

Sanctions on former professor chill academic freedom at Brock

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Brock University president Gervan Fearon listens during a meeting of the university senate, held Aug. 15 to discuss the emeritus status of former professor Garth Stevenson who posted racist tweets. - Julie Jocsak , The St. Catharines Standard

We Canadians are fortunate to have so few dark chapters in our history.

The internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War was one particularly shameful episode, and the creation of the residential school system another; but, by and large, we probably have less to be ashamed of than most other nations — if only because we're a relatively young country.

What is true of nations applies to institutions, which leads me to observe that the recent revocation of Garth Stevenson's emeritus status was not the brightest chapter in Brock University's short history. If Stevenson's social media posts failed to bring discredit on the institution — and how could they but fail, when he has been retired for years and spoke only in his own name? — Brock has brought it on itself by rushing to humiliate him as the first professor emeritus to be publicly stripped of that honorific designation.

And this because of a few unacceptable social media outbursts for which Stevenson had expressed regret and apologized in an email to The Standard and the CBC the week before — a tacit undertaking not to repeat his mistake. Having disassociated itself from, and condemned in strong terms, both the views expressed and his manner of expressing them, the university might have stopped short of stigmatizing Stevenson in this very public way. After more than a quarter-century of service, during which he had been a credit to the institution as a researcher and as chair of its politics department, didn't he deserve another chance?

Not in the view of the Brock administration and senate. Or rather, not in that of the nine-member senate governance committee, hastily convened at the president's behest during the vacation period. Brock's faculty handbook states: "The president must obtain the approval of senate to withhold or to withdraw the awarding of the honorific designation."

Couldn't the matter have awaited the first meeting next month of the full senate? That seems to be the intent of the handbook, which further states: "The honorific designation ... indicates the mutual desire of the university and the retired full professor ... to maintain an ongoing relationship which honours both the retiree and the university."

That desire is obviously no longer mutual. And that, given a long past association that honoured the university, seems a shame. Never having met him, I don't know, but I wonder whether, at this point, the

desire even exists on Prof. Stevenson's part. Given what transpired, I don't think he could be blamed if it didn't.

Those involved in this process emphasize there has been no curtailment of Prof. Stevenson's academic freedom. That's true: nothing the university has done prevents him from saying whatever he likes, wherever and whenever he likes, in future.

But an unfortunate chill has been cast on academic freedom at Brock all the same. Imposing sanctions (in this case, the only one available) for opinions expressed in a manner deemed unacceptable leaves one wondering what sanctions might be imposed on others (where more severe sanctions are available).

And where, exactly, is the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable speech? As I understand it, academic freedom means not sanctioning speech (as opposed to deeds) ever. Express strong disagreement, even condemnation, either only of the view itself, or also of the way in which it was expressed; but never stigmatize or ostracize the person who proffers it — to say nothing of stronger forms of discipline.

The Stevenson affair is at least a grey chapter in the history of academic freedom at Brock.

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