

For immediate release

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“The most significant year of our history”

- The world-famous Cambridge Union turns 200 years old
- Commemorative debates and events to be held in Cambridge and London

Founded in 1815, the Cambridge Union is the oldest continuously running debating society in the world, and the largest and most famous society at the University of Cambridge. In 2015, the Union will celebrate 200 years of free speech and the art of debating – having played host to some of the most interesting figures of the last two centuries: Prime Ministers from Stanley Baldwin and Winston Churchill to Margaret Thatcher and John Major; US Presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan; civil rights campaigners from James Baldwin to the Rev. Jesse Jackson; inspirational figures including the Dalai Lama and Prof. Stephen Hawking; and household names such as Dame Judi Dench, Reginald D. Hunter, Sir Ian McKellen, and Russell Brand.

Former Presidents of the Union have included John Maynard Keynes, Arianna Huffington, Michael Howard, two Speakers of the House of Commons, an Archbishop of Canterbury, three members of David Cameron’s Cabinet, two winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, an Olympic medallist, and the director of *Mary Poppins*.

Alongside the Union’s regular programme for the year ahead, a series of high-profile events have been organised to celebrate the Union’s bicentenary – and its longstanding tradition of free speech and debating:

- **The Bicentenary Debate** – on **Saturday 7 February 2015** the Union’s famous debating chamber will be packed full with former Presidents and officers of the society to debate the motion: “*This House is not what it used to be*”. The main speakers – all ex-Presidents – include the first two female Presidents of the Union, Labour’s **Baroness Mallalieu** and former Lord Speaker **Baroness Hayman**, as well as former Tory Party leader **Lord Howard of Lympne**, former Lord Chancellor **Ken Clarke**, chairman of the Arts Council and *Big Brother* impresario **Sir Peter Bazalgette**, and FCA chairman **Lord Turner of Ecchinswell**. A commemorative dinner debate will be held beforehand for former and current Union officers – with more than 200 guests including Vince Cable, Andrew Mitchell, Douglas Hurd, Normal Lamont, Chris Smith, *Fatherland* author Robert Harris, and Lord Justice Jackson.
- **The Bicentenary Ball** – a fortnight later, on **Friday 20 February 2015**, this lavish ball, with the theme ‘A Night in History’, will be an occasion for all current students at Cambridge to celebrate the Union’s landmark anniversary.
- **The 2015 Garden Party** – the centrepiece of ‘May Week’ in **June 2015**, the gardens of Sidney Sussex College will host a summer afternoon celebration for over a thousand Union members from Cambridge and far beyond.
- **The London 200th Anniversary Debate** – on **Saturday 26 September 2015** the Union will hold a historic debate outside of Cambridge to close the 2015 celebrations and enable greater access for non-resident members and members of the public. Following the result of the 2015 general election, speakers will debate a topical issue of national significance at Middle Temple Hall. The event will be open to all to allow everyone to celebrate the end of the Union’s anniversary year. The speakers and the motion will be announced at the 2015 Garden Party.

These bicentenary celebrations are being organised by the 2015 Steering Committee of current and former officers, chaired by Alessandro Forzani. The current President of the Union, **Amy Gregg** – who, as a woman, would not have been able to hold the office during the first 148 years of the Union’s existence – commented:

“This is the most significant year of the Union’s long and distinguished history. We have hosted some of the world’s most prominent figures, upholding the principles of free speech by giving a platform to people from all walks of life, with all sorts of beliefs. We have never shied away from controversial topics, and we hope the future will bring many more years of debating the issues that matter.”

On the Union itself, she noted:

“One of the greatest things about the Union is how unique a platform it is. Many organisations host speakers and hold debates, but very few have as unique and diverse an audience as the Cambridge student population. The variety of questions and points made from the floor of the Union’s debating Chamber never fails to amaze me.”

New innovations for the next 200 years. But the 2015 celebrations are not just about looking backwards: alongside these anniversary events, the Union has launched its new permanent **live streaming service** from an HD multi camera rig, modelled on the House of Commons. Available full-time to Union members wherever they are, it provides access to all events – including the 2015 events – across the world. Trials during 2014 have resulted in the development of a regular network of contributors from Japan to Chile.

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Notes to editors

1. The Union’s website will be kept up to date with all 2015 developments and press releases throughout the bicentenary year: <https://cus.org/200th-Anniversary-2015>
2. You can also follow the latest news and announcements by following the Union on Twitter: [@cambridgeunion](https://twitter.com/cambridgeunion)
3. Images available for use: <https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0Bzdzw0-3UEhLTB5TGRvbnVEZHc&usp=sharing>