SAFS Newsletter

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Maintaining freedom in teaching, research and scholarship
Maintaining standards of excellence in academic decisions about students and faculty

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In This Issue

Liberal Study and Its Institutional Setting

Mark Mercer

For many students and professors, university is a means to an end. That end might be having the credentials or the skills and knowledge needed for a job or career, it might be earning a living, it might be being educated. It's possible, though, to attend university simply for the sake of engaging in study with others. It is possible simply to enjoy thinking hard about difficult matters, and to enjoy thinking hard about them in community with others who are thinking hard about difficult matters.

Of course, that one engages in some activity for the sake of the activity itself doesn't imply that one doesn't also use that activity as a means to some other end. One might enjoy skiing but go skiing not only to enjoy skiing but also for exercise or recreation. One might eat not only because the meat is savory and the appetite keen, but also for nutrition and energy or to spend time with one's friends. To engage with the world as a student or a professor can be an end in itself while also being a stepping stone to something else.

Unfortunately, few students approach study as something to enjoy for its own sake; few seem even to understand that study can be an end in itself. For these students, university is about paying dues. It's true that study for its own sake will never be to everyone's liking. But I'm sure more students would take to it if only they had the right university environment, including sound role models, and were invited to try it.

Is it possible to go to university for the academic experience of going to university? Is it possible to put that experience at the centre of one's concerns? Maybe it's possible to ride the city bus just for the experience of riding the city bus, but few people do and most of us laugh at the idea. We want our bus ride to be pleasant, certainly, and if it is we're happy and none the worse for wear when we get off at our stop. Still, we would have done without the bus ride if it were possible just to be where we wanted to go. Going to university, then, following this train of thought, should be pleasant and fun, both in the classroom and in one's social life; but, even so, the academic experience of university, if not the social one, is to be got on with, not savoured. The academic experience is the dues one must pay for a chance at career success or whatever.

I think that one *can* value, just for its own sake, the academic experience a university might afford. Indeed, I think that the best way universities can serve many of their various other functions is to put the academic experience right at their very centres. But even if I am wrong on that second point, an academic university is a wonderful thing for those who prize thinking hard about things in community with others, and prizing thinking hard about things is not hard to do.

Universities have from the beginning been home to people who love, just for its own sake, thinking hard about difficult matters. Sometimes universities even promote themselves as such places, as institutions in which scholars and stu-

dents are free to love wrestling with the questions. But the tradition of study for its own sake has always been a minority tradition, even at the best universities—those universities whose ethos is generated and sustained by intellectual inquiry for its own sake.

Think of an on-going conversation at a quiet pub (where people are present more for the conversation than for the food or drink). One of your companions will offer an idea and defend that idea with an argument. Someone will criticize the idea or the argument, and someone else will add another line of defence. Then someone will respond to the criticism and add another argument. The topic of discussion will change slightly or even entirely as the conversation continues. Some people will leave to attend to other matters, new people will join, a few previous participants will rejoin. All of us in the conversation are attempting to find and articulate the truth about the topic, but it's the quality of the attempt that we admire and in which we take joy. An intense and open conversation at a quiet pub: that's what a university that values the academic mission for its own sake should feel like.

What I'm talking about is sometimes understood under the phrase "liberal education." But because the term "education" suggests a process with an outcome, where the outcome is the reason for undergoing the process, I will introduce a new term, "study," in place of "education." I want to describe an institution we can call a university of liberal study.

Those who engage in liberal study value their own intellectual and moral autonomy. That is, they are able to think for themselves, at least to an appreciable degree, and they want to think for themselves; as well, they are able to find their own values and to set their own goals, and they want to find their own values and to set their own goals. They want to believe what they do on the basis of evidence and argument, and on the basis of evidence and argument alone. They want to be aware of what matters to them and they want their values to align well with each other and to form a consistent set. Their values align well when, for instance, if they want to drink another beer, they want to want to drink another beer. Their values are misaligned when some things that they want or desire are in tension with other things they want or desire.

One who lacks intellectual autonomy will often order her beliefs according to her hopes and fears. She's inclined to believe that which will gain her approval, disinclined to believe what might get her shamed or shunned. The desire to fit in and to be liked overrides the desire to get it right; or, rather, whether believing it will promote her interests becomes her standard of truth.

Those who engage in liberal study within a university community value their own intellectual and moral autonomy, but they also value the intellectual and moral autonomy of their fellow academics, whether professors or students. They will criticize the ideas and arguments of members of their community, but they won't try to apply any pressure on their fellows to get them to reform their views or values other than the pressures of evidence and argument.

Truth or knowledge is the goal of academic endeavour, but it is the goal of the endeavour in just the way that winning the game is the goal of hockey. Trying to outscore the other team gives a hockey game its structure and direction, but it is in the playing itself that the joy of the game resides. Players seek to meet standards of excellence in passing, shooting, playmaking and checking; in meeting the standards of excellence of their sport, they bring about a well played hockey game. It is participating in a well played game that they enjoy, and in which they can take pride, even when their side goes down to defeat.

The same is true of thinking hard about difficult things. Professors, scholars, researchers, intellectuals and students engage in reading and thinking, in designing and conducting experiments and surveys, in lectures and discussions, in writing papers and giving presentations. They seek to meet the standards of excellence in the various activities that make up academic life. In posing a probing question, creating a rich interpretation or developing a rigorous argument, they attain the physical and intellectual goods of academic endeavour.

Playing hockey is a practice, a set of interrelated activities, and so, too, is engaging in liberal study. Practices need institutions if they are to survive and thrive. Hockey has leagues and liberal study has universities. Leagues and universities are to protect and promote the practices they house. Their task is to create spaces dedicated to their practices and to supply participants with the resources they need if they are to seek to meet the standards of excellence internal to the practice.

While hockey and liberal study take their point from the goods internal to the practices themselves, goods such as a well-played game and a well-conceived and well-run seminar, institutions take their point from making the pursuit of the internal goods possible. But institutions are liable to corruption. That is because institutions must trade in goods that are external to the practices they house. Chief among these goods are money, power and status. An institution committed to the practice it houses uses these external goods in ways that serve the practice. A corrupt institution, on the other hand, uses the practice to further ends that have little to do with that practice. It might use the practice to collect more money, power and status so that it might distribute them among those in the institution's bureaucracy. Or it might use the practice to further the goals of, say, social justice.

Generating and criticizing understandings of things is a mission spread wide over the university. Chemists, histo-

rians and philosophers, for instance, all engage in it. But it is only one form the academic mission takes. Another form is generating and criticizing interpretations of things. In discussing a poem or novel, academics are not seeking the truth about anything. Instead, they compare and contrast readings of the poem or novel, trying thereby to find those readings by which the work is most powerful—or trying thereby to explain why the poem or novel is flat or derivative. A third form the academic mission takes is articulating evaluations of things, primarily ethical and aesthetic evaluations.

The task of the institution of a university, then, at least when that institution values liberal study, is to provide members of the academic community with opportunities to reflect on matters of intellectual interest or concern to those members. Their task is to support the core academic experience of following the arguments where they lead and weighing conflicting ideas, interpretations and arguments against each other.

Those who engage in the activities of liberal study, who engage in those activities for the sake of the engagement, who love study for its own sake, are people who wish to live a certain kind of life. But living this life is not something one can want prior to engaging in liberal study, for prior to the engagement, one can have little or no idea what that life is like. A student must first simply devote himself to study, pretty much on a gamble, just to find out whether he likes it, or likes it well enough to continue with it.

We professors might hope to instil in our students a taste for study or to awaken their passion for it, but that is not our task. Indeed, if we set out to change our students, to create in them commitment to the life of the mind, we will likely not succeed. For one, we will be using means other than argument, evidence and example to affect the thoughts and emotions of our students, and that would be to manipulate them. Since we value people's intellectual and moral autonomy, we may not, consistently with our principles, seek to manipulate others into valuing intellectual and moral autonomy, not even for their own good. We must instead simply engage in the activities of liberal study: thinking hard about things and trying to understand, interpret or appraise those things. Our students have our example and their ability to choose to adopt that example. Maybe they will follow us.

