The Sylvans

Detailed summary powered by AI

19 October 2026

Motion: dress codes are a form of respect, not oppression.

Contents:

1. Analysis of the outcome

2. Detailed transcript

1. Analysis of the outcome

The motion went in ahead by eight to five and came out behind by seven to 12, with three abstentions. Yet the room never accepted that dress codes oppress. The opposer barely argued it. What failed was the word 'respect'. The opposition offered practicality as the better description of most dress codes, and the floor supplied a test, chosen or imposed, under which some codes were plainly oppressive. A motion claiming dress codes were respect and not oppression could not survive either move.

The proposition's case: theatre, ceremony, choice

The proposer's opening rested on two examples and a premise. Its examples, front-of-house staff and wedding guests, were well chosen and familiar. The premise was that British dress codes are voluntary. It carried the speech, and it was also where the case was exposed. A dress code that staff must wear under contract is voluntary only in the sense that the job is.

The opening also conceded early that historic dress codes were impositions. That was candid, and it gave later floor speakers an opening. If dress codes had once marked rank by force, the room could ask how much of that survived. Two speakers asked exactly that.

The closing was much stronger. 'Worthy of care', borrowed from an opponent's definition, turned the opposition's own vocabulary into the motion's case. The distinction between imposed and chosen codes, illustrated by the yellow star against Jewish religious dress, was the most precise argument either side made. It came, however, after the room had already learned to apply that distinction against the motion as well as for it.

The opposition's case: practicality, Iran, style

The opposer did not try to prove that British dress codes oppress. The opening replaced respect with practicality, and the closing replaced it with style. That was the decisive choice. It let the opposition agree with almost every example the proposer gave while denying the motion's description of them.

The Iranian cases did a different job. Mahsa Amini and the singer sentenced to lashes defined oppression so vividly that the British examples could not compete with them. They did not make British codes look oppressive. They made the motion's 'not oppression' depend on which codes it meant, since nobody in the room disputed that Iran's were.

The closing's account of the Georgian court was well aimed: an elaborate dress code paying homage to a king few respected. It answered the proposer's premise that dressing up signals regard.

The ebb and flow of the dress codes and respect floor

Four battlegrounds formed. The opposition held two, the proposition one, and the fourth decided the result.

History and class. The sumptuary laws speaker and the former fashion designer tied dress codes to cost and status, and the restaurant story gave the argument a face. The school uniform speaker contested the point well, arguing that uniform levels rather than ranks, and the opposer later agreed. On balance the class argument held, helped by the parable of the friend unable to hire black tie.

Occasion and professionalism. This was the proposition's ground. The Ritz and Glyndebourne speech and the pilot in tracksuit bottoms were the best arguments for the motion all evening. The opposer's closing tried to reclassify them as style. That was a fair hit on the Ritz but less obviously on the pilot.

Conformity. Two speakers argued that uniforms make people think alike, citing the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Nazi party's attention to brand. The proposer turned the second example around in

closing, but the conformity concern itself was not answered.

Chosen or imposed. The decisive contribution came from the floor. One opponent separated practical codes from codes kept for their own sake, and argued that respect is given by the wearer, so enforcement turns it into something else. Another drew the line at codes imposed by law. Once those tests were on the table, the motion's blanket claim, that dress codes are respect and not oppression, was hard to hold.

What the floor added to the dress codes and respect debate

This was a rapid debate, and the evening shows the format doing what it is for. The room's working definition of the motion shifted, and the shift came from the floor. Neither opener supplied the chosen-or-imposed test. It was assembled by two opponents of the motion, and then adopted by the proposer in closing as the motion's best defence.

The strongest case for each side also came from the floor. For the motion, it was the speaker on the Ritz and Glyndebourne, who gave dress codes a purpose beyond identification. Against it, the speaker who distinguished codes kept for their own sake did more than the opener to explain where respect ends.

Two readings of the dress codes and respect question

The motion could be read as a claim about the wearer or about the code. On the first reading, dressing for an occasion is a courtesy the wearer extends, and most people in the room accepted that. The funeral, the wedding and the Ritz were all cases of it. On the second, a dress code is a rule someone else sets, and the question is what the rule-setter wants. Practicality, branding, rank and control all appeared as answers, and none of them is respect.

The proposer spoke mostly to the first reading and the opposer to the second. Floor speakers who began from the wearer tended to support the motion; those who began from the rule tended to oppose it. The proposer's closing tried to join the two through choice: a code is respect when the wearer would have chosen it anyway. That was persuasive. It also conceded that some codes fail the test, which the motion's wording did not allow.

What the dress codes and respect debate left unexamined

Nobody examined gender directly, although the opening history, the Iranian cases, the office anecdote and the date example all turned on it. Religious dress was raised as a protected choice and as a state imposition, but the room did not discuss the space between, where a community rather than a law sets the expectation.

The question of who pays was raised twice, by the fashion designer and in the parable of the friend hiring black tie, and never answered by the proposition. The Ritz's loan of a shirt and tie was the nearest thing to a reply.

What drove the result

To keep its lead, the proposition needed the room to treat dress codes as a single thing. The opposition and the floor split them apart: practical codes, stylish codes, legal codes and codes kept for their own sake. Once that happened, few people could vote that all of them were respect and none oppression. Three moved into abstention, and the rest of the opposition grew.

