# British cartoon exhibition 'Licence To Offend' censored over political sensitivity



For centuries, British cartoonists have been revered for their sharp wit and incisive political commentary, earning acclaim as key voices in democratic discourse. However, a recent exhibition titled Licence To Offend, showcasing the works of prominent cartoonists, was abruptly censored due to concerns over potential offence.

The exhibition was scheduled to open to the public following a private viewing event at the Kingston Riverside 'TownSq co-working' venue in Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey. Organised by photographer Paul Mowatt and artist Zoe Dorelli of Whitelight Projects, the collection featured dozens of cartoons representing a broad political spectrum. Among the contributing artists were celebrated Mail cartoonists Mac and Jonathan Pugh, as well as Martin Rowson from the Guardian newspaper.

In a surprising move, the management of the co-working space asked for the immediate removal of the artwork shortly after the private view. Zoe Dorelli informed the cartoonists via email that the venue found the work "too offensive" and, given its dealings with councils across the country, felt it could not risk offending anyone or appearing politically biased. Dorelli said: "I was told they found the work too offensive! Apparently they have to deal with councils across the country and can't risk anyone getting offended, or of appearing too political."

Mac expressed his confusion and dismay at the decision, stating: "It's crazy. Everyone is so incensed. In bygone days satire used to be absolutely savage, but suddenly we can't express any opinions." He went on to highlight the inconsistency, noting that "the vast majority of the works have already been scrutinised and passed by editors and published in national newspapers."

Jonathan Pugh referenced one of his cartoons, depicting a prisoner confiding in a bird about "making some regrettable tweets." This particular cartoon was inspired by an incident earlier in the year when police visited the home of Daily Telegraph columnist Allison Pearson over a social media post she had deleted. Pugh remarked that the venue had known about the exhibition for weeks before suddenly "getting the jitters," and described their reaction as unnecessarily cautious towards something "rather unlikely to cause offence."

Rob Murray, whose cartoons have appeared in notable publications such as Private Eye and The Sunday Times, condemned the venue's actions as "a ridiculous decision but sadly not the first time a few of us have been censored/cancelled by local council types."

A spokesperson for TownSq Kingston clarified the venue's stance, stating: "Whilst we have not felt the exhibition was offensive, Kingston Riverside is a workspace, and our policy is to remain politically neutral." The spokesperson added that once it became apparent the artwork was deemed incompatible with a professional working environment, the venue respectfully requested its removal but permitted the artists to continue holding the exhibition space for free.

The incident has sparked a debate around the boundaries of satire and political commentary within public and professional spaces. The Licence To Offend exhibition aimed to celebrate the long-standing tradition of British cartoonists challenging social and political norms through humour and critique. Despite the cancellation of the display at Kingston Riverside, many of the contributing cartoonists remain vocal about their work's role in public discourse.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/oct/28/cartoons-giles> - Martin Rowson discusses the tradition of cartoonists incorporating subversive elements into their work, highlighting the role of cartoons as 'oases of anarchy' in newspapers.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jan/28/martin-rowson-phill-jupitus-cartoons> - An interview with Martin Rowson and Phill Jupitus, where Rowson reflects on the influence of historical satirists like William Hogarth and James Gillray on his work.
* <https://www.cartoons.ac.uk/cartoonist-biographies/q-r/MartinRowson.html> - A biography of Martin Rowson, detailing his education at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and his career as a political cartoonist for publications like The Guardian and The Independent.
* <https://www.cartoons.ac.uk/cartoonist-biographies/m-n/StanMcMurtry_Mac.html> - A biography of Stanley McMurtry, known as Mac, who worked as a cartoonist for the Daily Mail from 1971 to 2018, and was appointed MBE in 2004 for his services to the newspaper industry.
* <https://www.cartoons.ac.uk/cartoonist-biographies/p-q/JonathanPugh.html> - A biography of Jonathan Pugh, who has contributed to various UK national newspapers and magazines, including The Times, The Guardian, and The Independent.
* <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781003296409/dictionary-twentieth-century-british-cartoonists-caricaturists-mark-bryant> - A comprehensive dictionary providing information on nearly 500 British cartoonists and caricaturists active in the twentieth century, including their styles and influences.
* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14661933/Free-speech-row-cartoons-banned-exhibition.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data