

# SU Boycott Debate Minutes

Meeting on 21.11.2023 at 18.30 UK time

## List of Committee Members

Names, initials, pronouns and * to mark non-attendance	Role
Jacob Hougie, <b>JH</b> , He/him	President
Daisy O'Connor, <b>DOC</b> , she/her	Vice President
Oliver Law, <b>OL</b> , he/him	Treasurer
Luka Murphy, <b>LM</b> , he/him	Secretary
Salma Salifu, <b>SS</b> , she/her*	Welfare
Julia Sinkinson, <b>JS</b> , she/her*	Welfare
Luke Tyler, <b>LT</b> , he/him*	Welfare
Jess Morrissey, <b>JM</b> , She/her	Academic and Access
Ryan Simpson, <b>RS</b> , they/them*	Green
Ruth Chapman, <b>RC</b> , she/her	Catering, Accommodation and Facilities
Amit Ramakrishna Prasad, <b>ARP</b> , he/him*	Sports and Societies
Neela Nee, <b>NN</b> , she/her*	Ents
Saira Ahmed, <b>SA</b> , she/her*	Ethnic Minorities
Cosma Rubben, <b>CR</b> , she/her*	International Students
Harley Chidley, <b>HC</b> , they/them*	LGBTQ+
Maisie Johnson, <b>MJ</b> , she/her*	Gender Equalities
Malachi Gee, <b>MG</b> , he/him*	Disabled Students
Eleanor Lewis, <b>EL</b> , she/her*	Class Act
Lucy Robertson, <b>LR</b> , she/her*	Computing (non-voting)

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## 0. Administrative Matters

Meeting begins at 18.40

**SS, JS, LT, RS, ARP, NN, SA, CR, HC, MJ, MG, EL, LR** are absent.

# 1. Speeches

## 1.1 Oliver Law (**OL**)

Good evening, everybody, before I get into a cost benefit analysis, I aim to summarise the issue, to lay out what the stakes really are for the Corpus community. Let's be honest, nobody cares about the SU, the average election gets around 800 votes. This is a student community of at least 20,000, as a proportion this is miniscule.

What does this tell us about an institution that, supposedly, advocates for all of our interests? It is either actively harmful or does nothing.

My first point; the SU does nothing for us. They may have many initiatives, as you will no doubt hear, but cannot do anything the JCR can't. We have more money per head, more initiative, and better engagement with the student body, if voter participation is anything to go by.

The work that the SU does do is not helpful to students. We care about boring things such as merch and cheaper meals. These causes aren't flashy, they're hard dirty and boring. Despite many wonderful officers, including the one sitting here tonight, many others grandstand about issues that don't affect us. International relations or climate change aren't necessarily at the top of our agenda. Being more concerned about fossil fuel ties rather than the cost of meals or making colleges more welcoming is concerning coming from an institution that purports to represent us. Furthermore, a small active minority are a destabilising

presence within the SU. A welfare officer currently has a petition to remove him from his position. I won't get into the specifics, but this shows that something has gone horribly wrong with the institution. There are many within it who don't care about your interests and get a kick out of grandstanding on issues that don't affect you.

Let's move on to the moral case. There aren't particularly high stakes, but we do have a moral duty to continue this boycott. This is the only way that we can protest against an intuition that doesn't represent our interests. Perhaps in 10 years we can join if they are significantly reformed. What do we lose by boycotting? Not attending compulsory meetings that we can attend anyways. Renouncing the boycott would be a token gesture, in comparison to the strong moral stance we've taken.

Moreover, is a waste of time for the JCR, it reduces our efficiency by introducing a division of labour. There is no tangible benefit but many minor costs. This directly hurts your interests. We must keep this boycott going to protect your interests.

**Fergus Kirman** Point of Information (POI) – While I accept your point that engagement is low, turnout for electing sabbatical officers was around 2,500.

**OL** – I also understand your point, but in the grand scheme of things, this is still a tiny fraction. JCR elections at Corpus are a far greater proportion. Even if it didn't harm us materially, it would harm our moral standing as a college to re-enter this institution.

**JH** POI – In the most recent Presidential election we had turnout of about 50%.

## 1.2 Fergus Kirman (**FK**)

My name is Fergus, and I am the SU president. I was elected at the start of march and began my term in July, which will end next July.