Now, of course, students need to make good decisions about where, when, and what to study; they should make their decisions not only on the basis of their tastes and talents but also in light of an accurate understanding of the financial and other costs of being committed to study, and of the external rewards of gaining skills, knowledge and credentials. But once a student has decided to pursue liberal study, he or she should pursue it in the spirit of liberal study. A student is wise to enrol in the programmes and to take the courses that are best to take in that pursuit, and to read, write, and say what serves his education best. But students committed to liberal study will care little for grades, though they will certainly take comments on their work and criticisms of it seriously. They do well to engage with others who pursue study for its own sake. The more of us (students and professors) who work under an attitude of commitment to liberal study, the more fun we will have and, though this isn't the point, the better educated we will become.

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Two Threats to Science on University Campuses: Mendacity and Cowardice

Geoff Horsman

Honesty and courage are two ingredients for human flourishing, and essential preconditions for science. Not the only two, to be sure, but I mention these specifically because these values have so quickly been diminished in the academy and replaced by their opposites: mendacity and cowardice.

This road to perdition started out innocently enough. We were just asked to reflect on a seemingly unobjectionable set of principles. What could be the harm in that?

Equity? That's just fairness.

Diversity? Sure! Solutions to problems often come from unexpected places.

Inclusion? What's not to like about that?

But Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion—or EDI as it's officially known in Canada—is like a gateway drug. While some of us briefly experimented back in the day and decided it wasn't for us, others quite liked it and moved on to harder stuff.

Nowadays, people are dehumanized—reduced to phenotypic categories like skin color. And those who even question this EDI racism are themselves deemed racist. The concrete outcomes of EDI policy are open racial discrimination, censorship, and compelled speech.

To get a federal research grant in Canada, you must describe how you will advance EDI. And by that they mean EDI racism—they don't mean equality of opportunity, they don't mean seeking out diverse expertise and opinion. I know this because I lost a grant for arguing that science should be inclusive of the two-thirds of Canadians who disagree with EDI ideology. A senior university administrator then told me that, while it's okay that I disagree with EDI, those reading my grant application should be left with the opposite impression.

This incentivization of lying works. A colleague told me as much. He said "I have made my peace with EDI. I will lie about my most deeply held convictions on paper in order to get funding." This is a dangerous game. When you start lying, when do you stop? The public would be correct to entirely lose trust in us.

But perhaps more pernicious is the slippery mendacity of EDI language. Let me give you an example.

My university introduced a program called "Inclusive Excellence", which aimed to hire six black and six indigenous faculty. Now, you might think that, when introducing a program based so openly on racial discrimination, a university legal team might have carefully considered possible legal challenges.

You might think they would have prepared a detailed report establishing, to a high evidentiary standard, the existence of systemic discriminatory hiring against black and indigenous scholars.

Well, you would think wrong. The only justification for the program I can find is the following quote from our President:

"Inclusive Excellence embodies our vision to fully embrace discovery, scholarly exploration, and application of new ideas, while engaging and challenging the world in all its complexity."

This is what I would call diversibabble. It means nothing. It is an empty shell. English words have been combined according to rules of grammar and syntax to construct a perfect sentence, perfectly devoid of meaning.

It is lying by omission. Presumably, the president would like to pretend she is not participating in racial discrimination but has no idea how to justify it in plain language. So, she deploys diversibabble.

Let me now turn to cowardice. Professors, *tenured* professors, are a fearful lot. In my chapter in *The War on Science* I describe how a colleague suggested I should stop talking about EDI because I have a family, and that I should think about my kids. Because we all know how quickly these things can spiral out of control—you know, with cancel culture and all.

How has it come to this, where a university, of all places, has so cowed professors—even, or perhaps especially, hard scientists?

Well, that is a long story. So let me instead leave you with what I think is key to getting us out of this mess.

Don't do the work of tyrants for them. Don't self-censor. Don't go along with things. Make them force you, because they don't want to do that—it makes them look like petty bullies. They don't want to look like bullies, so much of the time they will back off. But if they don't, that is okay. Make them be bullies. Others will see it, and some will have their eyes opened.

If we go along to get along, we sustain and prolong a fragile pretense of freedom while we become ever more managed and controlled.

So the next time a feckless administrator tells you what to say or think, politely explain that, while you appreciate their offer of ideological subjugation, you kindly reject it. If they persist, be like the Spartans at Thermopylae. Let them try to force you.

You might also saucily seek transparency—that most potent administrative allergen—with something like, "And, by the way, I'd like that in writing."

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How Queer Theory Betrays Trans People and Subverts Academic Freedom

Sinclair A. MacRae

In the September 2025 issue of the SAFS Newsletter, I argued that Social Justice Theory's (SJT's) defenders have used coercive conformity techniques to target academics who challenge their views. Perhaps the most dramatic examples have involved controversies over trans issues. Queer theory's (QT's) supporters have villainized, ridiculed, and cancelled both academics and non-academics. Carole Hooven, Kathleen Stock, Colin Wright, Doriane Lambelet Coleman, Frances Widdowson, Jo Phoenix, and Kathleen Lowrey are some of the professors who have been deplatformed, lost administrative positions or other career opportunities, or have been forced out of their positions for asserting claims that "progressive" activists deemed hateful and discriminatory. The non-academics include J.K. Rowling, Maya Forstater, Martina Navratilova, Amy Hamm, and Sharron Davies.

The boldness and success of these campaigns in rendering public discussion of even basic factual questions of biology radioactive is stunning. What do the words "male" and "female" mean? How many sexes are there? Is sex mutable? How is it determined? Answering these questions in ways that deviate from QT dogma has become a path to career suicide, even for experts in evolutionary biology for whom such questions are elementary and long settled. And when experts withdraw from the public sphere for fear of losing their livelihoods, the quality of public understanding and debate of the issues suffer, especially when that vacuum is then filled with pernicious ideological nonsense. For example, according to a 2023 Angus Reid poll 34% of Canadians responded "no" to the prompt "we should identify individuals as male or female" with another 10%

saying that they are not sure or can't say. In other words, roughly 34% of Canadians believe that there are more than two sexes or, if there are only two sexes, that it is immoral to say so, with another 10% unsure. Either that or they don't know what the words "male" and "female" mean.

A Failing of Education and a Triumph of Queer Theory Propaganda

These poll results represent a failing of education and a triumph of coercive conformity and propaganda. But if the pollsters had run the survey with Canadian professors and higher education administrators, would the results have been any less dismal? Not only is public confusion partly a *product* of academic misinformation, but an advanced education does not immunize one against fear and intimidation. Choosing to remain ignorant and acquiescing to the "experts" in gender and trans studies (rather than those in evolutionary biology?) is much easier and safer than challenging QT's absurd claims and tortuous reasoning.

Examples of such misinformation abound. Consider the ongoing controversy over Alberta's Bill 29 *Fairness and Safety in Sport Act*, which seeks to limit competitive female sports to females where male-body advantages would be unfair and/or unsafe. Several academics, see here, here, here, here, and here, including six from my institution, along with various public figures, see here, here, and Egale Canada denounced it. Their responses repeat several QT dogmas. For instance, the four academic authors of one of the pieces insist that "trans women are women" and that "sex exists along a spectrum", adding that "Anti-trans sport policies are bound to fail because the idea of two sexes, like two genders, is a social construction and not a biological fact" adding that "Humans have significant biological variations and there are no strict measures that can determine maleness or femaleness."

Two Dogmas of Queer Theory: Sex Exists along a Spectrum and Is Mutable

To be clear: all these claims are false. Biologists classify life according to whether a species member's gametes or reproductive cells are isogamous or anisogamous. Isogamous gametes are similar in size and shape; anisogamous gametes are not. Males develop primary reproductive organs (gonads) that, when mature, produce sperm; females develop primary reproductive organs that produce ova. Sperm are small and motile; ova are much larger and stationary. The differences between them explain many other facts about us, including facts of male-body advantages in sports.