The abstentions deserve a sentence of their own. No abstentions were counted at the opening show of hands, and three were at the close, which fits the several floor speakers who said they could see both sides. Several people had also left before the final count, so the movement cannot be read as individual changes of mind. What the numbers do show is a room that began with a clear lean towards the motion

and ended without one: some against it, and some unwilling to call dress codes either respect or oppression.

The proposer argued that a dress code marks something as worthy of care. The room agreed, as long as the wearer was the one who decided.

2. Detailed transcript

The dress codes and respect motion, and the opening show of hands

We're now going to be debating something completely different. The motion we're going to be debating is: dress codes are a form of respect, not oppression. Same format as before: a proposer and an opposer, who both get five minutes to speak to start with, and then floor speeches for three minutes. Quickly, just in case people have got strong opinions on this, a quick poll. Who would be in favour of the motion? The motion is: dress codes are a form of respect, not oppression. Can you just keep your hands up? And against the motion?

The proposition opens: dress codes then and now

Hello. I will be proposing the motion that dress codes are a form of respect, not oppression. My friends, my fellow Sylvans, we come here today to debate the motion about dress codes, and I'm going to skip over what most of my argument would be, which is how dress codes were used in the centuries before democracy and mass industry, basically the world we know today. Dress codes marked you out. It was a form of respect. Were you a lord? You were allowed to dress in such a way.

Were you a peasant? Well, you had to respect that and dress as such. Were you a man or a woman? You had to dress that way. It was not a society I would have wanted to grow up in. But the societies of the past did not have the freedom of options that we have today. So dress codes were a form of respect, hands down. That's what it was. It was the way they had to live.

So let's move forward to today, in the 21st century, where a globalised Earth has a multitude of choices in the ways we can dress. People on the streets of London no longer go round in bowler hats and suits. Ladies do not have to wear the big hats and corsets that they might have done centuries ago. They have the freedom to wear jeans, dresses. There are barely any dress codes in force. But is it oppression if we do ask somebody to abide by a dress code? I would argue not. I would argue that Britain provides a good example that dress codes are a form of respect and not oppression, because as I understand it, you cannot force people to wear certain clothes in Britain.

I don't know of any laws about it, apart from the fact that you can't go running around naked except at designated nudist camps. You can wear what you like, and you can dress your children however you like. There are religious garments which people are entitled to wear as a sign of their religion: hijabs, Orthodox Jews and their head coverings. We can't force them to take them off.

Theatres, front-of-house staff and the uniform of trust

This is something that has come up in my line of work in the theatres, because going to the theatre used to be an occasion for which you dressed up in a suit, you dressed smart, you wore your best. Now people will rock up to these shows, for which they've maybe paid 300 pounds, possibly even 400 pounds, for tickets, and they're wearing T-shirts and shorts and jeans. Not exactly a dress code by our standards of, say, a dinner party or a wedding or a funeral, and that's fine.

That's their choice. But let's look at who they're walking up to. There are staff on the doors of the theatre who are wearing some kind of suit. They are wearing maybe a shirt, maybe a little lapel badge with their name on it, or maybe they wear T-shirts; maybe they're one of the cool theatres. The point is, there is a dress code that has been adopted as a form of respect.

When you go into a place of industry, you do not want to walk in and see the staff with their shirts hanging out of their trousers, or with their trousers hanging down here, so you can clearly see their underpants. You want them to have a designated look, as a form of respect, so that you can walk in and

know that person is someone who knows their job. You can rely on them. If you ask them the directions for the toilet, they will help you.

The people who are serving downstairs at this very pub have their dress code. They wear a shirt of some kind with the Ye Olde Cock Tavern logo on it, and that's a form of respect. I believe it shows that we can trust them. They're reliable. They are showing respect to us. They are showing that they are subordinate to the job, subordinate to what we need. They know that they have signed a contract and they are being paid to carry out a function.

So that is in terms of work. Let's talk about weddings, funerals and all the other occasions where we voluntarily dress. Would it affect the atmosphere if we turned up in T-shirts, jeans, whatever we wanted to wear? Yes, because you want a wedding or a funeral to be a special occasion. You want to show that you have set aside this day to commemorate a special occasion, whether it's happy or sad. Dress codes can feel oppressive. They can feel pretty wearying.

Say you are going to a more formal debate and they have asked you to put on a tuxedo: what am I putting on this heavy jacket in the middle of summer for? True, but it is a form of respect. You are showing that you are actually making the effort for the debate. I'm out of time already. We live in a free society, and dress codes are voluntarily chosen. They are a sign of respect. Please support the motion.

The opposition opens: practicality, not respect

Chair, ladies and gentlemen: a form of respect, really? I think a dress code is really practical. All my business life, I have worn a suit and a tie and a white shirt when I was in a customer-facing environment, because I was representing my company. When I went into the office and I wasn't in a customer-facing environment, I could wear whatever I liked. But outside of the company, I was the face of the company. That is simply practical: wearing a suit. If you go to the theatre, you want to identify a member of staff, so you look for a uniform.

It is simply practical. It's not necessarily about respect. You want to know the way; you look for a uniform. I go into the supermarket, I want to ask a member of staff where to find something, I look for a lady in a uniform, something that I can identify. How embarrassing is it if you go up to another customer and say, "Where do I find the custard creams?" So it's simply a matter of practicality.

