king's students pointed out that it was the *flag*. Proposal to have symbol stripped of USSR associations.

Floor: 3 points – early on, suggested symbol doesn't imply endorsement. Personally, and many other people would find it every bit as unacceptable. The symbol of the soviet union not to be compared with union jack. Flags of specific institutions, monstrous, finally overthrown. Just as bad to have apartheid flag on the wall. This flag still enjoys respect in North Korea – a place that has concentration camps and gas chambers.

Juan: You could make exactly the same case for the union jack.

Floor: Obvious point – we don't have the union jack on the wall.

Juan: When I see this flag, I see a tongue in cheek reminder of the days when we were 'champagne socialists'. I'm open to suggestions to change it to remove USSR connotations. Hoping we can look at possible alternatives.

Luke: Inherently contradictory motion – what if I don't take flag as ideological symbol – purely historical, aesthetic etc. Problematic to suggest that any flag represents same thing to all people who see it. You can't impune the social space that is the bar on what *you* feel when you see it.

Stephen: That's a fundamental part of my motion – different things to different people. Specific flag. You are making a mistake if you think it's a general symbol. Think of the people who *lived there*. I appreciate lots of people like it – we have to consider the opinions of those who are physically repelled by it.

Jacob: Seems to suggest you don't understand what Luke was saying. Multiplicity of subjectivities. Two different fronts. Clearly not a flag. Representation of flag with silly fancy gilt outline with ironises.

Stephen: Was it not a flag when it was on people's uniforms?

Jacob: I agree that this is an aesthetic symbol. I'm a socialist and I abhor Stalinism. People equate general socialism with Stalinist tendencies. What this means to lots of people in King's is not that it stands for a nation.. What it stands for is rebellion, socialism as opposed to capitalism. Communism, for people here, is another thing. Signs of Capitalism all around Cambridge, all around this room. I'm living and experiencing that right now. This is a representation of a force that tried to fight that

capitalism. We have to stop talking of communism and Stalin. It did a lot of awful things, but it was trying to express a certain ideal that lots of us hold dear.

Stephen: What it boils down to is this: Do you think that the satisfaction that you feel is enough to justify the visceral reaction that people who lived under the Soviet Union feel when they see it. Is the smile you get in the morning worth the tears of the people who see it.

Jacob: It's not just about pleasure. Lots of people talking about it as a symbol of heritage.

Stephen: Heritage of radicalism. Conservative terms. Doesn't sound particularly radical to me.

Tindall: Quantifying happiness? What we have to realise is that with a piece of art, you may think it's misguided. It's been done in quite an amusing way – I found it quite funny. I'm not laughing at heaps of dead people. We have to be very careful about protecting some people from offence. Everybody's capable of being offended by different things. Treating people with kid gloves runs risk.

Will C-S: To those who defend the flag – I'd like to ask. What's so great about radicalism really? Radicalism is the cause of most of the wars in the world at the moment. If it aligns King's with radicalism, it aligns everyone at King's with radicalism. I'm not comfortable being identified with someone else as a King's student.

Matt: Not talking about militant radicalism – ideological radicalism. Spirit of radicalism. I'm disappointed to be in this college.

Juan: What it reminds me of.. We all come here with dreams. Warning that these ideals, dreams, radicalism can go wrong. We have to be careful. Dangerous if we just say we don't like it. By having it on display here, reminds us we can have spirit of radicalism, but can go wrong.

Oscar: Both sides have made good points. Fact – I know people who have been put off applying to King's because of the flag.

Liz Rush: I'd like to thank you for bringing this up. People are very interested in exploring this. We have different bits of testimony. Ontologically not on super-solid ground. Aesthetics and politics aren't divorced. Aesthetic objects are political. I think of it in connection with all sorts of other objects in this bar. Provocative images here. I've felt frustrated and interested. Depends on the reference point. Looking towards past – disappointing and discouraging. Thinking of the future. Potential in some ideas that founded regime with this flag. Given that this keeps coming up, we should mark fact that we are unsure. I think we should keep it but have a large question mark next to it. Mark fact that we don't have a straightforward, one-to-one relationship with it. Add to bar's history.

