

# Not all the nominees for Laurier's free speech task force seem to get the concept

The Wilfrid Laurier University Faculty Association will dominate the task force; the association has seven of the 13 seats



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December 19, 2017

8:08 PM EST

<http://nationalpost.com/opinion/christie-blatchford-not-all-the-nominees-for-lauriers-free-speech-task-force-seem-to-get-the-concept>

It was when I was having a look at the candidates for Wilfrid Laurier University's task force on free expression that my heart really sank.

The task force is one part of the university's two-pronged response to the disgraceful browbeating of Lindsay Shepherd by two of her professors and a bureaucrat last month.

The young teaching assistant and grad student was hauled in and hectored by the trio for her incorrect thinking and identified as "transphobic" for having shown

a brief video clip of University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson debating the use of gender-neutral pronouns on TVO.

In on the struggle session were Nathan Rambukkana, Shepherd's supervising professor; Herbert Pimlott, the head of her program; and Adria Joel, the acting manager of the school's Gendered Violence Prevention and Support Program.

The other piece of the Laurier response fell into place Monday, when president Deborah MacLatchy released some of the independent fact-finder's investigation of the incident, which exonerated Shepherd of any wrongdoing and criticized the professors and the bureaucrat.

Twenty-three faculty and/or librarian members of the WLU Faculty Association are nominated for the five seats the WLUFAs is guaranteed (plus two who will be appointed by the task force chair) on the task force.

Clearly, the WLUFAs will dominate the task force; the association has seven of the 13 seats.

So I figured it would be interesting to see who was ardently in favour of free speech on campus and if the deck was stacked beyond the fact that Pimlott is one of two WLUFAs vice-presidents.

Only three professors — David Haskell, Kimberly Barber and Jordan Goldstein — clearly defined themselves in their accompanying "statements" as free-speech advocates.

Eight others obviously identified with what has become the other side of the issue, as nominee Alison Mountz described it: She was in favour of protecting free speech, she said, "but only alongside examination of conditions that make speech and expression free and safe for all..."

Nine others, in their formal statements, appeared neutral. They were either professors in the hard sciences, or seasoned faculty association members, or they seemed keen to hear all views.

But then I dug a little deeper, and that's when I saw what associate professor Kate Rossiter (she was the main investigator in Recounting Huronia, an award-winning, arts-based research project about the Huronia Regional Centre, the now-closed Toronto institution for developmentally handicapped children) had said on her Facebook page when the Shepherd brouhaha was at its height.

On Nov. 29, almost three weeks after Shepherd had been reamed out, Rossiter wrote: "For those of you following the unfolding Laurier debacle, this article is a breath of fresh air."

The link was to a blog post written by one Alex Usher at Higher Education Strategy Associates, a Toronto outfit that "provides strategic insight and guidance to governments, post-secondary institutions and agencies..." and "strives to improve the quality, efficacy and fairness of higher education systems in Canada and worldwide."

Entitled, "Has everybody lost their damn mind?", Usher's was a typical progressive take on the Shepherd business: Yes, Rambukkana had handled things badly (he couldn't have done worse, Usher said, "if he'd wanted to hand a propaganda victory to Peterson and his ilk.")

But Shepherd, Usher said, had revealed herself as not so bright (for having picked the clip she did, though Usher admitted he didn't know precisely what excerpt she had used), and all those free-speech defenders who didn't also stand up for Masuma Khan at Dalhousie University (she is the student leader who was briefly under investigation by the university for her "whitefragility")

Facebook comments, and for the record, I supported her right to speak her mind) were hypocrites and “probably racist, dog-whistling hypocrites” to boot.

The piece was done in a fake Q and A format, and it’s what Usher said about Peterson that was genuinely awful.

The pretend Q was, “But given that, what are the ins and outs of this case?”

The answer was this: “As I understand the facts of the case, Shepherd played a clip from an October 2016 episode of the TVO program The Agenda, in which the University of Toronto professor and noted gaping orifice Jordan Peterson made the case for why he opposed the use of a number of different possible pronouns to refer to transgendered people.”

The follow-up pretend Q: “Gaping orifice?”

The answer: “Yes, cuddling up to neo-Nazis qualifies on as a gaping orifice. Even if one has tenure.”

I found it shocking — shocking that a higher-education guy would say such a thing about a university professor who is, whatever you may think of his views on genderless pronouns, a serious scholar; shocking that a peer, the Laurier prof running for a seat on the task force, would find the piece cheering; shocking that this is what passes for civil discourse among the literati.

Lindsay Shepherd turned 23 about a week ago, but as she was in that room last month, she remains the singular adult in this mess.

And Deborah MacLatchy ought not to be so sanguine that the Shepherd incident was a one-off, and that freedom of expression is alive and well at Laurier.

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