Iran and Afghanistan: what oppression looks like

Now, if you want to know about oppression, I'll tell you about oppression. Have you heard the name Mahsa Amini, in Iran? A young lady in the street, who had come from somewhere outside Tehran, was picked up by people in a van who said, "You're wearing your hijab improperly", and she was taken off in the van, into custody, and lo and behold, she died in custody, simply because she was wearing her headscarf improperly. That's what they said. Nobody was held to account. There was no explanation of why or how she died. That is oppression: where you have vans patrolling the street, full of people who look at how you're dressed, and if you're improperly dressed, they take you away.

Parastoo Ahmadi: that's another lady from Iran. Heard the name? She's a singer. She was singing on the stage with her band in a sleeveless black dress, with no headscarf, and yet she was arrested. And what was the charge? I wrote it down at the time. She violated the country's legal and cultural norms. That was what she was charged with. Seventy-four lashes was the punishment. This is a country where they lash women with a whip, 74 times, just for standing up and singing in a sleeveless black dress without a headscarf. That is oppression, my friends.

And you go to Afghanistan. Be very thankful that you're not born as a woman in Afghanistan. It's probably the worst place to be born as a woman, because you can't go out to work. You have to stay at

home and do the cooking and the cleaning and produce babies. That is what they do. And if you go outside, you have to have a male relative with you, and you have to be dressed from head to toe in a chador, which is a blue garment that goes from the head down to your ankles.

There's a little grid that you look out of, and you have no peripheral vision. I have been through Afghanistan, and I have been to Kabul myself. I have seen it. So that is oppression by the Taliban, by religious decree or whatever you call it. In this country we don't have that, thank heavens. But we do have practicality. We dress as we please. But if you go to a supermarket or a theatre, or if you're in a customer-facing situation, you dress accordingly. That is simply practical. Thank you.

Floor: a former fashion designer on cost and judgement

I used to be a fashion designer, so I actually thought I might want to do this debate, but it was the oppression bit. When you design clothes, I prefer to design them for slim-figure people, and I used to be slim. I haven't made any clothes in recent years. Anyway, the reason I can't get away from the oppression, and also the respect: yes, it is respectful to wear a suit. But when I was in offices, maybe at the same time as the opposer, even if you weren't front-facing, you still had to wear a suit and tie.

So when I first saw Cameron, the PM, appearing in pictures without his tie, I was like, now. Going to the theatre, I don't really care. This is 2026. If somebody wants to turn up in shorts, they can, okay? Because at the end of the day, a tux, right? I had several tux jackets, because you get them from charity shops.

But I don't believe it's all a form of respect, because there is a debating club where they want you to wear a dinner suit. Now, I actually think that in 2026, where there's a cost of living crisis, and they want their audience to come in business attire, well, what is business attire? Business attire is a suit, right? How many people wear suits? So if you were to really go by that and go to their meeting, it means you've got to buy a suit to attend their meetings.

Luckily, I've seen online that most of the audience come dressed like we are: professional casual. And by the way, something about respect: I had this top on inside out. The only person who noticed it was a French person, who told me my top was inside out. So it depends how you look at clothing. If a French person walked down the road in the seventies and eighties, you used to know they were French, because they had this style, they had this flash about them.

I call myself a fashionista, because it can be a very "moi, moi" world. And I do not like drop-down trousers. I'm really sorry to say. If you're under 25, I will allow it. I have nephews older than that, and they wear it, and they know I don't like it. But you know something? If I go into a store, and the person's going to speak to me, I am not going to judge them, because it's the same thing as if I start speaking Jamaican now: my words are still the same.

So what comes out of that person's mouth is fine. And listen, you know how many men I tell off for wearing drop-down trousers? I know I shouldn't, but I say to them, "Are you a leg man or a bum man?" I even asked my nephew that, and we get on well. And they answer the question, and I say, "I'm a bum woman. Put your pants up." Thank you.

Floor: sumptuary laws and the restaurant door

I am against the motion. Dress codes: now, I know the proposer didn't really want to talk about the history of them, but a lot of the reasons why we still venerate them today are based on traditions. And if we think about where those traditions came from, it's oppression by force from the government. This country is no longer so, but that's not true of all aspects of this country. There are certain clubs and certain restaurants that you cannot go to if you do not have the right kinds of clothes.

The history is sumptuary laws, and they mostly came about from the 14th century, after the Black Death, in this country as well as in Italy and France. They are based around the idea that the nobility, the crown, could no longer easily distinguish between merchants and their feudal overlords. They couldn't tell by how they dressed or what they wore, because the merchants were so wealthy they could have whatever cloth or jewellery they wanted. So the crown enforced laws and said: you are of this station. You cannot buy these things. You cannot wear these things. You cannot show yourself to be above your station.

Now, it is true we do not have those laws today, but those traditions still infest our society through classism. Can you imagine going to a restaurant? You've worn your best clothes, and the people there turn around and say, "Sorry, you're not good enough." I have been in that position. It is galling and embarrassing. It's what you could afford, but they say no. That is a clear dress code, and it's all about a separation between those who are deemed morally good because they can afford the right kinds of clothes and can look their best, and those who cannot. That is oppressive in nature. Thank you.