Patrick: Coming from a place that's been fighting over flags for 300 years.. When I came here for my interview, I laughed. This is a question point – it's an integral part of our history. Just to get rid of it because one or two people don't agree with it stops the debate.

Luke Hawksbee: I've not made up my mind. I think we should keep some kind of symbol of radical heritage. What does radicalism mean? Radicalism about addressing root causes of things, not trying to fudge solution on the surface. Private ownership of property etc. We need to get to root of debate. Not 'is it offending some people'. It is offending some people, but so can lots of things. Lots

of things that happen every day in King's offend me. I'm offended by seeing people tucking into hamburger. I don't try to ban meat in the bar. Feasible for me to say – that offends some people. The point is that when I look at that or a more generic symbol, that is not just about whether that offends particular people, it's about what we as a democratic community, we don't have to endorse it as individuals, but as the community, we are deciding by majority whether or not we're happy to have it on the wall. It shouldn't be ruled by how many people are offended by it. Shouldn't be reduced to straightforward factual question.

Floor: Very dangerous to speak about radical heritage. I come from a country where it's part of the heritage to see a cross every day. The communist party has fought most hard in Italy to have it abolished. No ideology should be imposed upon students.

Floor: I want to question underlying belief of opposition. By having flag on wall, supporting radical history. If you look at radical history – came about in environment of 1960s. If one envisaged progress, look to US capitalism or Soviet Communism. Can't confine it to walls of bar or quad. In order to understand history, see how it spills out onto King's Parade, Moscow, Washington. When people think about being radical, they base that on models coming from other parts of the world. Models in part inspired by what flag represents. Two histories intertwined, neither can avoid other one.

Hawksbee: Reductionist to claim there are two poles to debate. It's funny that you should use phrase Washington or Moscow. Fallacy of limiting the options. Wholeheartedly endorse capitalism etc. All kinds of different perspectives. To imply that 'people were radical in past, only thing that wasn't capitalism was soviet union, that's what they must have been aspiring to'.

Floor: My argument wasn't that if you are communist you are by definition Stalinist. You cannot constrain history to this college. Perspective of worldwide politics – necessarily encompasses what this flag represents. You can't cut history into bits and compartmentalise it.

Stefan Arridge: I'd like to make point that a lot of people are talking about how few people are getting offended. Being offended by meat not the same. I have family from a communist country, spent years fighting against regime. Suddenly to see it up in the war in a really flippant way, as if it didn't mean anything.

Rory Boyd: Excellent point about people feeling comfortable in place of education. I wouldn't feel comfortable in place of education bare of decoration.

Lotte: It seems like we've moved away from looking at this artefact as an artefact in a frame. I think that's a useful way of seeing it. Seeing it as not one-to-one representing Stalinism.. Ironised way on top of that. Associating it with our radical history, which in itself problematic, We can't actually 'self-identify' as particularly radical at the moment. Several degrees of ironisation.

Stephen: I agree that seeing it as an artefact is quite useful – allows us to tell people that they are misunderstanding it. A teacher who taught me Russian was in tears to see that Stalin was being voted 3<sup>rd</sup> greatest Russian. When she sees this, irritating that people found it cool. It's frustrating to hear people say that people are misunderstanding it. That is an opinion, so is the offence.

Andriy: The opposition doesn't recognise this. Since my great-grandmother was killed by this regime, I can't look at it as just an artefact.

Tindall: Going back to point Patrick raised – piece that stimulates debate. Noone's suggesting that calling it art is stripping it of context.

Rob Thorman: I certainly haven't made up my mind. It's a debate that should involve the whole college. Everyone should have time to reflect and consider. Let's not decide right now.

Ria: Mechanisms put in place. Things sent out 24-hours ahead to everybody's emails. Discussion needs to be had today.

Juan: I disagree. Why do we have to end debate today? Rob could suggest amendment to postpone resolution to next week.

Rob: What if someone didn't get chance to read it?

