

Remarks by Eric Nelson, Beren professor of government

I would like us to reflect for just a moment on how we got here. Two years ago, a University task force on sexual assault asserted that final clubs were responsible for a wave of sexual violence against women on our campus. The administration responded to this report by announcing an unprecedented set of sanctions against undergraduates who join unrecognized social groups, including final clubs and sororities. As the subsequent debate unfolded, it emerged that the task force's claim about the link between final clubs and sexual violence was false, and that the data on which it had relied in making this claim had been misconstrued. From that point on, we ceased to hear anything from the administration and its supporters about the problem of sexual assault—although it must be said that the task force's assertion has not to date been retracted, nor has any apology been offered to the large numbers of Harvard students and alumni who were mistakenly (and very publicly) branded as sexual predators by the University.

The rationale for the sanctions then shifted; the danger was no longer assault, but discrimination based on gender. Single-gender social organizations were now said to be no less odious in principle than racially segregated ones—a remarkable finding from a College that admits hundreds of students each year from single-gender schools, maintains a host of single-gender sports teams, clubs, and performing groups, and divides students by gender in undergraduate housing. Presumably we would not do these things if we regarded them as

tantamount to Jim Crow. Indeed, I wonder if it has been noticed that several of the fellowships from which the administration proposes to exclude members of single-sex clubs are themselves tenable at single-sex institutions.

But before a proper debate could be had about this revised rationale, it shifted yet again—this time to the value of inclusion, full stop. On this view, the final clubs and sororities were to be anathematized, not for admitting members of only one sex, but for choosing their members at all. The question became whether it was so urgent to rescue some Harvard students from the discomfort of rejection that we ought to deny all of them the right to form *any* intimate associations of like-minded peers, even off-campus. But this too is now old news. The most recent justification for the proposed ban seems to be that we are worried about the integrity of the residential system at Harvard—the prospect of undergraduates fleeing the houses to live in a “Greek” world of fraternities and sororities. This despite the fact that 99% of undergraduates voluntarily elect to live in the houses—and that, if we are truly worried about this issue, we remain perfectly free to require undergraduates to live on campus, whatever the fate of the Lewis motion.

When the reasons offered for a given policy change as frequently as they have in this case, we should begin to wonder whether the policy in question has anything to do with reasons. The bottom line here, as it seems to me, is that we just don’t like these clubs. And some of them, at

least, clearly merit our dislike. But the first principle of a liberal arts education—and of the liberal society to which we are all rightly committed—is that disliking something is an insufficient reason to punish people for doing it. Here, I think, we might profitably learn from our students, two-thirds of whom rejected the proposed sanctions in a referendum last year.

Lastly, I think we need to take seriously the broader national context in which this debate is unfolding. It is news to no one in this room that we are currently facing a concerted effort by dangerous opponents to paint Harvard and our peer institutions as bastions of ideological groupthink, in which a frenzied and menacing political correctness has replaced common sense—and in which freedom of speech and association are routinely sacrificed upon the altar of diversity and inclusion. I do not think this is who we are, but it strikes me that, over the last two years or so—on issue after issue—we have been doing our level best to make it easier for these opponents to caricature us. This would perhaps be a price worth paying if we were right on the merits—but, as it happens, I believe we have not been. We have been getting it wrong and looking foolish in the process. My suggestion is that we ought to stop. There are, alas, very real battles ahead of us, for which we will require the support of a united faculty, student body, and alumni community—to say nothing of our fellow citizens. I don't see why on earth we would further risk that support merely to destroy a bunch of tweedy Victorian relics.

That there are problems with undergraduate social life at Harvard, no one will deny. But, as the committee report helpfully notes, these have primarily resulted from decisions that we ourselves have taken—and it is our responsibility to address them. Let us turn to that important business.

Thank you.