Floor: school uniforms as a great leveller

Firstly, to pick up on the historical examples that have been pointed out: the sumptuary laws are a very good point of reference here, and it's particularly notable that they come out of the Black Death, at a time when there's a major challenge to the fabric of the social hierarchy. So many people have died, rich and poor, right across the social hierarchy, and the value of labour has been pushed up because the pool of labour has been depleted. So that comes out as a means of reinforcing hierarchy.

But now I think things are being subverted, and the way in which dress codes are being used in the modern day is very, very different. You now have men in very high positions, leaders of tech companies, who make a point of constantly dressing in jeans, T-shirts and hoodies, Mark Zuckerberg being the most obvious example. And increasingly, with the trend towards athleisure, it's becoming more of a statement to dress casually than to put on something more ornate. So we're starting to see a cultural shift here.

But I think a particularly good example comes from my experience of wearing school uniform. God knows, my school's lumpy grey jumper was not the height of fashion, but it actually became a great equaliser and leveller. Particularly among girls, we would focus on the minute differences: what brand of rucksack we were wearing, what kind of pencil case we had. But the contrast with the odd non-uniform day, on which we were allowed to wear whatever we liked, was very notable.

With uniform, we could no longer obviously tell who was coming from money and who was not. We were focusing on the inherent characteristics of a person rather than the things that were more contingent about them and their social background. So in many ways it's contrary to the idea that there is some kind of hierarchy. It distracts people from hierarchy towards the things we actually need to be focusing on about others. And yeah, I will leave the room now.

Floor: compulsory office dress codes are infantilising

I don't know whether I misunderstood this motion, but I approached it from the point of view of dress codes in the workplace. I'm not arguing against uniforms for police, for ambulance staff, even for theatre ushers. I'm approaching it from the point of view of compulsory office dress codes. I think they are neither a form of respect nor oppression. They are disrespectful. A dress code is telling you: you think you know how you should dress, but we know better. It is infantilising. It is disrespectful to your judgement, to your dignity and to your competence.

At school, many of us had to wear school uniform, whether we liked it or not. But now we're adults, and the whole point of childhood was that we would grow into adults, able to make our own decisions about ourselves. The fact that we spend an awful amount of time working, increasing the profits of a company or delivering a service, doesn't entitle the people that we work for to dictate to us how we should dress.

I think it can also be a bit of an insult, not only to the person who is told how they should dress, but to the clients of the organisation, because I think people are more intelligent than to judge whether they are getting better or worse service based on the presentation of somebody in front of them. So for those reasons, I think compulsory dress codes should be confined to a bygone era.

Floor: barefoot in London, and why context decides

Thank you. I don't know where I stand on this motion. I think I'm in the middle. When I was in my mid-twenties, I used to walk around London barefoot, wearing tie-dye trousers and a Hawaiian shirt, just completely colourful. Because I did think of dress codes as a form of repression: I just want to be me; don't tell me what to wear. So what I'm getting to, I think, is that this is highly contextual, which is why I'm in the middle.

"Would you allow your son to do that today?"

If he was at that same life stage, I would say sure. He's going through a phase. Now, the opposite of that: recently I unfortunately had to attend a few funerals, and of course I dressed in black, with a tie. Had I not done that, I would have seen it as a complete mark of disrespect. So the dress code there was definitely something I had to follow, as a sign of respect. On another occasion I went to a wedding dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, with little trousers and shoes on, and I got a lot of blowback for it. The bride and the groom found that to be disrespectful, as did some of my colleagues. But in the end I never saw the bride and the groom that day, because they were so busy at their wedding.

I have noticed at work that if I dress professionally, with a shirt, not necessarily a tie, I am perceived to be more competent and more professional, and you do get all sorts of rewards. So it's an odd one. I think there's definitely this idea of it being a repressive convention, but at the same time that convention can be good or bad, and I think it's highly context dependent. Take a date, for example. Women will go on a date and prepare, get dressed up, and then you turn up in a T-shirt and some jeans, and they tend to find that a little bit disrespectful. So you're reducing your chances.

Floor: dress codes kept for their own sake

I actually think this is a really well put together framing of the debate. I'm going to be opposing. Is a dress code about respect or oppression? To tackle this logically, we've got to start by distinguishing, because obviously I'd be arguing that dress codes are more oppressive, but clearly not all dress codes are oppressive: football kits, for instance, or tennis whites, or military uniform. We need to differentiate between any dress code and a dress code that's in place for its own sake, where there's no practical benefit to it.

Military uniform is a dress code, but there is a practical need for it: camouflage. Football kits are a dress code, but you need the two teams in different kits so the referee can blow for a foul. We need the goalkeepers in their own kits because they're the only ones who can pick the ball up with their hands in the area. So there's a practical need for that. Not all dress codes are oppressive.

But when the dress code is in force for its own sake, then is it respect or oppression? I think the more a dress code in force for its own sake is insisted upon, the more it resembles oppression, in most cases. If we bring out a definition of respect, from the Cambridge Dictionary, though I got it from AI: respect is a positive feeling, a polite behaviour, or high regard shown towards someone or something considered

important, valuable or worthy of care. So it's the person doing the dressing who's doing the respecting. They're not being forced to do it. I think the more enforced the dress code is, the more it's usually important to the recipient of the dress code, not the person doing it, and it's usually oppression.