I want to explain the boycott of the SU's Student Council, and what it means. It requires some refutation, but also my own arguments. I have three main points. Firstly, the main roles of the SU; it can't supplant the JCR but can support what do and act on a university-wide level. Secondly, what you achieve by boycotting. Lastly, what you can achieve by reengaging.

As someone on the JCR for 2 years, I recognise that the SU can't do everything. We fulfil different and particular functions that can't be fulfilled by the JCR. We can't get stash, negotiate rent, improve food, or improve security in Colleges in the way JCRs do. This will always be dealt with at the JCR level in the first instance. JCR people are the best placed, closest to students, more proximate to the voters, as we previously heard.

What can the SU do then if it can't be a JCR?

We do things on a university level that JCR officers, who are necessarily part-time can't do. We also have access to rooms and

committees as part of our role as the officially recognised undergraduate student union for the university. Let me give you some examples. The Freshers' Fair; JCRs or colleges wouldn't be able to do that. Clinical medicine bursaries; these have recently been expanded to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year medics;

**OL** POI – How would these functions change if Corpus were to join?

**FK** – I will address that later, though note this debate and vote is not about affiliation but the JCR's boycott of a particular meeting.

We do disciplinary reform, provide sexual health supplies, run the shadowing scheme, support students during the marking and assessment boycotts, campaign for more street lights, agitate for the expansion of U-bus routes, push for improvements in workload.

This might be all boring, and you might not care, but some of your students do. Many do recognise that it is useful that another body can fulfil these functions. We seem to do these fairly well.

I will address the claim that the SU doesn't confront real issues. We do care about broader issues, but if you want a focus on real issues, you need people in the room to push for focusing on those issues, rather than ideological issues. This is why the boycott doesn't make sense. You can send people into the room to make sure the SU doesn't spend all its time only addressing these high-flown issues. If you believe there is a problem with institutional capture, you need to engage to ensure a small minority can't destabilise in the way **OL** described.

**OL** POI – Does one seat matter?

**FK** – Yes, every vote matters. There was an amendment to the motion on making food provided in University-run cafeteria vegan, that would have adjusted it to be ‘vegetarian’, that fell by one vote. If you care about these issues, send someone to address the issues you care about.

What do you gain from a boycott? **OL** suggested that it makes your feelings heard, and that returning would be a token gesture. Corpus has been boycotting since 2020.<sup>1</sup> It doesn’t seem clear what the boycott is for, it doesn’t seem to rely on the SU’s behaviour. It would be more impactful to end the boycott and then boycott when something bad happens. If you boycott for years, and it leads to disengagement from the issue by the student body, it loses its moral force. The token gesture is in fact to continue boycotting. It isn’t a moral stand that Corpus undergraduates don’t care about the SU. The question being debated is whether you should be required not to attend, or whether you should be able to attend when you wish to. I think that you should be able to attend when needed. If there was a motion that you felt was negative for Corpus at Student Council, you should be able to send someone to argue your case and vote against it.

If you send people, you can hold sabbatical officers to account. If you have a problem with individuals or causes, you can speak out against them, and many motions can come down to a single vote.

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<sup>1</sup> Though Corpus was disaffiliated from CSU, the predecessor organisation to the SU, between 2009 and 2020



There are many things that you have to deal with at a university level. You should have discretion about whether you go, rather than be bound not to attend.

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## 2. General Questions

From **JH** – Fergus mentioned that the JCR are bound not to attend. The JCR are bound not to attend as voting members. I had the displeasure of attending Student Council earlier this term as a non-voting member. There were no votes because the meeting wasn't quorate. I would rather have been a non-voting member because it gave me a sense of a moral high ground and therefore allowed me to stand against what some in the SU were promoting. Do the candidates think that maintaining the boycott on voting, in the event that representatives choose to attend council, has a greater semblance of a moral voice, to help be a voice of reason against the SU?

**FK** – If you believe there needs to be a voice of reason, why on earth do you think that you don't deserve a vote? It might give you a feeling of satisfaction to boycott, that's fair enough. But if you think that something bad is happening, if you can change it, you should probably try. I would encourage you to use your vote in order to represent your constituents. Voting is half the job, speaking at meetings is the other half.