Tindall: Getting together. That's what an open meeting is for. Can't believe a lot of people don't turn up. I don't think we should cater for hypothetical person for whom reading email is within their capability, but turning up not.

Bryony: This is probably the third of the three great debates. Nuts from the quiz machine. Dancers at formal. Both debates conducted over email list, because very offensive, very personal. This debate has been amazing. Inclusive, open debate. Needs to be here, in person, not over email list.

Annie Burman: I think that you can make up mind, but hearing everyone else's opinions can make you change your mind. I find that having some time to consolidate ideas, get time to talk to people, would be more useful than throwing ourselves into voting now.

Hannah: Can we vote 'keep it there' 'take it down' 'do something else'.

Will C-G: Why change the rules for this one?

Jacob: Considering everyone values democratic debate – let's continue the debate rather than having meta-debate.

Tindall: Does anyone have anything to add?

Jess: Two people who contributed valuable points. I don't think just because we're indignant about people not turning up, we should decide people shouldn't get a vote. I propose grads be included in voting body.

Bryony: That seems a bit unfair on the grads who didn't know they were going to be able to vote. Grads are not meant to be able to vote, they wouldn't have known.

Jacob: I personally would like to finish this now.

Mavis: Tell everyone it's going to be a poll.

Rob: As an individual, I read the email, I've come here – I want to talk to more people about it. It's really interesting. We can talk about it with our friends, make a decision in a week's time.

[Vote held on whether to come to a decision now or extend debate: Slim majority in favour of extending debate]

Rob: I didn't mean we should spend another hour going back and forth. I want to go away and think about it. I want more time to think about it.

Elian: In general, someone feels a debate is more important, they'll delay it.

Shayan: Result was not to come to a decision tonight.

Jacob: We've decided not to take a vote tonight. If Luke decides to withdraw *his* motion, unless someone's got pressing AOB, this meeting could just be part of that debate. This is a group of people talking about what they care about.

Bayu: We should definitely extend this debate. We should set up a structure so we have at least a set date, timeframe in mind. Get a few more points across.

Juan: Proposal – since we voted to extend debate, we have a week of discussion, we'll set up a forum on KCSU website. Organise a polling system.

Liz Rush: I propose we maintain respectful tone. Last year the issue with the burlesque dancers, a lot of plain slamming. We should have proposals, put people's ideas in a box so we can think about it rather than slamming back and forth. If people have real proposals.

Juan: Can we agree that posts on this forum will be moderated.

Hannah: The most useful way this can go forward is if this isn't a debate, but a putting forward of proposals that can be vote. We'll collate all the motions.

Jacob: We need to discuss system used. Trying to collate a lot of proposals. We need to decide whether we're going to vote online or have open meeting. I suggest we have real debate. I propose we have real open meeting. Website – forum gets indicative votes.

Juan: I don't mind whether we vote online.

Luke: We can't vote online – unconstitutional.

Bryony: It seems like we want the grads to be able to vote on this.

Floor: If you have open meetings, lots of grads can't come. Can't be in Cambridge, research etc.

Jess: There's a reason KCSU elections happen both online and in person.

Shayan: Next week we will come together and come to a decision on this. This meeting has been more of a debate than a meeting. Put ideas on website, come back and vote.

Barnaby: What exactly are we voting *on*?

Luke: Someone needs to make a decision. I'd suggest that the exec discuss it.

Liz: Can I propose 4 rough categories – take down, leave up, change, replace.

Chad: Jonny can take it down?

Jacob: Process point – We haven't had much discussion on what the benefits of either voting system, etc.

Bayu: This isn't going to get resolved now. We can propose indicative votes, polls etc. More information to take away and process. The internet solves the problem of grads not being here. Accessing website, information etc. Coming to next open meeting with more enlightened mind.

Shayan: This motion is just a debate. Please get on the website. Send us motions. If you have a suggestion about exactly what to do, present motion.

Tindall: Have we resolved that exec are discussing the voting?

Shayan: The exec will discuss voting.

Tindall: A reminder - we talked a lot about voting. CUSU referenda – vote on that too.