QT efforts to reject human dimorphism and claim that sex is mutable all fail. Considering that QT also claims to represent trans people's interests, its disconnect from biological reality makes trans people appear uneducated and irrational by association. They should disassociate themselves from this extreme ideology, starting with QT's understanding of what it means to be transgendered. A good definition is "someone whose gender identity differs from their sex". To illustrate consider a variation on John Locke's thought experiment: imagine that instead of his prince switching bodies with a male pauper he switches bodies with a female. Imagine, furthermore, that they are both experiencing gender dysphoria, and that following our definition they identify as transgendered.

Whereas such self-identification is consistent with acknowledging basic biological facts about one's sex (hence "transgendered" not "transsexual"), the same is not true for the QT definition. QT defenders deny that all trans people fall into this category (derisively referring to those who believe this as "transmedicalists"). Instead, they insist that identifying as trans suffices for *being* trans because how a person regards their sex *determines* their sex. According to QT, sex is mind dependent. It is a *product* of self-definition. Thus, they insist that one should never question the "lived experiences" or "truth" of someone who claims to be male or female or otherwise, or doubt their feelings about this matter. To do so is "transphobic" and "anti-trans".

Unsurprisingly, this absurdity leads to other absurdities. When their view that sex is mind dependent contradicts the biological facts, they side with mind dependence. For them "trans women are women", even if almost all their nucleated cells have a functioning SRY gene (the male, sex-determining gene on the Y chromosome). This mind-dependent view of sex also entails that sex is non-binary in a way that is not commonly recognized. This claim is usually reached via faulty appeals to the existence of so-called "intersex" persons, *i.e.*, DSD (differences of sexual development) individuals. On this view sex exists along a spectrum with male at one end and female at the other, with DSD persons among those between these two endpoints, even though no DSD persons produce gametes that differ from the two types we just noted.

However, the belief that sex is mind dependent also leads to this conclusion. If a trans person's sex is mind dependent, and if that sex identity is a function of what they regard as their gender, then their sex is determined by their gender self-conception. In other words, gender *is* sex on this outlook. (One reason why QT supporters use the words "sex" and "gender" interchangeably is because they believe they are the same thing.) Furthermore, if someone identifies as non-binary, as genderfluid or gender queer, say, then since gender self-conception determines sex, sex is not just non-binary, it is also changeable, presumably even from moment to moment.

A Third Dogma: Sex Is a Social Construct

A third dogma is that sex is a social construct because QT views the controversy over how sex should be identified – by chromosomes, mind dependence, gametes, the expression of primary and secondary sex characteristics, and so on – as essentially a *political* rather than a scientific ques-

tion. According to this view, since the determinants of sex conflict, there is no decisive, biological answer to the question of what sex is. This leaves us with a political question instead of a biological one – whose view of the nature of sex will prevail? Via this reasoning the pursuit of academic excellence is displaced by social activism.

Furthermore, and unsurprisingly, since QT is grounded in SJT, it interprets the claim that there are two sexes as an attempt to oppress trans people. Consider, for example, the following exchange between New York Times columnist Ross Douthat and Chase Strangio, Deputy Director of Transgender Justice and staff lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union:

> Douthat: Before 2016, how did people think about sex as a category that was distinct from biological differences between men and women?
>
> Strangio: What we thought of as sex as a category – and this is in the context of civil rights and constitutional law – that it is just impermissible to discriminate against someone because of their actual, their perceived sex or their sex stereotypes. So, it didn't necessitate defining sex. … We start to see this impulse to define sex for purposes of sorting and excluding trans people that comes in 2016. In that context, I think that the definitions we see in the statutes that emerge then say biological sex changes.
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> In 2016, it says biological sex is what's on your birth certificate. Then I think we start to see definitions that are more about genitals. Then we start to see definitions that are more about chromosomes and reproductive anatomy.

Strangio is claiming that the biological account of sex aims to wrongly discriminate against and oppress trans persons. This echoes the defining tenets of SJT, according to which scientific "truths" are just value-laden and fabricated cultural assertions that advance powerful interests at the expense of the marginalized and oppressed, such as trans people. For QT, cancelling someone for insisting that sex is binary is a *political* victory won in a political, not an academic, arena. Since it is a step forward for social justice, because it helps overcome trans oppression, it should be *celebrated*.

This subverts academic freedom because it turns undesirable answers to biological questions into hate speech, at least in the minds of QT supporters. It also confuses sex with "sex", and from which it gains an initial air of plausibility. Which words we use to denote the world *is* a matter of social agreement, but that does not entail that those denoted states of the world are either arbitrary or socially constructed as well. So, for instance, we could have settled on some other word to denote water, or we could have used the word "water" to denote something else, say water and a poison. But this disregards the pragmatic function of the language choices we make. We chose "water" to refer to water, and not water and some poison for an obvious practical reason. Insisting that "trans women are women" if there is widespread political agreement that this is so is like claiming that it is always safe to drink water, where the word "water" now denotes, by a change in social agreement, both water and a poison. Whereas QT would have the world bend to its will, science bends to the world.

QT confuses how the word "sex" is defined with how sex is determined. The two-gamete theory is not one among many possible definitions of the word "sex"; it is an empirical generalization that has proven stable over two billion years of evolution across a huge number of species, including ours. It has tremendous explanatory power. It explains facts such as, that among humans, men are, on average, larger than women and die younger. These claims *are made true* by the world, not by any social agreement. They are consistent with reality as we have discovered it to be.

Similarly, since the two-gamete view is a theory *about* the world, rather than a claim about how we agree to use words, it is settled by empirical investigation. And as with other such empirical generalizations, it is falsifiable. If someone discovers humans who can reproduce via isogamous gametes or using some yet undiscovered third or more type of gamete, then the theory would be disconfirmed. Note also that persons with ovotesticular disorder of sex development, or ovotesticular syndrome, (OT-DSD), formerly referred to as "true hermaphrodites", have both ovarian and testicular tissue. They cannot reproduce via isogamy or some other type or types of gametes and so their (very rare) existence does not disconfirm the two-gamete theory either.

Whereas science is a method for understanding the world, QT disconnects us from it. Trans people should see it for what it is and reject it. And academics need to overcome their fear, apathy, and cynicism and take their duties to advance the socially justified mission of the university to seek the truth and propagate knowledge seriously. Exposing the dogmas of QT is not hate speech, nor is it wrongly discriminatory towards trans people, transphobic, or anti-trans. Claiming otherwise subverts academic freedom and evidences contempt for trans people and academics alike.

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The Elite Hall of Shame

Frances Widdowson

After Mount Royal University wrongfully terminated me,

in December 2021, I noticed that not only is my institution regularly imposing prescribed doctrines and censoring professors and students, but many other institutions are doing so as well. Many of the attacks on freedom of inquiry and expression have been motivated by the project of indigenizing the university. This is not surprising, for a university cannot demand that indigenous "ways of knowing" be "respected" and "valued" except by flouting academic values.

My response has been to travel to a number of universities to try to discuss one of the most contentious areas of Indigenization — the false claim that "the remains of 215 children" have been "confirmed" at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. In early September 2025, following a number of experiences trying to examine this assertion, I began to compile the "Universities' Hall of Shame". The list included Mount Royal University, the University of Lethbridge, the University of Regina, Thompson Rivers University, and the University of Manitoba. All of these universities had obstructed me in various ways in my attempts to discuss the Kamloops case.

I recently travelled to both The University of Winnipeg and the University of Victoria. These universities, for different reasons, cannot be placed in the Universities' Hall of Shame alongside the others; they deserve special standing: a place in the Universities' *Elite* Hall of Shame.

The University of Winnipeg

When I announced that I was planning to go to the University of Manitoba to do a Spectrum Street Epistemology session on the claim "The 'Grave Error' at Kamloops was a Hoax", a friend from The University of Winnipeg wondered if I would be visiting his campus as well. At the time I thought "why not"? After all, two university experiences would be better than one.

I was warned that The University of Winnipeg would be a dangerous place to visit because it was located in the heart of the territory of various aboriginal gangs. However, I naively thought gangs would not be interested in an intellectual exercise such as Spectrum Street Epistemology, and so I was unprepared for what unfolded.

