



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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31 October 2018

Jane Lothian
President, University of Winnipeg Club
Wesley Hall, University of Winnipeg
515 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3B 2E9

Dear Ms Lothian,

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and the merit principle in higher education. (For further information, please see our website at www.safs.ca.)

SAFS is concerned about the decision by the University of Winnipeg Club to cancel a talk by Rodney Clifton in the Club's Hot Lunch Speakers' Series. Dr Clifton was to give a talk on 25 October entitled "What's in a School's Name? The Names Given to Residential Schools," but the Club rescinded its invitation on 23 October.

My information comes from an article by Barbara Kay, "What's in a Residential School's Name?" – The Talk that the University of Winnipeg Club Didn't Want Their Members to Hear," in *The Post Millennium*, 28 October (<https://www.thepostmillennial.com/kay-whats-in-a-residential-schools-name-the-talk-that-the-university-of-winnipeg-club-didnt-want-their-members-to-hear/>).

<https://www.thepostmillennial.com/kay-whats-in-a-residential-schools-name-the-talk-that-the-university-of-winnipeg-club-didnt-want-their-members-to-hear/>).

According to that article, the Club cancelled Dr Clifton's talk after hearing that members of the Club would resign were the talk to proceed.

By giving in to threats in this case, the Club has set a precedent that will seriously compromise its ability to program interesting and potentially controversial presentations. Since threats of resigning worked in this instance, members given to applying pressure when they disapprove of a topic or a speaker will be emboldened to shut down future talks.

Moreover, in placating those Club members who lack a commitment to open and free inquiry and discussion, the Club will have alienated members who joined specifically in order to engage with ideas. Surely the majority of Club members are of the latter sort. The Club might

find in the end that members resign because the Club failed in its mission.

Barbara Kay's article reports you as saying that the Board cited the University of Winnipeg's Respectful Work and Learning Environment policy in justifying its cancelling the talk. This is a policy against harassment and disruption. Using such a policy to prevent a free and open exchange of ideas is contrary to the spirit of academic freedom and the mission of a university. The Club should be aware that misusing the policy in the way that it has could encourage further misuse of it.

We respectfully request that you respond to our letter. With your permission, we will post your response along with this letter on our website.

Sincerely,



Mark Mercer, PhD
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