**OL** – I agree with much of that. Change should be made. But I disagree with the rest. Going to the meetings and explicitly not voting has much more significance than casting a measly vote that will not change anything 9 times out of 10. What does the boycott aim to do? Not voting is the whole point. If you still go, but not vote, you are showing the whole community that something is seriously wrong with the institution and you are taking a stand against it. There is nothing more effective than that.

From **Jacob Simmonds** – We have JCR elections with a turnout of just over 50%. I'm not asking why should we vote one way or another, but why should Corpus students vote at all in the boycott?

**OL** – This boycott is a real show of force by college. It would be a real tragedy if this really worthy cause slips by. The stakes aren't massive, as I said. But either way, if we re-join there will be adverse impacts on our college. The status-quo is broadly good for us.

**FK** – I sincerely believe in changing things by voting. Otherwise, you can take direct action, however, I would never endorse crime. Voting is the easiest and most straightforward way to bring about change. You might not care about changing the world in this manner. But think about what might benefit other students in this college. In a general election you vote for your own interests, but also for a vision of society more broadly. The status-quo doesn't benefit Corpus. When dreadful motions are submitted, Corpus JCR is the only JCR that boycotts, your representative can't go and vote against it. If you think that the SU will always be bad, and

you need to be morally clean, I don't see the reason why you don't at least send someone to vote against such motions.

From **JH** – Just picking up on that, you mentioned that there might be a dreadful motion that Corpus could vote against. Do you think there is a structural problem that these motions come up, and that Corpus needs to be there to stop that?

**FK – OL** suggests that there is a structural problem, a small group of students who have an actively destabilising presence. It is fair to suggest that students who vote in SU elections are not necessarily representative of the wider student body. That is why the SU has a policy on vegan food in university cafes, which I can see is not necessarily a priority for most students. It doesn't mean that Corpus needs to be the one vote that breaks a tie in every motion, but that is a case where it would have happened. One person speaking in a room, might have had a different impact. This is the situation we are in, and voting will aid your constituents.

**OL** – If we take you at your word, you've made a powerful case. But the reason that people don't vote on a structural level is because the SU has far less power than comparable student unions at other universities. We have a massive body of JCRs, which most universities don't have. If they didn't exist, you'd have much more responsibility. At other universities the SU is the centre for getting things done. People here don't see that the SU has

enough of a purpose. I don't think this will change because it never does, we've been having the same problems for decades.

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### 3. Targeted questions

From **RC** – Whenever I've interacted with the SU, it's been at a student level. The boycott doesn't affect that, I've been able to make changes. Why should I care about my JCR boycotting when I don't care about the SU on a college level?

**FK** – That is true. You should only care so far as student council is being boycotted, since that's the issue being debated and voted on. It holds sabbatical officers to account. If you don't interact with these officers or their campaigns, this might insulate you from them. Perhaps they then don't seem so relevant. Fair dos. In terms of policies, it would be good if a Corpus representative was there. Maybe a motion would arise that might heavily affect your student life. This isn't a case for having a rep at every meeting, but rather that a Corpus rep could have a chance to vote at any particular meeting in any given year. This might affect your university experience; the SU might lobby to change reading lists on your course, for example, or advocate for better street lighting in all areas except yours. It would therefore be good to have a rep to vote for or against a policy.

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## 4. Concluding speeches.

### 4.1 – **FK**

I've clarified the boycott and encouraged you to think about what benefits your students. You can either cast a vote at Student Council, when you want to, or not at all. Whether or not you think the SU is helping you, it will always be better to engage and utilise your vote. You might think this doesn't have relevance to the JCR and how your college is run. But your university experience often depends on things that occur on a university level. For your JCR not to have a vote is strange; you are voting not to have a vote. This boycott, respectfully, is not effective. This room is empty, and Corpus students clearly aren't that engaged with this issue. The JCR should obviously be able to vote on issues that affect your students.

### 4.2 - **OL**

As a student individually, rather than as part of a corporate JCR, if you are worried about things on a university level, you aren't missing out on anything; you can still engage with the SU. By opposing a boycott, you are hurting the JCR's operational capability, you are engaging with an institution that has been captured by a hurtful minority, who are offensive and harmful to many of our minority communities. Hold the fort, and maybe in the future we can reengage with the SU.

Meeting ends at 19.18