

I'm not really supposed to say goodbye, I know, and I'll still have a role on the Association's Council as Immediate Past President, but I can only say how much of a privilege it has been to serve the community in this way for the last six years. I hope I leave the Association in a reasonable state. I'm honoured and humbled to have served as its president and am delighted with its achievements.



RMA President, Mark Everist

Should Academic Societies Make Public Statements about Political Incidents?

Following up Mark Everist's piece in the last *RMA Newsletter* (May 2017) – which touched upon discourses around Trump's election and the Brexit vote, and their effects on musical scholarship praxis – I would like to share some thoughts on the potential roles of learned societies, arising from a heated debate that took place during the last AGM of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology (BFE), held in April 2017 at the University of Sheffield. The matter of discussion was whether the BFE should or should not make public statements in response to serious political incidents in the UK or elsewhere, particularly those relating to or affecting our profession.

I was the person who raised the issue during the AGM. I mentioned President Trump's Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States (aka 'the Muslim ban') as an example of the kinds of issues I feel that UK academic societies should be responding to. After this order was issued in January 2017, US colleagues took prompt action to oppose the ban, signing letters and issuing statements.

Those reacting included the American Musicological Society, the Society for Ethnomusicology and tens of thousands of individual academics. Around the same time, four colleagues and I decided to approach the BFE committee to request that our organization also oppose the ban. The committee's response at the time explained, among other things, that the society did not have the mechanisms for making or endorsing such statements and therefore our petition could not be supported by the organization.

At the AGM two months later, I proposed that mechanisms be created so that if and when situations comparable to 'the Muslim ban' occurred in the UK or overseas, we could react promptly. I reminded colleagues that our membership is international, and that many of us do international work. I also pointed out the uncertainty about how human rights will be protected after the UK's likely exit from the European Convention on Human Rights, predicted to be the 'next target' after Brexit.

BFE members were divided over the proposal. On the opposing side, some argued that making public statements would interfere with BFE's potential legal status as a charity. Others claimed that these statements are of a political nature and should be channelled through a political party, not through a learned society. Others recognized that there are many pressing issues in the world and also many different viewpoints within the BFE, and therefore finding consensus on which issues we should react to would be an impossible task. It was also suggested that concerns over political developments affecting our profession could be addressed at the 2018 BFE annual conference Europe and Post-Brexit Ethnomusicologies.

On the supporting side, some stated that reacting to issues such as 'the Muslim ban' is not about politics but about 'good or bad'. Others argued that these issues matter to us because they relate to ethical concerns that are central to our discipline, and that these impinge upon basic values upheld (presumably) by the majority of members. A suggestion was made to develop a statement of core values, which scholars should accept to become and/or remain members of the organization. This statement could then be used to decide which developments the society should react to. In other words, if an incident directly violated one or more of the organization's values, and was related to and/or impacted our profession, then we should react publicly. One person of US nationality noted that the effects of geopolitical currents can impact people in many walks of life. He shared his experience of having visa issues when travelling to Austria early this year, explaining that these issues were a consequence of retaliatory policies introduced after the US did not agree to visa-free travel for citizens of five EU countries.

On 24 September, Trump extended the travel ban to three further countries, including my own country of birth. Two days later, new actions of the Home Office affecting academics were reported. These included at least fourteen academics being denied visas to attend a single conference at the University of Cambridge, and a Diamond Light Source scientist being ordered to 'leave

the UK immediately' and threatened with six months in prison, forcible removal from the UK and a ban on returning to Britain for up to ten years, despite having a work visa valid until 2019.

It is my belief that the aforementioned incidents, the complexities of the current and future political landscape, the need to safeguard international links and collaborations, and the growing interest in the public roles of researchers, among other reasons, make it even more evident that academic societies should be prepared to react publicly when serious political incidents occur. I shall conclude this piece with an invitation to extend the above debate to the RMA membership.

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The RMA's position is that we could and should take a public role if and when political actions impact on our members, or music research as it affects us more broadly. As an example, we would be unlikely to make a statement about any nation's immigration policy in the abstract, but might do so within the context of a statement about the free movement of scholars and open scholarly exchange. Members are welcome to contribute to the discussion by contacting the Association's president-elect, Simon McVeigh: S.McVeigh@gold.ac.uk.