

WLU's contemptible conduct proof of intellectual assault underway on campuses

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BARBARA KAY

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The story of Wilfrid Laurier University grad student and teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd — who was recently subjected to a creepy, but instructive, grilling by campus superiors over material she'd used for her entry-level Communication tutorials — went viral on social media last week.

A somewhat naive lament was posted by the host of TVO's The Agenda, Steve Paikin, who has been tangentially implicated in the story for having presided over the incident's contested terrain: an Agenda debate between University of Toronto professors Nicholas Matte and Jordan Peterson concerning transgender pronouns and compelled speech. Shepherd had shown the class parts of the debate to elicit discussion.

Paikin tweeted: “hard to imagine that someone actually thought watching @TheAgenda on a university campus made them feel ‘unsafe.’ Have we really lost the ability to debate issues on campuses?” Yes, Steve, we have. Shepherd's ordeal merely confirms a widespread pathology that is only too familiar to observers of the campus culture wars.

What happened at WLU is the product of five decades of tenured radicals executing their Gramscian “long march” through the academy. In 1969, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education found there were about twice as many left-of-centre faculty as right-of-centre. Today, in the humanities, according to an Econ Journal Watch [study](#), it is about 12 to 1. In some departments, like English, the faculty is virtually 100 per cent leftist.

Why is that fact so dangerous to academic health? Because, as John M. Ellis, emeritus professor at the University of California Santa Cruz and chairman of the California Association of Scholars, observes in a recent Wall Street Journal article, “Higher Education's Deeper Sickness,” “[I]ntellectual dominance promotes stupidity. As one side becomes numerically stronger, its discipline weakens. The greater the imbalance between the two sides, the more incoherent and irrational the majority will become.... With almost no intellectual opponents remaining, campus radicals have lost the ability to engage with arguments and resort instead to the lazy alternative of name-calling: opponents are all ‘fascists,’ ‘racists’ or ‘white supremacists’.”

That is precisely the WLU case. Indeed the actual words “Hitler,” “racism” and “white supremacist” were adduced by Shepherd’s accusers to indicate the seriousness of her alleged transgression (also to intimidate and shame her; they managed to reduce her to tears). We’re fortunate to know this only because Shepherd had the presence of mind to record the hearing, without which the story might have fizzled. Listening to it, one becomes shockingly aware that one is witnessing an intellectual assault, committed by power-holding ideologues, on an innocent victim, whose “crime” was to expose students to two sides of a cultural debate.

As in all show trials, holistic charges of incorrectness are presented, but without evidence. Shepherd is told she has exhibited “transphobia” and created a “toxic climate.” Her pleas for details are ignored. The word “problematic” is repeated again and again to sinister effect. Far more ominously, and erroneously, Shepherd is told her action ran counter to the Human Rights Code, specifically C-16. C-16 amended the Criminal Code to extend protection against “hate propaganda” to any segment of the public “distinguished by gender identity or expression,” and made “bias, prejudice, or hate based on gender identity or expression an aggravating circumstance when it is a motivating factor in a crime.”

A crime! As Senator Linda Frum tweeted: “Proponents of Bill C-16, including Justice Minister [Wilson-Raybould], testified that Bill C-16 could not be used as a tool to silence reasonable free speech. Yet here we are just a few Orwellian months later.” Precisely what Jordan Peterson predicted before C-16 was passed.

In 1915, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued their “Declaration on the Principles of Academic Tenure and Academic Freedom.” It included this statement: “Faculty members are expected to present information fairly, and to set forth justly, divergent opinions that arise out of scholarly methodology and professionalism.” By “divergent,” the AAUP Declaration didn’t mean opinions based in proven falsehoods, like Holocaust denial, or opinions arising from hatred, as Shepherd’s accusers suggest Peterson’s are. Anyone familiar with Jordan Peterson’s research and writings knows his entire career is a testament to “scholarly methodology and professionalism.”

Although the Declaration is, alas, observed now more in the breach than the observance by the AAUP, setting forth divergent opinions justly and fairly is exactly what Lindsay Shepherd did in her tutorials.

This contemptible episode has proven, if proof were needed, that, as one WSJ letter-writer put it: “The left is no longer able to recognize opposing political thought as thought.” Absent a miraculous rebalancing of perspective in the academy, we need a grievance and indemnity process embedded in a formal statement of principles regarding students’ rights, to protect all our Lindsays from faculty and administration-sanctioned intellectual abuse.

To honour her courage, intellectual clarity and scholarly integrity, I therefore propose the establishment of the Lindsay Shepherd Students’ Bill of Academic Rights.

kaybarb@gmail.com