On the 11th of November the Cambridge Union Society welcomed Julian Assange. He was speaking via videolink from inside the Ecuadorian Embassy. The format was a speech on ‘The Challenges to Freedom of Speech in the West’ followed by a Q&A session with audience, with Assange saying before the event that he did not place any restriction on what could be asked by members attending the event.

Assange started by saying that he “was put here under certain circumstances, different to the ones now” and went on to say that it “is hard to condense what has happened into a single formula” that being in reference to how much has changed since 2011 and since he founded Wikileaks. He said that to start he could see “parallels between me and Burchett” referencing the well-known journalist, whose passport had been taken away by the Australian authorities. Continuing on the subject of censorship, Assange mentioned that it had become much more “fluid, especially now with the internet”. Moving onto the problems that exist in London, he asked the audience to “imagine of New York, LA, DC, Chicago and San Francisco to have existed in London.” commenting on the limited movement in class structures and especially the “concentration of established networks in London”.

“All Burchett wrote about was true” concerning the report on the effects of the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima, and mentioned that the US tried to “vilify him” in response to the article. What Assange took away from this was that “you are not worried about some press attack”. Then, when commenting on the Western press he stated that “It is structured to dissuade people from talking about certain things” but that the situation had changed from when these were founded because “the internet has allowed the hoi polloi to publish” and that “no generation being as quickly educating.” Additionally, Assange mentioned that “Facebook is being festooned by laws” but not by governments, but by Facebook itself. To end his speech he says, “freedom of expression is now being wound back because of its success”.

The event then opened up to floor questions. He responded to a question about releasing people’s social security numbers by saying that while it was already available, “it was useless to journalists.” On the subject of Sony he said that they “wanted tax cuts” and “changes in copyright laws.”

Replying to a question about his home country, Assange responded that “Australia is a great country in many respects” but mentioned he was disappointed that it “has become a pacific theatre aircraft carrier for the United States”.

Another student asked “Why did you choose this background?” Assange said “It is from a documentary we produced in 2010, based on the gun camera footage of an Apache helicopter” in an episode which also killed two journalists. Attacking the censorship of his speech at the Oxford Union, Assange told of how at Oxford they “edited the background” because “it was classified.” And then justified their actions saying ‘it’s not because it was classified… it was copyright’. After explaining the video and how the US “does not own the copyright”, he played the two short videos, then saying “let’s see what Cambridge thinks about that.”

When asked about the most important series of documents, Assange uses the example of a series of documents which show [William] Hague entering the US embassy before the 2010 election. Assange asked “How could the US assist someone in the UK win an election?” Then reporting that “US ambassador says...”
that ‘we want a pro-US regime, we need it, the world needs it”.

On a question about the rape allegations Assange first said he was “surprised [he] didn’t get a trigger warning” but replied directly saying “no woman has alleged rape against me”. He added that “formally I have already been cleared by the chief investigator of Stockholm.” and that “the woman herself” said “that the police made it up and she was railroaded”.

A question online asked about his place in the Ecuadorian embassy considering its human rights, he said that “it was the first country” with a democracy “to step forward.”

The final floor question concerned what his future looked like. Assange called it a “political situation” and “depended on public support.” He then called the tabloid press in the UK “uniquely bad and obsessed by sex” referring to the sort of attention he has got in this country; adding that in the UK he “had an approval rating of minus 38” comparing it to the Chancellor who had “minus 39.” He said that the Cambridge Union vote was “partially about free speech and partly about me.”

To finish he commented on the referendum saying “is it the case that the Cambridge Union after inviting me to speak, did it start to feel pressure” and “needed democratic mandate to back it up.” This could mean it is “becoming bolder” suggesting that the situation could be a “good precedent” because it “will stiffen the spine of the Union” and show that there is a “small and often ignorant minority who oppose free speech” with the majority being in support of more controversial speakers. “I think it is a very interesting situation” with the caveat of “not unique”.

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For footage of the event go to https://www.youtube.com/user/cambridgeunionsoc
For photographs of the event go to http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/photos/chris-williamson?excludenudity=false&family=editorial&locations=61720&page=1&phrase=Chris%20Williamson&sort=mostpopular