It turned out that a number of aboriginal gangsters felt the need to show up to "make sure the voices of our elders are protected". This consisted of threatening and intimidating my cameraman, Daniel Page (who is also a computer science professor), to the point where he feared for his life. He was pushed off campus by a number of thugs because they had decided that he should not be able to document what was happening.

My treatment was mild in comparison. Seven female assailants (including Vivian Ketchum, Geraldine "Gramma" Shingoose, and Louise Menow) roughed me up and then decided that I should be forcibly removed from campus. They surrounded me and linked arms so that I could not escape as they tried to pull me off the property. To prevent them from moving me, I sat on the ground within their "sacred circle" while they screamed at me and told me that I "belonged underground". Someone poured a sticky drink over my head.

Each time a man tried to help, the women would pretend that they were being attacked. This gave the gangsters a reason to intimidate the men trying to offer me assistance.

Although the university had no control over the gang members who showed up and the "elders" supposedly being protected (security staff made the implausible claim that they called police who never arrived), it did create a hostile climate for me within the campus community. On September 25, 2025, Provost Pavlina Radia sent an email to all faculty members stating that The University of Winnipeg would not block me from entering the campus, but she implied that my session was contrary to the "values" of The University of Winnipeg's "Truth and Reconciliation" efforts. She also provided a detailed list of the "counselling" and "health" supports that were available, which indicated that my presence would traumatize aboriginal members of the community.

Even worse were the actions of the University of Winnipeg Faculty Association. Its president, Peter J. Miller, sent out a message of denunciation on the morning of my visit. In his email, Miller asserted that "the genocide perpetrated against indigenous peoples by the government of Canada is a fact". He then implied that I was intentionally disseminating falsehoods. He "note[ed] with pride the work of scholars and students in our membership — Indigenous members and allies — whose scholarship, teaching, and activism centres on these issues and who are at the forefront of combatting the lies of residential school denialists on our campus and elsewhere". As to what these "lies" were, Miller was silent.

Then, before I could begin the Spectrum Street Epistemology session, and even though the Provost said that I would not be "blocked" from doing the session, I was handed a trespass notice. The gangsters, "survivors" and allies intimidating Daniel Page and several others, however, were allowed to engage in all of their harassing behaviour with impunity.

The University of Victoria

My visit to the University of Victoria was marked by less violence than my visit to The University of Winnipeg. Nonetheless, UVic acted in a similarly appalling fashion. Because of the actions of the crowds in Winnipeg, I decided not to do Spectrum Street Epistemology. Instead, I would wear a sandwich board asking two questions "What Remains?" and "Denial or Truth?".

Carey Newman, a professor in the Faculty of Fine Arts, organized a "counter protest". He said that my questions

were "ignor[ing] official church and government records of residential school deaths, dismiss[ing] the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and disrespect[ing] the testimony of Survivors in order to promote … hateful and false rhetoric". He encouraged people to use drums to "drown out hatred with songs", in order to show people that he and his associates "know and believe the truth of residential school history", unlike me who supposedly "deni[es] it".

In spite of my intention merely to stand outside and engage people in conversation, and not to obstruct any activities of the university, officials deemed my presence would constitute a prohibited "unsanctioned event". I saw this as a deliberate effort to exclude dissenting positions on the Kamloops "215" claim, a claim which the University of Victoria had been promoting for the last four and a half years. I responded with the following: "Piss off @Uvic. We're coming in!". This resulted in me being met by five police officers, who handed me a trespass notice and took me to the police station. I was fined $115. The trespass notice said nothing about holding an unsanctioned event. Now the accusation was that, despite not yet having arrived on campus, my conduct did not "respect the rights, privileges, and safety of others".

Although the university had me removed presumably to prevent a confrontation with the "counter protest" organized by Carey Newman and other professors — Ry Moran, Jeff Corntassel, Tracy Underwood, Darcy Lindberg, and Miqe'l Dangeli — it did not have this effect. Instead, an angry group of activists pursued the people who had accompanied me. They assaulted my companions and damaged property. The university issued no trespass notices, and the police declined to arrest anyone.

Instead of admonishing people for their bad behaviour, the President of the University of Victoria, Robina Thomas, congratulated everyone who participated in the "counter protest". In Thomas' words: "thank you to all the respected ones who showed up to turn their backs on a potentially harmful unsanctioned event at UVic earlier today" as this was "an undeniable validation of our communities' commitment to the local Indigenous Teachings that ground our Indigenous Plan". In a strange twist of logic, Thomas argued that the shutting down of discussion that occurred "help[ed] to create the conditions in which academic freedom, civil and informed debate, and open inquiry can thrive".

The Universities' Elite Hall of Shame

I've inducted these universities into the Universities' Elite Hall of Shame because both completely abandoned their academic mission. They allowed mob rule to prevail over academic values, issued trespass notices for engaging in an intellectual exercise, and, in the case of the University of Victoria, even had me arrested for trying to correct the falsehoods that it had been disseminating.

To try to combat this, I have enlisted the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms to help pursue action against both universities. In the case of the University of Victoria, we are challenging the ticket on the grounds that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was violated. The outcome of this is uncertain because it is unclear in British Columbia as to whether freedom of expression is protected on university campuses.

At the very least, however, the case will provide much needed attention to the serious problems facing these universities. This could potentially assist what actually needs to occur — changing the culture of these institutions. As most universities have been significantly captured by the prescribed doctrines of Indigenization, it is only with "boots on the ground" that the prevailing climate of institutional censorship can be challenged.

The next university scheduled for a visit is the University of British Columbia. UBC has similar characteristics to the University of Victoria in that it excessively promotes Indigenization. There is the First Nations House of Learning, headed by Joely Viveiros, who has actively been asserting that Ground Penetrating Radar can confirm remains. It also has the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre that sees itself as promoting the stories of "survivors". The Academic Director of this "Dialogue Centre", Johnny Mack, recently replied to the situation that unfolded at the University of Victoria by saying that "The history of the Indian Residential School system does not require debate".

This is not the response of an academic institution, and we plan to test the University of British Columbia's capacity for open inquiry and critical thinking on January 22. The question is: Will this institution be promoted to the Universities' Elite Hall of Shame or will it allow the required discussion to proceed?

Frances Widdowson (widdowsonfrances@gmail.com) is a professor who was wrongfully terminated from Mount Royal University in 2021, and whose lack of reinstatement is being appealed to the Alberta Labour Relations Board on February 6, 2026. In the meantime, she is directing documentaries with Simon Hergott about academic freedom and the "grave error" deception at Kamloops. You can read more about her case and her work on the website https://wokeacademy.info.

Why Are Academic Unions in Canada So Pathetic? (Part II of a Three-Part Series)

Peter Bowal

Introduction

Why are unions at Canadian post-secondary institutions

often useless in advocating for their members in disciplinary matters? In the first installment exploring this issue,[1] I pointed out that these unions wield extraordinary exclusive power over the careers of faculty members. The academy is a closed shop in Canada, like other public sector institutions, because provincial legislation mandates faculty unionization at post-secondary institutions.

Not only are faculty members forced to be union members to work at post-secondary institutions, but these unions also enjoy exclusive jurisdiction to represent and advocate for faculty members in all Collective Agreement matters, including discipline. We are stuck with unions to protect our career interests even if they are ineffectual, and even if we would prefer to defend ourselves or hire our own legal counsel.

Faculty unions choose what grievances to file, how far to take them and what resources to spend on them. Unions enjoy ultimate discretion and authority over the careers of faculty members, who have no standing to defend themselves.

Duty of Fair Representation

The only check on union effectiveness is the duty of fair representation owed to members.[2] This duty is created by legislation[3] but it is defined and enforced by provincial labour relations boards. In this article, I describe the Alberta Labour Relations Board (ALRB) practice to the end of 2025, as set out in my own case.[4]

Summarizing from the ALRB decision,[5] representing employees "fairly" means without discrimination, arbitrariness, bad faith or serious negligence. The union need not take every grievance to arbitration just because the faculty member asks. Rather, the union assesses the merits of the grievance, the costs and chances of success at arbitration, among other factors, when deciding whether or not to arbitrate grievances. The ALRB considers union conduct and considerations in fairly and reasonably investigating grievances to arrive at informed decisions.

