

Lindsay Shepherd incident is simply one bubble in a boiling caldron

May I summarize by saying my positionality on Laurier's apologies is problematic and my problematics on their positionality is profound



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The value of an apology is inversely proportional to the public relations pressure under which it was given. Principia Apologia, auth. Bertha Newton (Isaac's sadly overshadowed sister)

According to that metric, which I enthusiastically endorse, the twin *mea culpas* from Wilfrid Laurier University to Lindsay Shepherd (one from its president, Deborah MacLatchy, the other from the leader of the troika who visited the Thought Correction Session on Shepherd, Nathan Rambukkana) approach, if not collide with, zero value.

I am heartened in this view by the consideration that *Post* colleague Christie Blatchford frowned most mercilessly on Laurier's whispered regrets. Gifted with a jeweller's eye in such matters, Blatchford applied the adjectives "craven, dissembling, and revisionist" to their efforts, adding — good sport that she is — that she would "tell them all to blow the *mea culpas* out their various bums." (Christie, ambivalent as always.)

More to the point, our honoured protagonist in this affair, Lindsay Shepherd, also scaled the apologies low on the down slope. With the clarity and directness now established as her hallmark, she wrote: "Moral of the story: A university must be repeatedly publicly shamed, internationally, in order to apologize.... Even then, ambiguous about free speech."

Apologies, as a priority tactic in damage control, are getting quite a workout these days — from Harvey Weinstein to Kevin Spacey to Charlie Rose — not that I am attempting to conflate the open bathrobe gambits of Weinstein and Rose, or the crotch expeditions of Spacey, with the Wilfrid Laurier shenanigans. That would be like dragging a Hitler speech into equivalence with a three-minute clip from TVO's *The Agenda*. An utterly unthinkable operation we all agree.

Forced apologies come perilously close to a contradiction in terms, the point of an apology being the willing recognition of a genuine wrong and sincere regret for having caused it. Rather than, as in Laurier's case, a desperate hope to pacify angry donors and reel back the good will of an outraged and astonished public.

May I summarize the points so far by saying that my positionality on their apologies is problematic and my problematics on their positionality is profound.

The real mess here, however, is that they are choosing not to see the full problem at all: that their dealings with Shepherd are but a particular of a general phenomenon, a parable, if you will, of a collapse in the understanding of the university, what education is, and how it is being delivered.

Here's what is *not* in the apology. That this is not some one-off incident, but rather an egregious illustration that some humanities courses at all universities (mainly with the tag "studies") function not as educative undertakings, but as commitments to a narrow, predestined ideological viewpoint. That such studies are enclosed universes of fixed thought, or intellectual predisposition. That wedding any course to a pre-chosen political goal — social justice, identity studies, oppression studies, feminism — turns it into a sophisticated vehicle of indoctrination and propaganda. Such courses inculcate doctrines, disoblige inquiry, abhor dissent, and are the reverse of an educational exercise.

They are as dogmatic and intolerant of heresies as the churches of old when they held sway. The heresies of today are any deviation from the prescribed progressive truisms of social justice, which constitute the catechism of advanced political correctness. And by the way, throwing the incantation "alt right" at anyone who walks a different path is not the intellectual exorcism that those who avail of this tawdry, manufactured, empty label think it is. It's a signal that you can't argue.

And that is why every three-minute exposure to an argument of Jordan Peterson — even in debate with another professor — is regarded as "epistemic violence" that creates a "toxic climate for marginalized students," and which must bring the full weight of inquisition onto an honest, clear thinking and un-ideological teaching assistant. The Lindsay Shepherd incident is simply one bubble in a boiling caldron.

So if Laurier really wants to apologize, instead of confining itself to the particular case, it might want to regard how it created its own climate of intolerance to varying perspectives, how the reflex of its three professors went immediately to turning on the heretic, rather than examining how their faculty went so quickly to quashing a valid exchange of thought. It might want to examine the cloying righteousness and condescension on full display in the taped session and ask from whence came the bland certitude, slipshod intellection, and presumptuous righteousness so characteristic of her interrogators.

That might offer grounds for a repentant apology of some value and worth. And let it be noted that Laurier is far from alone in this; it's just the particular university that got caught with the door open.

Here is one final thought on this miserable business. Miss Shepherd has said that, on her return to class, she was more or less ostracized; that she was, in her own words, "looked on as a monster." Really? We're just a few days away from Remembrance Day. Is there so little of the courage we so greatly celebrate on that anniversary now residing in the hearts and minds of university students and professors that they forgo — for the trivial fear of being thought not onside with "conventional wisdom"— common manners and due respect to one of their peers?

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