The opposer raised obvious ones: ultra-conservative dress in Afghanistan is pretty oppressive. In 1930s Germany, Jews were made to wear yellow stars. That was clearly a form of oppression. I think you could even say that in supermarkets or DIY stores, when the people behind the checkout are made to follow a dress code so you know what job they're doing, they're being subjugated into the branding of an organisation. I find that quite aggressive as well. And to rebut the funeral argument very quickly: a very interesting point about funerals. But if someone turned up for a funeral in a black T-shirt and jeans, for instance, they wouldn't be refused entry to the funeral. I think they would be given licence. They might be turning up late. They need to mourn someone.

"Maybe if it's got no holes in the jeans, because ripped jeans would be like this."

But would you refuse someone access to a funeral on the grounds of ripped jeans if they really knew the person well and they just couldn't afford to buy the suit, and they explained that?

"No, no, they could have an exploding washing machine."

Floor: imposed by law, or freely chosen?

I'll be firmly here, because I'm firmly on the opposer's side of this. Absolutely; it doesn't happen often. Listen, I think we need to make some specifics here. I think dress codes are oppression if they are imposed. I take a dress code to be one which is imposed by law. We need to make that clear; otherwise it's open for both of you to argue which one it is. But I'll take it as imposed by law, and in that case it's oppression. Now, there are two cases that were mentioned which are clear cut to me. Iran was mentioned: clear cut to me. Jews in Germany: clear cut to me, on the basis of fairness.

The exceptions that were mentioned are the cases of practicality for the common good. The military: if someone shows up in jeans when you're due to fight in the snow, that puts everyone at risk. It just doesn't make sense, and you shouldn't allow that by law, because it's a risk for everyone. The same for doctors in hospitals. Imagine if everyone could go around dressed like a doctor; you'd find it difficult to find a real one. So that also should be disallowed by law. So there are sanctions there.

Then there are borderline cases. To me the school uniform is a borderline no, in that I wouldn't really want my daughters to be made to wear a uniform in school. I think it was something that was adopted when different people could afford different clothes, and that could distinguish them socially in schools. I don't think that's the case anymore. But if it has to be, it has to be; I don't have a big argument against that.

A borderline yes on private events. Funerals were mentioned: the black T-shirt, the ripped jeans, those are debatable cases. But imagine Uncle Ed, the drunkard, showing up in pink shorts at a funeral. That should be utterly refused, and I don't see a case not to do that. By the same token, drunkard Ed in pink shorts showing up at a wedding is maybe borderline acceptable. So I think private events are borderline.

On private establishments, which were mentioned, I think that is fine as long as the dress code is published beforehand. If you know that going somewhere implies wearing certain things, and it's a private establishment, I think it's acceptable that if you show up in a different dress code, which you knew about, you are refused. Unless it's outrageous: you need to be dressed in gold and so on. So I'll conclude: to me, the moment you can enforce by law how I dress in general environments, chances are my liberties are more infringed than protected, and on that basis I oppose the motion.

Floor: dress codes and respect as a language

I will start with the basics of the question. What is respect? Someone gave a long definition. I will make it very simple. Respect is giving value to something. For me, it's as simple as this. When it comes to values, I see clothing conveying quite a lot of them, whether you're imposing it or whether you leave it free. If you impose a dress code like school uniform, you can promote equality and solemnity. It gives a certain importance to the situation. If you're in front of your professors and you have to give a presentation: I've seen this at university, people coming in shorts and T-shirts because it was warm that day, while the teachers and lecturers who were listening were all dressed up nicely.

Is that an excuse? I don't think so. Read the room. There has to be a form of importance given to it. And if anyone has to make an effort, it's really the student, because they are the one being assessed and needing to learn.

It also conveys intimacy and dignity, if we want to protect people, especially children, from exposure to sexuality and nudity. It was said earlier that there are certain clothes that are really revealing, and we cannot have those. I was in St James's Park one day, at the end of a protest for the Pride movement, I think, and there were people who were just bottom naked, and there could have been children around. I was shocked by this. So we impose codes for a reason, and this is mainly to convey respect.

I talked about imposing, but values are also conveyed when it comes to the freedom of choosing. It conveys a form of identity and values. If you choose a specific brand, it's for a reason. It's not only about the marketing. Brands also relate to specific values. You see them all putting the rainbow on their brands, because they are attaching themselves to a specific value. I will use the last minute I have to say that the way you dress is signalling and communicating to others, the same way as we do with language. If my "hello" means "I will kill you" in your ear, we cannot communicate. And when you signal a particular group belonging, you need to be really careful about this.

France has taken the position that the more you promote your own specific identity as an individual or a subgroup within the nation, the more you prevent yourself from interacting with others effectively. So it's about mitigating communautarisme, really, and we need to be very sensible about what kind of signalling we do, not to mention all of these T-shirts with specific messages that could be racist or sexist. So I see the dress code as something that allows us to connect and to interact, and not necessarily something oppressive all the time. Thank you.