Unions must communicate "fairly" with members about all aspects of their representation, allow members to make their case and provide input on what unions have discovered. Unions do not take direction from members but their decisions cannot be motivated by discrimination, bad faith or personal feelings.

Finally, unions must not be arbitrary in dealing with members' grievances. They are to give more than superficial attention to the matters at issue and members' needs and interests. Unions must 'thoroughly investigate all facts, obtain full details of the case and evaluate the merits of the claim and the probable outcome of arbitration before deciding to abandon or settle a grievance,' including reviewing previous arbitral decisions. The unions' judgment must be "reasoned."

Bowal versus Faculty Association

After 30 years of service, I entered into a resignation agreement ("MOU") with the University of Calgary in June 2021. Terms from the MOU, relevant to this article, included three more years of employment with reduced or no duties, that it was a final agreement, and no discipline would be levied.

During and after the final three years of employment, I alleged that the university violated the MOU in several ways. For months, it deliberately delayed processing my pension by 3 months, it denied me the opportunity to apply for *emeritus* status (contrary to its own policy) and had violated the MOU and otherwise harassed me in several specific ways.

I requested a grievance against the university on all three matters. The union dismissed all these concerns. A union administrator merely emailed university officials asking "[c]an you provide me with some information on why his pension processing was delayed?" and to 'confirm (my) suspicion' why *emeritus* was denied. On the basis of that minimal leading follow-up, and naïve faith in what the university responded, the grievances were denied, the grievance advisor writing, "I do not believe that a grievance will bring any solution."

The duty to fairly represent requires unions to invest more than superficially in these concerns. It must thoroughly investigate all facts, obtain full details of the case and evaluate the merits of the claim and the probable outcome of arbitration before deciding not to grieve. Suggesting the reason to the university for doing what it did against the member, automatically accepting the university's explanations for shabby treatment of its member, and refusing to engage in contextual issue analysis does *not* constitute thorough investigation, obtaining full details and evaluating the merits. Has any other resigning member, includ-

[1] Peter Bowal, *Why are Academic Unions in Canada so Pathetic?,* 99 SAFS Newsletter (Sept 2024, p. 5)

[2] A general description is found at Peter Bowal, LawNow (2019) *The Duty of Unions to Fairly Represent Their Members*

[3] For example, Alberta's *Labour Relations Code*, RSA 2000, c L-1, which reads as a negative duty and right:

> *Fair representation*
>
> 153(1) No trade union or person acting on behalf of a trade union shall deny an employee or former employee who is or was in the bargaining unit the right to be fairly represented by the trade union with respect to the employee's or former employee's rights under the collective agreement.

[4] *Bowal v The Faculty Association of the University of Calgary*, 2025 ALRB 143 (CanLII)

[5] The full ALRB statement of the law is at paragraphs 44-45, more verbiage than can be accommodated in this article.

ing those resigning in the same circumstances, suffered the same pension processing delays? Should HR administrators be able unilaterally to override valid *emeritus* policies to the detriment of some faculty? Could an arbitrator see this as prohibited university discipline?

The union did not engage in any objective and analytical evaluation of the merits, probably because it did not understand those merits nor its duty to investigate and evaluate. It appeared to be looking for an easy way to give both the employer and itself a pass. This was evident in the third MOU-breach and harassment-related complaint where the union refused to investigate *any* aspect of it and did not even reply to me about it. I saw that as similar effort the union had expended on all my concerns.

I appealed under the union's internal appeal process. This likewise elicited all-purpose, canned language characteristic of a template decision written by AI:

> The Appeal Committee came to the unanimous decision to support the decisions of [the Grievance Advisor] to deny your grievances. Specifically, we believe that she acted in a timely, fair and good faith manner in all her decisions related to your appeal issues. Upon careful consideration of your specific concerns, the committee found that none of the evidence you presented suggested that there were violations of the Collective Agreement. Therefore, the Appeal Committee is of the view that [X] acted in a reasonable, non-arbitrary and non-discriminatory manner. It is the opinion of the Appeal Committee that the Association has fulfilled its duty of fair representation in these matters.

I was convinced that the Appeal Committee members failed to grasp the facts and arguments of the case. Its standard one-size-fits-all form decision proved it.

ALRB Decision

The ALRB took close to five months to decide whether this duty of fair representation complaint should advance to a hearing, or whether, upon preliminary documentary review, it was destined to fail.

Delayed Pension Processing

The ALRB was satisfied that the union "looked into the matter, and canvassed information and perspectives from the Complainant and the University. It obtained an explanation for the delay in the processing of his pension, which was relayed to the Complainant."[6] It concluded, "[i]n sum, the Association made its discretionary decision, to decline to file a grievance, a decision it was entitled to take after its fair process, including an investigation, the provision of its explanation, and its internal appeal. There is no arguable unfairness here."[7]

Emeritus

The ALRB also found that the union discharged its duty, writing "there is *[sic]* also no indicia of ill will, bad faith, discrimination, arbitrariness, or serious negligence. The Association put its mind to the issue and canvassed information, including in obtaining the Complainant's information and perspective and an explanation from the University, before deciding to not file a grievance."[8]

Breaches and Harassment

Since the union did not even address this basket of issues, the ALRB had no choice but to send it to a hearing.

Overpayment of Union Dues

A fourth issue was raised that was against the union, not the employer. The union also conceded it had erroneously collected some $3000 in dues during that time but refused to unconditionally refund that overpayment.

The internal appeal process envisions raising this to the Appeal Committee which passed on it. The ALRB also punted it, refusing to order or recommend reimbursement on the basis of limited statutory jurisdiction. Such clear wrongs by unions against their members – mere "equity" as the ALRB styled it – apparently are no concern for the only administrative tribunal resolving disputes between unions and their members. One is now left to drag it through expensive court process to recover money improperly taken and held.

Conclusion

The feebleness of academic unions has fundamentally shattered academic freedom and tenure in post-secondary institutions. Terminating tenured faculty members in Canada on disciplinary grounds has been an acquired taste by senior administration to rid the modern campus of ideological dissidents and other freedom-loving scholars who consider indispensable and non-negotiable the full spectrum of debate, teaching and research of the big issues of our day.

This trilogy laments how weak union representation and advocacy for faculty members contribute to the collapse of tenure and academic freedom on Canadian campuses. The focus in this article is how the *only* check on union effectiveness in supporting faculty members is the duty of fair representation.

Faculty members have no choice but to work in unionized institutions in Canada. They cannot advocate for them-

[6] Para 51
[7] Para 54
[8] Para 55

selves and they have no choice of legal counsel. They are totally dependent upon their union to represent their interests. The law confers exclusive jurisdiction and broad discretion on these unions. In my view, since law removed this agency from faculty members over their own careers, their *unions should be held to a duty of fair representation equivalent to what an average and reasonable member would advocate for oneself.*

The ALRB asserts that "the law surrounding the duty of fair representation under section 153 is well established."[9] Others would call it a well-established word salad that provides minimal "duty", predictability and objective standardization. This very minimal legal duty unions owe to their members is framed mostly in what it should *not* do instead of what it *should* do for members.

The *Bowal v Faculty Association* case in December 2025 shows how low the standard has fallen. Proving discrimination, arbitrariness, bad faith or serious negligence by one's union is essentially impossible today. Faculty members do not expect every complaint to be shepherded through arbitration; they *do* expect some pushback against their university employer. The law technically requires unions to thoroughly investigate and inform themselves to obtain full details of the issue and evaluate the merits and chances of success. They should review previous arbitral decisions. Their decisions about whether to file, and how far to advance, the grievance must be "reasoned." This is the language of the legal standard; anything less is "arbitrary" and a failure of the duty of fair representation.

The *Faculty Association* case demonstrates that this 'thorough investigation for full details' and 'reasoned evaluation of the merits' exists in theory only. If the whole effort comprises a union administrator suggesting to the university why it acted against the faculty member, or accepts any explanation offered, the duty will be discharged. It can inherently trust the institution. If the union calls that a thorough investigation, the ALRB, in practice, will ask for no more duty. The union need not show that it wrangled with facts, arguments and issues at all.

