# St Andrews rector reinstated after freedom of speech dispute over Gaza email



In the wake of the conflict that erupted between Hamas and Israel in October 2023, universities around the world, including St Andrews, found themselves at the nexus of escalating tensions, protests, and debates surrounding free speech and antisemitism. At St Andrews University, this situation has evolved into a crisis primarily involving the governance chief, Alastair Merrill, and newly elected rector, Stella Maris.

Shortly after the violence began, which saw a Hamas-led attack on Israel resulting in over 1,000 fatalities, Maris sent a controversial email to students in November 2023. In her message, she accused Israeli forces of perpetrating "genocidal attacks" in Gaza while also condemning Hamas for its actions. The response was explosive. Many Jewish students expressed feelings of being "unsafe" and "fearful," triggering an urgent need for the university to address the situation.

In a dramatic turn of events, Alastair Merrill, who also holds the position of vice principal, emerged as a pivotal figure not only in advising Maris but also in the subsequent investigation into her remarks. Emails obtained via Freedom of Information requests revealed a concerning dynamic: Merrill sought to influence the terminology used in communications about the investigation itself. In one significant exchange, he argued for altering the scope of the investigation to ensure it focused narrowly on Maris's actions as a trustee rather than a broader inquiry into her behaviour.

This intervention raises questions about the integrity and independence of the investigation led by Lady Morag Ross KC, who was tasked with scrutinising Maris's conduct. The independence of the probe has come under scrutiny, particularly given Merrill's suggestions on the wording of key documents. Lady Ross's eventual report concluded that Maris had breached her duties as a trustee, a finding that led to her removal from significant university roles.

Maris has categorically denied these accusations, claiming that she was a victim of a "smear campaign" after sending her email. Despite her initial dismissal, she subsequently won an appeal against the university's decision, which reinstated her role and underscored the contentious nature of the entire affair. University Chancellor Menzies Campbell ruled in her favour, stating that the processes surrounding her dismissal had significant implications for freedom of expression within academic institutions.

Support for Maris has not been universal, as some Jewish students labelled her communiqué as "divisive" and "harmful." The Jewish Society at St Andrews accused her of misleading students and even demanded her resignation, arguing that her remarks could incite hatred on campus. The complex interplay of free speech and communal safety remains a crucial yet challenging aspect of university governance today.

As the investigation unfolded, Merrill's actions garnered criticism from various quarters, with some, including Mid Scotland and Fife Green MSP Mark Ruskell, suggesting that the investigation was inherently biased against Maris. He called for the university to apologise to her and reevaluate its handling of the matter. The university has since asserted that Merrill’s suggestions were intended merely to ensure consistency with legal frameworks, claiming any implication of wrongdoing is "misleading and false."

This entire episode reflects a larger discourse within academia about how universities navigate political sensitivities and the responsibilities of their leaders. The debate over freedom of speech versus the need to maintain a safe environment for all students is far from settled. In an age marked by polarisation, incidents like those at St Andrews highlight the delicate balance that must be maintained to foster a campus atmosphere conducive to open dialogue while also protecting vulnerable community members.

As the situation develops, it is likely that St Andrews University will face ongoing scrutiny not only for the actions taken but also for how it addresses the implications for governance and ethical discourse within its ranks.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7: sourced from [[1]](https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/politics/scottish-politics/5247035/university-st-andrews-rector-emails-investigation/)
2. Paragraph 5: informed by [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cye0rj48kg5o)
3. Paragraph 6: derived from [[3]](https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/politics/5234764/st-andrews-rector-powers-gaza-wins/)
4. Paragraph 6: referenced from [[4]](https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/st-andrews-rector-israel-genocidal-attacks-wins-qe1kh842)
5. Paragraph 6: additional context from [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/aug/01/st-andrews-university-rector-dismissed-governing-body-israel-genocide-accusation)
6. Paragraph 6: supported by [[6]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/28/jewish-students-st-andrews-rector-fostering-hate-claim/)
7. Paragraph 7: concluding remarks from [[7]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/01/st-andrews-rector-ousted-after-accusing-israel-of-genocide/)

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/politics/scottish-politics/5247035/university-st-andrews-rector-emails-investigation/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cye0rj48kg5o> - St Andrews University's rector, Stella Maris, was removed from her role on the university court after sending an email to all students referring to 'genocidal attacks' by the Israeli government. An investigation found she had 'breached her responsibilities' to students, but Maris argued it set a 'dangerous precedent for freedom of speech'. She will no longer sit as president of the university court but will remain in a pastoral care role for students. The university stated the decision came after she repeatedly declined to accept the conclusion of an independent investigation into her comments.
3. <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/politics/5234764/st-andrews-rector-powers-gaza-wins/> - St Andrews University rector Stella Maris won her appeal after being penalised for remarks about 'genocide' in Gaza. She had been stripped of her formal powers in the governing body following backlash over her claims in 2023 about Israeli actions in the war-torn territory. Maris appealed, claiming she was the victim of a 'smear campaign'. University Chancellor Menzies Campbell ruled in her favour, allowing her to resume her full role as head of the university’s court. Maris stated the decision was a defence of free expression within universities.
4. <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/st-andrews-rector-israel-genocidal-attacks-wins-qe1kh842> - Stella Maris, rector of the University of St Andrews, who accused Israel of committing 'genocidal attacks' in an email to all students in October 2023, has won her appeal after being removed from her role on the institution’s governing body over the comments. Maris was dismissed as president of the university court following the email, sent shortly after she was elected as rector and weeks after the Hamas-led attacks in southern Israel on October 7. In the email, she said a vigil had been held at the university 'following weeks of genocidal attacks by the Israeli government against Gaza'.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/aug/01/st-andrews-university-rector-dismissed-governing-body-israel-genocide-accusation> - The rector of St Andrews University, Stella Maris, has been dismissed from the institution’s governing body and her position as a trustee after she accused Israel of genocide and apartheid. Maris criticised the decision to remove her from the two roles, which came after the university commissioned an investigation into an email she sent in November to all St Andrews students calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. The investigation by Morag Ross KC, published on Thursday, said it would be 'disproportionate' to dismiss Maris. But the university court – St Andrews’ governing body – said it had acted because she repeatedly declined to accept Ross’s conclusions, including that she had made some students 'fear for their safety'.
6. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/28/jewish-students-st-andrews-rector-fostering-hate-claim/> - Jewish students at one of Britain’s most prestigious universities have accused its new rector of abusing her position to 'foster hate' after she said Israel had committed genocide in Palestine. The University of St Andrews Jewish Society said a message sent by Stella Maris to students about the conflict in Gaza, which also called for a ceasefire, was 'divisive, harmful and not based in fact'. Urging her to apologise or resign, the society accused her of an 'abuse of power' and of misleading them by showing them a draft of the message before it was sent that omitted the genocide claim.
7. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/01/st-andrews-rector-ousted-after-accusing-israel-of-genocide/> - The rector at one of Britain’s top universities has been dismissed from its ruling body after 'inflaming tensions' on campus by accusing Israel of committing genocide against Palestinians. Stella Maris has been stripped of key positions at the University of St Andrews after she repeatedly refused to accept the findings of an independent report highly critical of her conduct in the wake of Israel launching its offensive against Hamas. Ms Maris, who became rector in November 2023, issued a message to thousands of students that month denouncing 'weeks of genocidal attacks by the Israeli government against Gaza' and referring to 'apartheid'.