Floor: a parable of two uncles at a black-tie wedding

I'm going to split this into two bits, tackling the respect part and then the oppression part, and I'll do this in a bit of a parable format, if that's all right. The first question I want you to think about is: do any of you value attire over attitude when considering respect? I'm about to get married. I send out my invitations to all my friends. It's a black-tie event, a traditional British wedding. One uncle turns up dressed absolutely perfectly: little black bow tie, lovely suit, flawless shoes shining, everything exactly how I described. Brilliant.

My other uncle then turns up in a Hawaiian shirt, shorts and sandals, toes poking out. The one in the beautiful outfit looks absolutely gorgeous, exactly as I wanted, but behaves awfully at the wedding. They're spilling wine everywhere. They're way too drunk. They're being inappropriate with all the guests. The uncle who is dressed completely opposite to what I wanted is perfect. They're so gracious, so kind. They're the life of the party. Everyone enjoys talking to them. It's brilliant having them there. Who showed more respect? For me it's quite obvious in that case.

Then, following the same theme, looking at the oppression part: some of my friends are more wealthy than others. I've mandated black tie. I've told them all: black tie, that's what I want, you should wear that. One of them has sleepless nights over affording just renting it. They're worried. They're stressed. How are they going to afford to rent this for one night? I'd argue that's oppression. Quite simple. Then a second question. I've got a friend who's Nigerian.

They want to wear a traditional Yoruba outfit; I think it's called the agbada, apologies if I pronounce that wrong. That is not my dress code; I've asked for black tie. If they then don't feel comfortable and turn up in black tie, that is oppression. That is oppression of a culture. And we can go into details of how comfortable they are. But if they don't, they are oppressed in this case.

"About the example of your uncle: would you say that imposing something on someone makes them less able to have positive interactions with others?"

Again, I would say in this case attitude trumps all. So even if you're not dressed suitably, if you are being respectful in an attitude sense, you're getting involved, you're being respectful as you go, I would argue it doesn't matter what you wear.

"So one doesn't affect the other?"

You could maybe say one doesn't improve the other. Maybe the best outcome is perfect dress and perfect attitude. But I would still say that someone dressed completely wrongly with the perfect attitude is much better than the perfect dress with the wrong attitude.

Floor: the Ritz, Glyndebourne and a sense of occasion

I'm standing next to you, but I do not agree with you. I am for the proposer. Chair, fellow Sylvans: I think clothing in the context of a dress code, and I have placed it in a London-centric, Londoner's worldview, is about respect for places, demonstrating it to the places you're entering and the people around you. The classic example is the Ritz Hotel. To dine at the Ritz, they insist that you wear a shirt and tie. But the joy of that is that when you go in, you know that they will lend you a shirt and tie if you don't have one.

Most people don't. But the idea is that it creates a sense of occasion for everybody that's there. Going to the Ritz is a big occasion. People have often saved up for it, and they want to come in and feel like they've stepped out of the norm into somewhere more exciting, more extravagant, more pleasurable, and that dress code enables that.

It creates a sense of presence, of place, of space, and that's respectful. It's respectful to the other diners. It's respectful to the people who are serving you. But it also changes your behaviour. You wear a shirt and tie, and you behave differently from when you don't. There's a relaxed nature to wearing jeans and a T-shirt, which seems to be our universal uniform. But as soon as you put the shirt and tie on, you feel more likely to engage politely. You feel that people will treat you with more respect, and they do. Those kinds of environments engender it. They're dining, they're treating you, they're respecting you, and you're dressed respectfully back.

Glyndebourne is another great example. To go to the opera at Glyndebourne, women are expected to be in evening wear, and men are expected to be in tuxedos. That adds to the occasion. It's respectful to the performers. It's respectful to the audience. It brings so much to the experience for everybody who's there, way above anything else you could possibly experience. You dine in picnics. There are flames. There are waiters. There are people that give you this extravaganza of an experience, and all you're doing is attiring appropriately to give everybody else the same experience. I see that as purely respectful and not in any way oppressive.

Floor: pilots, professionalism and social cohesion

First of all, I'm very much looking forward to one day potentially meeting the previous speaker's uncles. I will also highlight what I felt was a slightly false element of that argument. If the uncles had behaved exactly the same, there would actually have been an implied additional level of respect given by the one who had conformed to the dress code. So although both attitude and how you dress are important, you can appreciate that one in isolation does matter. I'm going to agree with the proposer, I'm going to disagree with the opposer, and I think that dress codes are a form of respect.

I want to dwell a little on some of the opening arguments, where we were talking about extreme applications of dress codes in certain less enlightened parts of the world, where they're used as a real constraint on people's freedoms. I would contend that the vast majority of dress codes in use across the world today are far more to do with social cohesion, with respect, with traditional cultural identity, with professionalism. It's important not to get diverted by a small number of very malicious uses of a dress code.

It's already been well covered, but it's worth briefly mentioning dress codes as an element of a professional mindset: both how you think of the job and how other people perceive that in you. If I got on a plane and the pilot was there in the cap but also some tracky bottoms, I might suggest that I would go with a different airline. And that's not oppression. That's respect for the profession.

It's worth mentioning that there have been studies on over-casualisation in the workplace, where an excessive lack of dress codes has led to difficulty with focus, with disengagement, and with a sense among people that their work and their rest aren't adequately separated. Addressing that by mutually agreeing a dress code is not oppression; that's respect for the job, for the self and for each other. School uniforms, I think, are about teaching children how to adapt to social norms when appropriate. That's education in giving respect, not oppression. Dress codes are a form of social respect, and they're present in this room.