Why are academic unions in Canada so pathetic? The law requires essentially no effort from them to support their faculty members.

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The Limits of Tenure for Those Who Dare Break Boundaries

Kevin Gosine

While many people in the 'real world' oppose the idea of tenure for university professors, it serves a vital and obvious function: the protection of academic freedom. The job security guaranteed by tenure allows university scholars to share research findings and espouse perspectives deemed controversial or that oppose politically accepted narratives of the day. The tenure system supports the historical mission of the university: the unrestrained pursuit of truth. By allowing diverse ideas to be aired and debated, bad ideas fall, the best of divergent ideas merge, and some semblance of truth is ideally siphoned out.

Despite this, as readers of this newsletter are well aware, academic freedom has been under siege for at least a decade. While the North American academy has been left-leaning since the 1970s, within the last 10 years it has been overtaken by a pronounced far-left hegemony that aims to promote equity and protect traditionally marginalized groups by policing social narratives.

Amidst this politically charged atmosphere, there have been far too many instances of professors who have gone against preferred narratives being de-platformed, censored, denied opportunities, professionally marginalized, or outright fired (in some cases, despite being tenured). Hence, while most tenured professors will not be fired for airing unpopular opinions, they are by no means shielded from social and professional consequences, including a potentially biased peer-review system, reputational harm, the erosion of critical social capital and, relatedly, diminished opportunities. I recently had the misfortune of learning this firsthand.

I'm a tenured associate professor at Brock University. In October of 2024 I, along with colleagues Tamari Kitossa and Ron Thomson, organized two campus talks by Frances Widdowson, a political scientist who, despite being tenured, was fired by Mount Royal University in 2021 after publicly conveying unpopular views on a number of topics, notably university Indigenization policies and residential schools (her dismissal was ultimately ruled wrongful by an external arbitrator). Her main evening talk was held in honour of the late Thomas Hudlicky, a highly accomplished chemist at Brock who himself suffered professional slings and arrows after writing against preferential treatment for women and underrepresented racialized groups in STEM.

We staged this event not to signal agreement with or to endorse Dr. Widdowson's views, but to promote academic freedom on campus. In her talks Dr. Widdowson challenged accepted residential school narratives along with the Kamloops 'mass graves' controversy, and talked about her termination and ensuing arbitration process, all of which she discussed in the context of academic freedom. Despite our intent to illuminate the importance of a core academic principle, Ron Thomson describes the disillusioning behind-the-scenes administrative attempts to shut down the event:

[9] Para 44

> Multiple emergency meetings were reportedly held, with false accusations levelled against both Dr. Widdowson and the event organizers. [A university administrator] is alleged to have privately attempted to coerce cancellation, even meeting with the Dean of Social Sciences during the pressure campaign. Brock's curiously titled 'Campus Safety Services' and the university Registrar (in her oversight role for room bookings) were also drafted in attempts to intimidate the organizers, warning of grave safety risks to students should the talks proceed. (Thomson, 2025, p. 12)

Despite these efforts, Dr. Widdowson's talks took place as scheduled and were well attended despite the limited promotional avenues available to us (the daytime talk took place in Dr. Kitossa's third year undergraduate class where students had the option to not attend). Predictably, people in the audience largely disagreed with her perspective. Despite this, engagement, while impassioned, was encouragingly civil, something that cannot be said for most of Dr. Widdowson's campus talks. To our surprise and no doubt that of trepidatious administrators, the event did not spark protests. Video of the main talk is available on YouTube and features me delivering introductory remarks and facilitating a post-talk Q&A. Somehow, I didn't foresee personal professional consequences stemming from my involvement with this event. In hindsight, I'm embarrassed by my naivety.

Months before the Widdowson talk I had embarked on a project with three colleagues: an edited book on a contemporary topic of great social and political concern. The individual who invited me on board, let's call him Mike, was a close friend. In my first year teaching at Brock I taught him as a final year undergraduate student. Mike went on to acquire a PhD and landed a tenure-stream professorship at a US university where he acquired tenure and, last I was aware, was applying for a full professorship. Over the years Mike made a point of keeping in touch and considered me a mentor despite having surpassed me in academic accomplishment. I considered him a close friend, someone to whom I could turn to in any situation, as he did me, and I was immensely proud to see him accomplish so much professionally. I visited him in the US city in which he lived where I spent a wonderful time with him and his partner. He was very far-left politically (as are the other two original co-editors), while I had veered centre-left and grew critical of identity politics.

Despite this, my friendship with Mike withstood political disagreement and he long expressed a desire to collaborate. Our divergent worldviews made me question whether collaboration was possible despite our friendship. This edited volume finally provided an opportunity to test the collaborative waters (spoiler alert: we failed the test).

By fall of 2024 the book project was in full swing. We had secured a contract with a major university press and had recruited chapter authors, a mix of established and emerging scholars. I enthusiastically produced a full polished draft of my own chapter manuscript. Everything seemed in place when a couple of contributors pulled out. We still had a sufficient number of chapters to constitute a book, but the withdrawals alarmed the co-editors. One of the co-editors alerted Mike to the video of the Widdowson talk, and Mike confronted me about it. (My guess is that one of the authors who withdrew searched each of us, uncovered the video of the Widdowson talk, and brought it to the attention of one of the editors.)

When the other two co-editors expressed intent to abandon the project, Mike asked if I would be willing to continue working on it with him. I agreed. Despite this initial willingness to salvage the volume, however, Mike himself pulled out of the project, informing me in an email that he "was uncomfortable with the direction that the book is taking." This explanation made little sense. Despite the few contributor withdrawals, the book remained the same in terms of theme and content. With three of the four editors having withdrawn, the publisher terminated the contract.

I was dumbfounded and disillusioned. Suddenly and unexpectedly, this promising project was endangered by my involvement with an unrelated event, one where I exercised my academic freedom. Mike's seeming betrayal exacerbated my incredulity given the friendship we long shared. The main (pre-colon) title of the volume was "Breaking Boundaries," which implied a need to challenge rigid boundaries within a certain milieu. My partner, who is not an academic, astutely highlighted the irony of the title (and inspired the title of this piece). To paraphrase her, "you 'broke a boundary' and wound up punished for it."

Convinced that the project was worth saving and conscious of contributors' time and effort, I invited Ron Thomson to be my new co-editor. We recruited additional authors to replace those who withdrew. The new contributors are members of the Heterodox Academy and SAFS, and predictably promised chapters that were highly critical of leftist university policies and the 'woke' climate of higher education. We submitted a new proposal to the publisher, this time armed with committed contributors, chapter abstracts, a draft of a foreword authored by a prominent Canadian sociologist, and four sample chapters.

These efforts turned out to be in vain, however, as the publisher rejected this new version of the project. In a three-sentence email entirely devoid of constructive criticism, the acquisitions editor informed us that "the project is not a fit with our publishing list." I was mystified. The publisher had granted the original iteration of the book a contract but it was somehow no longer "a fit" despite retaining the general theme with a slightly broader scope.

I'm left to speculate that the proposed chapters of the new contributors spooked the editorial board. Ron and I are currently trying to find a new publishing home for the volume.

My experience with this scholarly unravelling illuminates what tenure cannot protect: professional opportunities conditional on *how* academic freedom is exercised. Academic freedom is not the same as constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression. In the words of Joan Scott (2017), "[f]ree speech makes no distinction about quality. Academic Freedom does" (p. 14). Put differently, the ability of academics to share their arguments and study findings via institutionally recognized channels is contingent on peer assessment of how well arguments are developed and substantiated, along with methodological rigour.

This is justified and necessary. However, the exercise of academic freedom should not hinge on whether scholarship aligns with a fashionable ideology. In the case of my project, the publisher's claim of "fit" seemed like a linguistic loophole to reject work regarded as controversial rather than substantively wanting.

From the standpoint of illustrating ideological selectivity in academic publishing, my experience is reminiscent of the famous 'grievance studies hoax' in which three US scholars published a number of papers espousing (hyperbolic) far-left perspectives in peer-reviewed journals. Taken together, these cases suggest that ideology can, at times, weigh heavily in decisions under the guise of objective scholarly vetting.

