

Lindsay Shepherd lays bare ideological divide on Canadian campuses

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In the volatile tinder pile of progressive, gender and social justice politics that defines university culture these days, Lindsay Shepherd has become a pain in the ass to those hell-bent on making the world at any cost a better and more tolerant place.

Shepherd's story has now been broadly told – a teaching assistant at Wilfrid Laurier University – who had the unmitigated and insensitive gall to play a short TVO clip to her class of UofT professor Jordan Peterson debating gender-neutral pronouns, which they were studying, without demonizing Peterson to her first-year class.

Summarily hauled before her professors, Shepherd was accused of violating Laurier's Gendered and Sexual Violence policy, creating a "toxic climate" in her class and (wrongly) accused of breaking the law.

Bullied to the point of tears, Shepherd nevertheless had the foresight and wit to tape her inquisition and release it publicly, which subsequently resulted in an apology from the university.

And although Laurier is attempting to treat its black eye with a task force on how to deal with such matters in future, its campus is further embroiled in an ideological battle over free speech versus the protection of transgender students.

At the heart of the conflict are two irreconcilable perspectives.

Those advocating for social justice on campus see transgender students as the real victims in Shepherd's situation, and believe that to address past and current injustice and prejudice, society must proactively protect vulnerable groups and individuals from negative attitudes, feelings and actions. Shepherd is guilty of exposing her students to negative ideas.

Debate, from the perspective of these social reformers, amounts to hostility and violence toward the marginalized and those who promote such debate are bigots, racists, deniers and worse.

On the other side are those that believe universities should be institutions that promote critical inquiry, and who as Laurier himself did believe the best antidote for bad ideas is rigorous and fearless debate that exposes truth.

Lindsay Shepherd
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I wonder if these profs have taken into account that maybe, if it's even true that harassment against trans students has gone up, it's not because of transphobia, but because the campus LGBTQ community is now associated with being anti-free speech, thanks to Rainbow Centre.

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But in this case, the gulf between the truths embraced by both camps is irreconcilable.

William McNally is a professor of finance at Laurier's Lazaridis School of Business and Economics who launched a petition calling on the university to affirm freedom of speech and supported Shepherd in a recent free speech rally.

The relative handful of faculty who publicly support free speech are now being branded as "transphobic" by those on the other side.

"There's two perspectives on what should be going on in universities," McNally said. "Truth search or social justice advocacy."

"Jonathan Haight (an American social psychologist who specializes in the psychology of morality) argues universities have to choose one or the other but you can't split the difference," McNally said.

"The process whereby truth conquers is in the battle of ideas," he said. "So if one idea can't come out to play, because it's censored, then truth can't win."

Laurier's motto in fact is Veritas Omnia Vincit, or Truth Conquers All.

Time will tell.

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