I'm obligated by social norms not to turn up in scuba gear. I could do, but you'd probably give my ramblings even less thought than you already are. So I think that's me both offering, and hopefully gaining, some respect from all of you by turning up and conforming to a certain societal norm and dress code. So there are extremes, but I think the majority of dress codes are a sign of respect and not oppression.

Floor: white coats, ties and the pressure to conform

I'm not really sure where I stand on this specific debate. I think with dress codes, in certain respects they're definitely required: things like the military, police, airline pilots, nurses and so forth, because you need to know exactly who they are, and it's designated to a certain occupation. But if you look at doctors in white coats, you'll notice that in hospitals doctors don't wear white coats anymore, because they've actually got rid of them. They act as a barrier between the patient and the doctor in terms of communication. Patients feel that if the doctor gets rid of the white coat, they might be able to open up a little bit more easily. And the doctors have also got rid of ties, because they see them as an infection risk.

Specifically with social engagements: a Hawaiian shirt was mentioned. I once went to a wedding in quite a conservative community. I wore a jacket and shirt and everything. I didn't wear a tie, and for half the evening I was basically condemned: "How come you're not wearing a tie?" It was a family sort of thing, and someone said, "Oh, I'm going to buy you a present. I've got a gift for you." And then someone said, "Oh, I hope you bought him a tie." So it was a little bit conservative. In that respect I don't really agree with dress codes at social engagements, as long as it's common sense. Most people do dress pretty

well at things like weddings and funerals.

But specifically, if you have an establishment that tells you that you have to follow a certain dress code, you need to think: who's pushing that, and why are they pushing it? If you have a dress code in a certain business or place of work, it could actually be a method of conformity: you have to dress in a certain way, you have to think in a certain way, and you have to act in a certain way. That can lead to a lack of freedom of expression, a lack of freedom of speech, a lack of independent thought, and I think that's where the oppression part of this debate comes in, in my opinion. I'm not entirely sure how I'm going to vote here, but thank you, everyone, for listening.

Floor: uniforms, teams and the Stanford Prison Experiment

Thanks, everyone. I feel like I'm a little bit in the middle here, because there are obvious reasons why it looks respectable to turn up to a wedding having had a shower and wearing nice clothes and all the rest of it. Whether you wear a tie or not is beside the point. There are also practical reasons, as with the theatre example, or if you're at a supermarket and you need to know who's working there. If I had to choose, I would probably say that it is a form of oppression, though.

The main reason I have is that I work in marketing and design, and one of the main ways to control a group of people is to make them think that they're all on the same team. That goes off the point that the person before me was making: it's a form of conformity, and when you're on the same team, it makes you think in a certain way.

There's the example of the Stanford Prison Experiment. Everyone knew they were in that experiment, and they weren't actually prisoners, but they all sided with each other as prisoners when they were dressed as prisoners, and against the guards. You can look at the same thing with sports teams, or with real prisons. It creates a sense of us and them, and no matter what the other people are, you always think that your team's better.

So I feel like it's just a way of conformity. My final example: Hitler, before he got into power, was obviously a questionable guy, to put it lightly, but he knew about marketing and he knew about brand. Before he got into power, he created a brand bible for the Nazis. He created uniforms. He put a lot of effort into making a shared identity, and rolled that out. So I would say that it's oppression.

Floor: a retired retail worker on uniforms that help you navigate

Hi. This is my second time here, and the first time speaking. On the motion, I'm also still not 100 per cent sure how I'm going to vote, but I've been thinking about how I go about my daily life. I'm retired now, but I worked in retail for all of my working life since I left school, and wherever I worked there was a uniform given to us by the company, which basically meant that we could be seen in the store by the customers as representing the store. For me, generally, I'm more comfortable in a world where I can identify the person I'm dealing with, wherever it is, as representing the place I'm trying to find out something about: whether it's a police officer in the street, someone in a particular department store, or a lawyer.

I always take the uniform as something that helps me identify the person I'm trying to deal with, what the environment is that I'm in, and how I interact with that person. If we had a system where there was just a free-for-all wherever you happened to be, I would not completely lose my way, but I think the world in general would be a very hard place to navigate without knowing exactly where you stand or who the person is that you're dealing with.

I'll add just one anecdote. On Saturday I was going out for a hike, so I had hiking shoes and a good pair of waterproofs, and I was on the train. At Clapham Junction I noticed people on the platform dressed as

if they were going to a wedding, and I thought: interesting, quite a few people on this platform going to a wedding. Then I got on the train, which was heading to Teddington, and everybody on the train was dressed like that, and I thought: no, I don't think all of these people are going to the same wedding.

It turned out they were all going to the horse racing. Because of the number of people I saw dressed like that, I had a different idea of what was going on until I saw the quantity. So to me, I navigate the world based on how I see people dressed and how I interact with them. Thank you.

Closing for the opposition in the dress codes and respect debate

Thank you, Chair. I used to volunteer at one of the royal palaces, and when the Georges came to the throne, George the First and George the Second, they were from Germany. George I hardly spoke English, in fact. Of course, everybody wanted to be at court, in the presence of the king, but in order to do that you had to be extremely well dressed. The dress code was out of this world, and it cost a fortune just to get through the palace doors.

