

**Deloitte.**The Cambridge Union Society  
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Cambridge, CB2 1UBEmail : [pressofficer@cus.org](mailto:pressofficer@cus.org)**PRESS RELEASE – 12.03.2015****“This House Supports the Cuts to Legal Aid”**

On Thursday 12th March, the Union held a debate on the proposed cuts to legal aid provision. This was the presidential debate, which began with the Lent team handing over to the Easter team.

The debate was opened by **Jonathan Djanogly**, MP for Huntingdon and former Under-Secretary of State for Justice. He began his speech by discussing the history of legal aid, saying that at its first introduction after the Second World War legal aid was useful, but now, especially under our more litigious society, legal aid is being used when there are better alternatives available. He criticised the Labour government's economic behaviours, and said that, with the need to cut spending, either prisons or legal aid must undergo cuts, as they are the two biggest areas of spending for the Ministry of Justice. He discussed situations in which litigation is not always the best solution, such as divorce, and praised the assistance provided by the Citizens' Advice Bureau. Mr Djanogly said that Britain's current system has been rejected in most other countries, and to instigate these cuts to legal aid would move Britain forward to a more modern and efficient system.

Outgoing President of the Cambridge Union Society **Amy Gregg** opened the case for the opposition. She stressed the problems for family law, in which cases can be very personally upsetting, and spoke disparagingly of the fact that now two thirds of parents are represented in court by someone not trained in law. She also criticised the proposed cuts for being ineffective economically, saying that they make cases drag on because, without the advice of a lawyer, cases take longer to settle. She attacked the cuts as "heartless", saying they buy into an inaccurate stereotype of criminal lawyers as greedy "fat-cats". Ms Gregg raised the point that the proposed legal aid cuts will put many off becoming lawyers, as the prospect of earning less money will make all but those with considerable personal wealth think seriously about whether it is economically worth their while. At the heart of her argument was the point that the legal aid cuts undermine the principle of equality of the law, severely disadvantaging those seeking legal help who do not have the funds to pay a lawyer themselves.

**Richard O'Keeffe**, affiliate lawyer, then continued the case for the proposition. He defended the legal aid cuts, saying that they encourage a move towards settlements outside of court. He argued that serious crimes, the cases of human significance, should be given preference in court over less significant cases, such as disputes with landlords. He presented cases in court as being like "a fight", and argued that it is best to keep minor matters out of this environment. Mr O'Keeffe criticised the current system as not being cost-effective, and disputed Ms Gregg's claim that legal aid cuts put many off becoming lawyers, saying that evidence suggests barristers are paid very generously. He concluded by saying that in the move from cottage industry to factory production, some people suffered, and the same is true here.

Current president of the UK Law Society **Andrew Caplen** took up the mantle for the opposition, bringing to the audience's attention the conclusions of the justice committee, that the legal cuts have prevented those who are in need accessing legal aid. He was critical of the damages of legal aid cuts, saying that they make justice inaccessible to many people, and also disputed that the cuts to legal aid have in fact made any meaningful improvement economically. He articulated the damage to individuals when their cases cannot be settled and the damage to the principles that underpin justice, as tens of thousands of people now cannot access legal aid simply because the type of case they are dealing with is not provided for. He concluded his speech by reminding the audience that some of the most vulnerable individuals are being denied.

The proposition case was concluded by **Michael Dunn Goekjian**, Cambridge University debater and second best speaker at the Worlds University Debating Competition. He urged the audience to cast out the politics of identity involved in this debate, saying that instead it is important to examine what this proposal would actually do. He told the audience that the cuts to legal aid only affect those with incomes over the median in

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the UK, attacking the opposition's argument that the vulnerable are being denied support. Mr Dunn Goekjian argued that there need to be cuts to ensure other services such as education and the NHS can continue running. He said that, despite short-term harms, in the long-term he believes people will realise representing themselves in court is bad, and therefore there will be a move towards alternative settlements and a lump sum system. He admitted that the issue was a "difficult decision", but that it was necessary.

Former Union President **Chantal-Aimee Doerries QC** concluded the debate as a whole. She talked of other countries' jealousy of the British justice system which Mr O'Keeffe had called "archaic". She criticised the assertion that those who need legal aid still get it, citing recent investigations into the success of the cuts by the Justice Committee. She said that the supposed "safety net" funds for legal aid had only been successfully accessed by 69 people, though it had been anticipated for some 5000. Ms Doerries QC discussed the harms for the "real people affected by this", particularly in family cases, where a 30% increase in personal representation has been seen. She picked out example of individuals clearly in need who narrowly missed the requirements to receive legal aid, arguing that the proposition were wrong to say that those most in need were still being supported.

**Debate Result**

Ayes: 11%

Noes: 68%

Abstentions: 21%

*The motion failed to carry.***By Helen Dallas**  
Co-Head of Press, Lent 2015**PRESS OFFICE**