On a personal level, a tenure-protected job is certainly nice. From the standpoint of promoting a thriving academy, however, job security means little when marginalized academics are deprived of the resources, connections and opportunities to do their job, which includes testing knowledge that ideologues deem settled. In such a scenario, scholars service the academy about as well as toothless orcas support the ocean ecosystem.

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Taking Apart the Academic Paper that Celebrates Closed-Mindedness

Marc Champagne

James Lindsay, who researches the roots of social justice zealotry, observed that, "[s]o far as I know, there's not some specific piece of scholarship that closes the Woke off to debate, like a single paper or book explaining why they don't do it" (2020). We now have that paper. It is titled "Pragmatism as a Mediator–Seeking an Illusory Harmony?" and was written by the Finnish scholar Sami Pihlström.

We can all agree that things like racism are bad. Pihlström, however, goes much further by holding that racism violates "a transcendental condition for the possibility of serious discourse in general" (2023, 22). As a consequence, "[l]istening to the racist's voice is, in brief, to fail to listen to the cries of those wounded by the racist" (Pihlström 2023, 3). The desire to avoid moral contamination is so pronounced that even the medium conveying a given message must be eradicated. It is not enough to reject what is *said*; we must ensure that the very *voice* used doesn't reach one's ear drum.

This closed-mindedness is worrisome, because it releases Pihlström from defining his terms. Presumably, we must depend on Pihlström to tell us when something or somebody counts as "racist" or "antidemocratic." Naturally, someone unjustly caught in the crosshairs of such a dismissal will want to warn Pihlström that he is overshooting. But, Pihlström informs us, merely listening to such a dissenting voice would abet evil. Hence, "[t]he liberal pragmatist temperament of listening to as many different 'voices' as possible [...] must eventually be constrained by the duty to *stop* listening when the voices become intolerant or simply unacceptable due to their extremity" (Pihlström 2023, 3; emphasis in original).

I worry that, by cutting itself off from evidence, a refusal to listen leaves wrongfully accused persons no means of exonerating themselves. Moreover, given that concepts like racism now encompass beliefs and acts that many rightly consider sensible, a policy of silence risks dismissing implausibly large numbers of people as immoral. We academics should therefore think very carefully about the consequences of closed-mindedness, especially since it risks increasing the likelihood of conflict.

Let us suppose that, to solve the "paradox of tolerance" (Popper 2013, 581), we must be intolerant towards intolerants. Given that communication ceases and information stops flowing, how can we be sure that the person on the receiving end of our intolerance is indeed as we deem them to be? Pihlström holds that we should not "start from an allegedly neutral context within which it is not yet clear that sexism and racism are to be rejected" (2021, 164). It is fully possible, however, to take badness for granted while

insisting that we must start from a neutral context when determining *who* is in fact bad. Pihlström contends that "[e]thics is and must remain *beyond justification*" (2005, xi; emphasis in original). Even if we assume that this is true, one cannot go from the premise 'I refuse to discuss whether it is good or bad to be a racist' to the conclusion 'I refuse to discuss whether or not this particular person is in fact a racist.' If we clump together these two refusals, we risk converting allegations of moral blameworthiness into ascriptions of moral blameworthiness.

Now, under ordinary circumstances, refusing to converse with racists (about a topic of relevance) might be reasonable. However, these are not reasonable times. Here, for example, are some beliefs and actions now ranked as "racist" or "intolerant":

- Wearing a costume with cultural elements for Halloween.

- Holding that only women can get pregnant.

- Believing that hard drug use should be stigmatized, not encouraged (much less tax funded).

- Not feeling bound by what is forbidden in Islam.

- Being proud of the accomplishments of the West.

- Asking for proof and due process when allegations of abuse or genocide are made and withholding judgment until that evidence is known.

- Thinking that people should be hired only on the basis of merit.

- Believing that illegal immigration is illegal.

- Listening to both sides of all issues, even when one side appears "unthinkable" (Pihlström 2023, 17).

For the record, none of the beliefs and actions just listed seem "racist" or "intolerant" to me. By analogy, I do not associate with murderers, but if the term were to cover eating hamburgers, I would be unmoved by accusations of murder directed at me. Hence, in addition to erroneous accusations, we must guard against exaggerated accusations.

Scholars who fixate on racism often seem unconcerned with other (arguably more prevalent and consequential) vices such as lying, envy, greed, lust, laziness, narcissism, etc. It is clearly easier to blame others—or, better still, vague "systemic" failures—than to reform one's character, action by action. Hence, despite the level of sophistication achieved in his area of expertise (philosophy of religion), Pihlström is simplistic about political matters, since he implies that only persons with reproachable intents would object to his take on things. "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us […]. But the line dividing good and evil passes through the heart of every human being" (Solzhenitsyn 2018, 75).

Given the fashionable exaggerations I have witnessed in academia and the steadfast decency I have observed in ordinary people, I find it more plausible to think that the term "racist" has been stretched to encompass half a nation than to think that half a nation is racist. So, if someone describes the items listed a few paragraphs ago as "racist" or "intolerant," you should doubt their judgment, not your moral worth.

Denouncing unnamed "racists" is less an empirical claim—which, if rendered precise, could be defeated—than a performative act, addressed to readers who will presumably cheer. Pihlström's main claim is that "[t]here is no way of mediating between the false extremes of what might simply be described as lunatic and non-lunatic types of thinking" (2023, 4). The use of the passive voice and implication of consensus let him enjoy the benefits of denunciation while dodging its costs/risks (Turri 2022). So, while Pihlström *insinuates* that people who voted for Trump or Brexit are racists, he never actually *justifies* the claims about "hateful or violence-driven identities" (2023, 5) that motivate his rejection of mediation as "illusory."

I would like Pihlström to name names and show receipts, but he keeps such applied questions at bay by saying that "while I suppose my reflections are politically relevant, […] my discussion will remain at a more abstract metaphilosophical level" (Pihlström 2023, 5). Similarly, he recognizes that "there are different views on how exactly to interpret the meaning of the concepts of racism and democracy," but he explains that, "[a]s this paper addresses a meta-level issue, we can leave such matters open here" (2023, 3). Instead of winking at the like-minded, intellectuals who have a specific political aim in mind should take responsibility for their claims by giving an explicit story. Surely one should not be allowed to call for sweeping (half-country sized) cancellations—only to then retreat to the rarified air of theory. Extraordinary claims may not require extraordinary evidence, but they require some evidence.

Most of Pihlström's arguments dissolve once we realize that listening to X does not automatically mean acquiescing to X. In fact, repudiations that come *after* charitable engagements have a greater claim to being justified than repudiations based merely on innuendo and hearsay. Alas, an unproductive set of ideas has taken over academia. Like pilgrims during the Hajj, many academics are marching around the common goal of "DEI": "diversity," "equity," "inclusivity" (Hillman and Borland 2022, 18). However, many (more?) people inside and outside academia think that freedom, rigor, and merit (FRM) ought to be our lodestar. Yet, not only are those who oppose prevailing social justice beliefs "deemed to be unworthy, arguments inconsistent with that vision are likewise often […] treated as something to be discredited, rather than answered" (Sowell 2011, 147–148; emphasis in original). What exactly are

those arguments? Someone following Pihlström's recommendations would never have a chance to find out.

Although Pihlström wants to shut down communication with those he deems "anti-democratic," one could argue that "communication is what democracy is all about" (Coeckelbergh 2024, 219; emphasis in original). Looking at history, no echo chamber has been able "to hold its ground in practice" (Peirce 1931–58, vol. 5, para. 378). For instance, "in the 70s there was a lot of self-congratulation that we no longer have violence on campus," but it was because scholars "who would antagonize the students by their viewpoints were not hired as professors" (Thomas Sowell, speaking to Peter Robinson, May 19, 2011). Such "deplatforming" may succeed in doctoring mock-consensus at a local scale, but given that there is no analog of non-hiring in society at large, scholars excluded from the academic conversation simply migrated to think-tanks (and now the internet), where vibrant and rigorous conversations continue to this day.