That wasn't a case of respect, because many of them didn't like him. Very few people liked him. He couldn't even speak English. It was simply a question of practicality, and it showed your rank and the fact that you were wealthy. There was no respect in it at all. It was just a question of: I'm wealthy, and this is my rank; I'm a duke, or whatever.

Now, somebody mentioned schools. Of course, when I was at school I wore a school uniform as well. A school uniform gives you an identity. It allows you to be identified as being from that particular school. When I went out of the school gates, people knew that I was from that school, and consequently I behaved myself, because I knew perfectly well that if I didn't, it would get back. So it served a purpose. It was quite practical from the point of view of the school. It was also, as the lady said, a levelling device. You couldn't tell who was wealthy and who was poor, because we were all the same. We were all in the same uniform.

And somebody mentioned a compulsory office dress code. I've worked in lots of offices over 30 or 40 years. I've never been in an office with a compulsory dress code. Customer-facing, yes. If you're actually interacting with a customer, you're the face of the company. You're representing the company, and you have to be dressed appropriately. But in the office, goodness me, no. I remember a young lady with skirts up to here and tops down to here; there was no dress code there at all. Yes, actually, we rather enjoyed that. And of course, practicality: military, football, hospitals. You have to wear a certain uniform. It's simply sensible.

This gentleman here talked very passionately about going to the Ritz or going to Glyndebourne. That is a question of style. The Ritz has a certain style, and if you go in, you are expected to conform to that style. Everybody else is in that style. It's simply a question of fitting in. It's not necessarily a question of respect or oppression. It's just a question of fitting in and being part of the style, like going to the races, the Grand National or whatever it is. You dress appropriately because that's what's expected of you. Glyndebourne likewise is a question of style. It's a certain style of person who goes to Glyndebourne, and they're supposed to fit in. There's no respect. Sorry, I've got to finish. So it's style, cultural identity and practicality. That's what I'm talking about.

Closing for the proposition: worthy of care

Before I start, I want to ask something, just so I don't get the Sylvans in trouble. Is it factually correct that the Nazi followers of Hitler were wearing uniforms and swastikas before he got into power? They were wearing the swastikas before 1933? Okay. That's all I need to know.

When one speaker went through the definition of what respect is, they came up with the phrase "worthy of care", and that is actually very apt. That is why I feel that dress codes are a sign of respect and not oppression, because each dress code shows that a certain something is worthy of care: the weddings, the funerals, the school, the prisons, the political force, for good or ill. What I feel it comes down to is the question: do we feel that this dress code has been imposed from the outside, or would it have been freely chosen?

To circle around a really controversial example: the stars that Jews had to wear in Hitler's Germany. That was imposed. That was oppression. They didn't want to wear that. But bear in mind that in the Jewish religion there are a lot of dress codes which are freely chosen by the community. We could get into a debate about religion being the opiate of the masses, but the point is that when they were being persecuted in medieval Europe, they had the option of abandoning their yarmulkes, cutting off their locks, not wearing their tallits, and they did not. They continued to wear Jewish dress because it was a sign of their devotion to God. God was worthy of care, and you covered your head. That was the dress code. It was not imposed on them; it was freely chosen as a community.

Social cohesion, trust and Lord of the Flies

One speaker also mentioned that dress codes can be a force for social cohesion, and there is not one dress code in this world. There are multiple dress codes, often very subconscious ones. For example, we come here tonight to the Sylvans, and nobody has turned up in tracksuit bottoms and a T-shirt that fully exposes a horrible belly piercing and so on. A friend and I first met at the London Library at a Christmas party, where there was no formal dress code; there was an informal dress code.

It gave us a social cohesion. The point was, you could maybe trust that this was a respectful, intelligent person. By social cohesion, I mean that dress codes help to establish trust. The customer service person: you can trust them to help you out and do their job. The schoolboy: you can trust that they will represent the school, or that you can report them if they don't.

A horrible example: the Nazis. Even before Hitler had actually come to power, they chose to dress in their Nazi uniform, because you could trust that they would be, quote, good Germans, unquote. It can be a force for good or ill. But let's say we are in a Lord of the Flies situation. You know the novel, where these boys are lost on a desert island and they can freely abandon their dress code, and you know what happens? The barbarians decide on a new one, dressed in these horrible paints, becoming warriors, hunting down the innocent.

They freely chose a dress code. It gave them social cohesion. It was not oppression. In the world today, dress codes are not a force of oppression. There are barbaric examples, but those are oppressive societies anyway: Afghanistan, Iran, Hitler's Germany. In a free society, dress codes are a sign of respect and not oppression. I urge you to vote for the motion.

The vote on the dress codes and respect motion

I'm going to ask for another vote: people for the motion, against the motion, and anybody who wants to abstain. Could I have a clear show of hands, and please keep them up? The motion is: dress codes are a form of respect, not oppression. So, all in favour of the motion. And all those against. And any abstentions. Super. Okay, so before we started the debate, and I do know that some people have run out, it was eight in favour and five against, and there has been a swing, because there are now seven in favour, 12 against and three abstentions.