

Free speech not threatened at Brock

OPINION 05:20 PM 17 August 2018

St. Catharines Standard

<https://www.stcatharinesstandard.ca/opinion-story/8845479-free-speech-not-threatened-at-brock/>



“The issue is not one related to free speech as we are in no position to censor (Dr. Garth) Stevenson’s comments,” Brock University’s senate governance committee chair Scott Henderson. said during Wednesday’s meeting. - Julie Jocsak , The St. Catharines Standard

Recent social media postings by a retired professor, and the reaction of Brock University to those postings, have raised questions surrounding freedom of speech.

The posts by Dr. Garth Stevenson, who was professor emeritus at Brock and formerly head of the university's political science department, came about due to anger to a decision by the city of

Victoria, B.C. to remove a statue of Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, from in front of its city hall.

Victoria is removing the statue and relocating it elsewhere in the city because of MacDonalD's role in the mistreatment of Indigenous people and the establishment of residential schools.

In response, Stevenson went on an incendiary diatribe on both Facebook and Twitter. In one post Stevenson described Indigenous people as "sniveling aboriginals who probably never did a day's work in their lives."

In another, he wrote, "Frankly I am getting sick and tired of the kowtowing to so-called 'First Nations' or 'Indigenous' or whatever they call themselves. This is OUR country, not theirs, and we don't need to apologize for being here. I don't give a rat's ass who lived in it before Europeans arrived or what happened to them."

Upon learning of the posts, Brock officials moved quickly to denounce them and to determine whether Stevenson should retain his status as professor emeritus.

In a specially-convened meeting of the university's senate governance committee, held Wednesday, the decision was made to strip Stevenson of his title.

The move has been criticized in some quarters. Mark Mercer, who teaches philosophy at Saint Mary's University in Halifax and is president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, wrote in a column in *The Standard* and to the university, that Brock's actions "signalled that certain views on important topics may not be spoken."

"Brock University has a responsibility to promote candid and open discussion of matters of public interest," wrote Mercer. "Certainly its professors should be free to comment on matters of public interest as they see fit, even intemperately, without putting their official university positions at risk."

He suggests that in future, as a result of the university's move to remove Stevenson's status, Brock has made it "harder for members of the university community to believe they are free to speak their minds."

He also says the decision devalues academic achievement and undermines public trust in the independence of research coming out of Brock.

We disagree.

Mercer does present a persuasive argument on the issues of devaluing academic achievement, but largely dismisses the racist language Stevenson used in describing Canada's Indigenous peoples, noting there is a legitimate debate as to "the place of First Nations within Canada." Stevenson did not contribute to that debate; he only offered racial stereotypes and abuse.

Brock University's reaction was not based on Stevenson's criticism of Victoria city council's decision. People are free to debate that and the motivations for it. [See Environment Minister Catherine McKenna's reaction](#) for an example of how such a discussion might take place.

Brock professors have no reason to fear repercussions if they criticize Victoria's decision or tackle other controversial topics.

The Brock senate's decision was based on the language used by Stevenson. The message he delivered led Brock's administration to determine he is no longer deserving of the academic honour it conferred on him.

"The issue is not one related to free speech as we are in no position to censor Mr. Stevenson's comments," said senate chair Scott Henderson. "As an academic community, Brock encourages a diversity of opinion, but we also expect thoughtful, reasonable debate."

Stevenson's contributions were neither thoughtful, nor reasonable. They were only hurtful and Brock was justified in the action it took.