

Wilfrid Laurier investigation into Lindsay Shepherd affair complete, but public won't see report

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The lawyer appointed to "gather the facts" of the Lindsay Shepherd controversy at Wilfrid Laurier University has finished his investigation and is preparing his final report.

Rob Centa made the comments in a note Friday to Howard Levitt, the Toronto lawyer who is representing the 22-year-old Shepherd pro bono.

She is the graduate student and teaching assistant whose browbeating last month at the hands of two Laurier professors and the acting manager of the school's "Gendered Violence Prevention and Support" program prompted a firestorm of reaction.

According to the professors, Nathan Rambukkana and Herbert Pimlott, and manager Adria Joel, Shepherd's sin was to show her class a short clip of a televised debate involving the controversial University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson without first denouncing his stance against gender neutral pronouns such as "zie" and "zher."

Shepherd was identified as "transphobic" at the meeting and sanctioned by having to submit her lesson plans in advance.

Rambukkana has since issued a lengthy apology to Shephard, as has university president Deborah MacLatchy.

Levitt had written demanding Centa resign in the wake of tweets he made, before he accepted the Laurier appointment, in which he appeared to be an ardent supporter of diversity, arguably even at the expense of limits on free speech.

For instance, in the recent Law Society of Upper Canada debate over whether forcing lawyers to submit a "statement of principles" confirming their obligation to promote equality, diversity and inclusion was a form of "compelled speech," Centa praised a colleague who spoke in favour of "advancing diversity."

“Your tweets were, in my view, broadly supportive of compelling support for diversity over free speech,” Levitt wrote Centa on Dec. 4. Centa replied that “I have never taken a position on this case” and pledged to approach it “with an open mind.”

When The College Fix, a U.S. conservative, student-run website, ran a story this week about Centa’s earlier tweets, Levitt renewed his concerns.

“I am asking, on behalf of my client, that you recuse yourself and step down immediately,” he wrote Centa on Thursday. “If you choose not to step down, I am asking Dr. MacLatchy, who we understand appointed you, to replace you with someone who all parties would find acceptable.”

It was that letter Centa replied to Friday, saying, “I see no reason to recuse myself and will not be doing so. I addressed your concerns about a reasonable apprehension of bias in my previous letter.

“I have completed my investigation and will be finalizing and submitting my report to the president.”

His report will remain private, though bizarrely, MacLatchy has pledged to act “on the recommendations that come out of the report.” Since it will stay secret, no member of the university or public will ever know if Laurier follows through.

The university, via spokesman Kevin Crowley, has denied suggestions that Shepherd’s employment was at risk in Centa’s probe.

“There is no assumption on the part of the university that Ms. Shepherd did anything wrong,” Crowley told the National Post in a Dec. 8 email.

“All of the people at the meeting were and are employees of the university. Consequently, the review relates to employment and personnel matters.”

On another front, another spokesperson for Laurier, Lori Chalmers Morrison, says that the membership of the Task Force on Freedom of Expression, another of the school’s formal responses to the Shepherd situation, should “be finalized and announced next week.”

This task force is to focus on freedom of expression and academic freedom, she said, whereas Centa was to “gather and report on the facts of the recent situation ... the task force and the fact-finding are not related” and the university “will not be removing Rob Centa from the fact-finding exercise.”

Shepherd herself was nominated to the task force, as a representative of graduate students, but the Graduate Students Union then decided its president would take that seat, about the

same time she said that “transgender and non-binary students” have been discounted in the Shepherd story.

And just this week, the university’s faculty association president, Michele Kramer, issued a statement condemning “the violent speech and actions that have, unfortunately, become a daily occurrence on our campuses (Laurier has one in Waterloo and one in Brantford, Ont.)” and proclaiming it “stands in solidarity with our LGBTQ2 community as they continue to battle their way through walls of ignorance and oppression...”

Given that the association, according to Kramer, has a role “in helping to draft the composition for the Task Force,” it has been necessary for it to “refrain from certain public statements.”

Kramer said in the statement that the association has been beleaguered with requests from members with “diametrically opposing points of view” for the union to “intercede or to make public statements along various, diametrically opposed, lines of support.”

Not once in the Dec. 12 statement did Kramer mention freedom of speech.

The association’s priorities, she said, are the protection for members, particularly Rambukkana and Pimlott; support for faculty who were interviewed by Centa, and working with the university administration to repair “campus relations and university reputation.”