

Counter-protests at Wilfrid Laurier University over freedom of speech turn — well, one man was shouting

The great free speech crisis had all the makings of a major battle in the culture wars, but Friday's protest went off like the mildest of campus pep rallies



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WATERLOO, Ont. — When it spilled from the classroom to the streets, the great free speech crisis at Wilfrid Laurier University had all the makings of a major battle in the culture wars.

There was a clash of fundamental values, free expression versus equality. There was a university administration forced into an embarrassing apology by a secretly recorded interrogation. There were fundamentalists lined up on both sides of Hazel Street in Waterloo, staring each other down. There were rumours of violent protest by organized anti-fascist and alt-right groups, just like the protest that turned Charlottesville, Va., into a deadly street fight.

But in the end, the rally at Laurier in support of teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd, who controversially showed her class an episode of *The Agenda* on inclusive pronouns, went off like the mildest of campus pep rallies.

The closest thing to civil unrest was a dog off its leash. Not more than three passing cars honked. There was not even much weed in the air.

“Make Laurier Great Again,” shouted one man in a hat that said “Make Gold Money Again” as he waved a German and a Canadian flag (which was upside down).

“Oh damn, no,” he said when asked if this was on purpose. “But it is a sign of distress, though, so maybe ...”



Wilfrid Laurier teaching assistant Lindsay Shepherd finishes speaking at a rally in support of academic freedom near the university in Waterloo, Ont., on Nov. 24, 2017. *Tyler Anderson/National Post*

Toby Finlay, a non-binary student who acted as a spokesperson for the counter protesters, said the LGBT and trans community at Laurier have been the target of threats recently, as the issue of discrimination against trans people climbed the national agenda. The counter-protesters did not wish to appear opposed to academic freedom, so they did not interfere or chant, but Finlay said they wanted to protest how the discourse of free speech is being used to harass and threaten trans people, and call their very identities into question.

The rally speakers, mainly campus conservatives, said next to nothing about trans identity, but stuck to the traditional rationale for academic freedom and free expression.

Former MP Stephen Woodworth did not show up, but sent a speaker and a message in support of the Democracy Defence Initiative, which advocates on behalf of doctors who decline to perform abortions, Ontario lawyers forced to make a declaration of values, and the criminal code section that suggests a fetus becomes a human only when it is fully born.



A sign on the window of the Rainbow Centre at Wilfrid Laurier University on Nov. 24. *Tyler Anderson/National Post*

Shepherd also spoke, and lamented that she has been labelled transphobic for her part in this crisis, which undermines the use of that word against people who truly do have an irrational, bigoted fear. “The leftist authoritarianism has gone too far,” she said.

Cosmin Dzsurdzsa, a third year English literature student at the University of Waterloo who organized the event, said a key goal is for Laurier to adopt a set of principles similar to what the University of Chicago has done, in a strong endorsement of freedom of speech and the duty to both challenge and listen. “Apology is great,” he said. “But that doesn’t go far enough.”

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