

LETHBRIDGE: Free speech: handle with care

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Free speech is a sign of a healthy democracy, but it's worth thinking about how we engage with these issues. The politics of polarization is the dark side of free speech. (MEGAN TANSEY WHITTON / CP)

You may or may not agree with Dalhousie student [Masuma Khan's comments about "white fragility."](#)

And you will probably have an opinion on her boycott of the Canada 150 celebrations.

You might think her "kiss-my-ass" comment is rude.

But whatever your opinion on Khan, her actions, views or choice of words, there is a fundamental principle at the core of this controversy that we should all agree upon.

And it's not race, white fragility or Canada's 150 birthday celebrations. It's freedom of speech.

This week, Dalhousie University backed off on a disciplinary action against Khan that had the look, feel and smell of suppressing free speech.

The university administration launched the action after Khan made a Facebook post that said: "Your white fragility can kiss my ass."

Yes, this post was provocative, angry and polarizing. Hackles went up. White people were offended. They posted comments on stories and called into radio shows to express outrage. Or agreement.

Khan made the post in reaction to a barrage of hateful comments and even death threats that came after she made a motion to the Dalhousie Student Union to quash Canada 150 celebrations in solidarity with Canada's Indigenous Peoples.

Her argument was this: How can Canada spend money on flags and fireworks when Indigenous children don't have clean water?

This prompted a complaint from another Dal student — white and male — which led to the disciplinary action by the Dal administration, after Khan declined Dal's demand that she take counselling and write a reflective essay.

Dalhousie said Khan's post violated its code of conduct which says that "no student shall engage in unwelcome or persistent conduct that the student knows, or ought to reasonably know, would cause another person to feel demeaned, intimidated or harassed."

But others said Dal was using this code to silence Khan's speech, which occurred off campus where Dal has no jurisdiction.

A letter from professors in the university's own law faculty urged the university "not see its role as to police and censor the tone of our community's political speech."

The Ontario Civil Liberties Association and the Canadian Association of University Teachers also wrote asking Dalhousie to repeal disciplinary policies that suppress the freedom of expression of students.

So yes, freedom of speech was defended here and the university responded. I'm glad for that.

There is, of course, a lot more to this case. Race, discrimination and identity politics are potent issues, boiling with history, agendas and emotion.

Racial discrimination and intolerance suffered by Indigenous people and other racial minorities are the very topics that should be debated on university campuses, which are places where people open their minds, learn things, challenge old ways of thinking and protest.

This is a sign of a healthy democracy, but it's worth thinking about how we engage with these issues. The politics of polarization is the dark side of free speech. We only need to look at the U.S. to see the politics of division at work. True, dividing and conquering can serve a narrow band of self-interest, but it is also very destructive.

When lightning-bolt issues strike, they inflame passions and attract media attention. They move issues up on the political radar and get national and sometimes international coverage.

But when people are pitted against one another — whether it's gun control, health care or racism — the outcomes will be hate speech, anger and heels dug in. This does little to resolve the matter in dispute.

Smart democratic leadership rises above division and finds a way to lower the temperature and unite people. There is a moment for anger, but productive debates and good policy require calm minds and rational thought on all sides.

Dalhousie University could show good leadership by reviewing its disciplinary policy and by communicating with Khan to investigate hate speech and death threats she has received and involve her in future efforts to make Dalhousie an inclusive campus.

Name-calling and attempts to suppress free speech will only make it worse.