Universities used to have a monopoly on knowledge and credentials, but now they only have a monopoly on credentials. Having spent decades steel-manning controversial views (e.g., Champagne 2016), I find the nonchalance of Pihlström's undocumented dismissals infuriating. Unilaterally ending a conversation may give one a momentary ego-boost, but people and ideas one dislikes do not vanish merely by plugging one's ears. So, above all, the question I have for Pihlström is: What is supposed to come after silence?

Language games involve game theory, since what one person does/says is conditional on, and responsive to, what the other person does/says and vice versa. So, if A characterizes B's beliefs as "lunacy" and ceases all dialogue with B, what does A expect B to do in response? Spontaneously feel contrition and switch to A's side? Pihlström is no doubt aware that many scientists and lay people view philosophy as a waste of time, yet he did not ditch his vocation merely on account of these displays of disdain. We have no reason to think that the folks summarily dismissed by Pihlström would act any differently.

Unfortunately, dwelling exclusively in one's tribe is like wearing beer goggles or having a high IQ: one becomes so certain of being certain that one drifts away from facts—including facts about what response conceit typically elicits. While one would have expected a pragmatist like Pihlström to calculate the downstream effects of his claims and actions, it is as if he decided his first move and gave no thought whatsoever to how others will respond. Speaking for myself, being on the receiving end of such closed-mindedness only makes me want to redouble my efforts (by writing pieces like this one).

Right now, "[b]itter divides are poisoning our politics" because a person "aligned with a particular heuristic [...] can continue unswervingly down that path undisturbed by information which does not suit it or which might thwart it" (Murray 2019). A cursory glance will reveal that "[c]urrent journalism practices tend to exacerbate tribal us-vs-them thinking by [...] nudging citizens toward not listening to political ideas from the other political camp" (Arendt et al. 2023, 424; emphasis in original). Do we really want to steer academia in that direction too? Conversing with perceived opponents may be unpleasant, but "[i]f you are under the impression that you have discovered the complete, final truth about politics, then it is more likely that you are a dogmatic ideologue than that humanity has actually, in the person of you, finally arrived at that complete truth" (Huemer 2022, 165). Since conviction does not track truth, encountering genuine push-back is vital.

> Human beings have been making mistakes and committing sins as long as there have been human beings. The great catastrophes of history have usually involved much more than that. Typically, there has been an additional and crucial ingredient—some method by which feedback from reality has been prevented, so that a dangerous course of action could be blindly continued to a fatal conclusion. [...] Today [...] the prevailing social vision is dangerously close to sealing itself off from any discordant feedback from reality. (Sowell 1995, 1.)

Cancelling dissenters may be trendy and capable of scaling due to technology (Stjernfelt and Lauritzen 2020), but it remains inimical to the pursuit of truth (Winsberg 2024). It is also inimical to the pursuit of peace. When one isolates oneself in an echo chamber, communication with rival tribes ceases, but sign-exchange does not; it merely shifts from convention-based symbols (e.g., words) to causation-based indices (e.g., bullets). I thus fail to see how further sound-proofing academia's echo chambers will stop "the slide to lunacy" (Pihlström 2023, 24)—or conflicts that may lead to civil war, if we academics don't find a way to backpeddle the polarization.[10]

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[10]This is a shortened and slightly edited version of Champagne (2025). The original Open-Access piece may be downloaded free of charge by clicking this link.

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Live Not by Lies: A Defence of Dissident Scholars

William Brooks

In February 1974, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was arrested by the KGB, stripped of his citizenship, and expelled from the Soviet Union. On the eve of his arrest, he circulated a short essay among Moscow's intellectuals titled: "Live Not by Lies."

The essay was neither a revolutionary manifesto nor an appeal to overthrow the state. Instead, it was a quiet moral summons. Solzhenitsyn urged ordinary citizens to withdraw their consent from falsehood—to refuse to repeat what they knew to be false, even when silence promised their safety. Tyranny, he argued, does not rest solely on brute force; it survives because people are compelled to participate in a lie, often out of fear, convenience, or moral fatigue.

Over half a century later, Solzhenitsyn's ethic of dissent has unexpected relevance in Canada. A small group of Canadian scholars and journalists, contributors to the recent publications "Grave Error" and "Dead Wrong," have challenged prevailing claims about Indigenous residential schools, particularly the assertion that Canada committed "genocide" through a system that caused the deaths of thousands of missing children who were buried in unmarked graves.

The work of these scholars has not been an exercise in denial of or indifference to Indigenous suffering. Rather, it represents an attempt to distinguish verifiable evidence from conjecture, and moral reckoning from myth-making. In doing so, they are paying a price remarkably familiar to anyone who has studied the life of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn.

The narrative they question emerged from the June 2015

Summary Report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). That report asserted that approximately 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children were forcibly removed from their families between the mid-19th century and 1996 and placed in institutions designed to eradicate Indigenous culture. It further contended that some 6,000 children died while enrolled in the residential school system and characterized the entire enterprise as "cultural genocide." These conclusions were received with widespread public sympathy and quickly became foundational to Canada's moral self-understanding.

The genocide narrative gained extraordinary momentum in the spring of 2021 when the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation announced that ground-penetrating radar (GPR) surveys had identified what were described as the remains of 215 children near the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. International media outlets swiftly reported that mass graves had been discovered. Flags were lowered across Canada. Churches were vandalised or burned. Political leaders spoke in tones of absolute certainty about murdered children buried in secret.

Yet, as contributors to "Grave Error" and "Dead Wrong" have documented, these reports went well beyond the available evidence. GPR technology detects soil disturbances—anomalies—not human remains. No bodies were exhumed. No forensic investigations confirmed graves, let alone murders. Even the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc leadership later clarified that the findings were preliminary and unverified. Nevertheless, the correction never matched the emotional ferocity of the original allegation.

Those who questioned the genocide narrative were not met with reasoned rebuttal. Instead, they faced moral denunciation. Those who asked cautious questions were accused of "denialism." Academics who pointed to historical mortality rates, incomplete records, or alternative explanations for burial practices were branded as racists. Politicians across party lines warned against "questioning survivors." Legacy media organizations treated skepticism itself as evidence of bad faith. In several cases, individuals lost professional positions or reputational standing simply for insisting that horrific claims require sound evidence.

It is here that the parallel with Solzhenitsyn becomes instructive. Solzhenitsyn argued that tyranny endures not only through violence but through the insistence of authorities that citizens regularly accept and participate in obvious falsehoods. Fearing isolation more than injustice, people surrender conscience for comfort.

Liberation begins not with protest or revolution, but with personal moral refusal: declining to repeat, endorse, or live by fabrications, thereby depriving lies of their power to survive. Some Canadian scholars have taken precisely that step. They have not denied the possibility that trauma could have been experienced by former students of residential schools. What they criticise is the moral shortcut of regarding contested claims as settled truth.

The reaction to their work reveals something troubling about Canada's current intellectual climate. A society confident in its values should welcome scrutiny, especially on matters of historical gravity. Instead, Canada has drifted toward a culture in which narratives are insulated from challenge by ideological taboos. Once a claim is framed as protecting victims, questioning it becomes an act of aggression. Truth yields to sentiment; evidence bows to consensus.

This does not rise to the level of Soviet era repression. No one is being arrested at dawn or expelled from the country. But cultural repression operates differently in liberal democracies. It functions through professional ostracism, reputational harm, and the quiet knowledge that asking certain questions will cost more than the answers are worth. Solzhenitsyn warned that such climates are sustained not by secret police alone but by ordinary people repeating things they do not fully believe because it feels safer than standing apart.

The irony is that this climate ultimately undermines reconciliation itself. Genuine reconciliation depends on trust, and trust depends on truth. When institutions exaggerate or decline to correct errors, they invite cynicism. When journalists abandon skepticism, they weaken their credibility. When scholars self-censor, they impoverish public understanding. Indigenous communities, too, are ill-served by narratives that cannot withstand scrutiny, for their case will eventually lose credibility under the weight of unanswered questions.

How can we escape a regime of unrestrained fabrications? Solzhenitsyn's answer was modest but demanding. He did not call for grand gestures. He simply urged individuals to refuse participation in falsehood—to speak carefully, verify claims, correct errors, and accept the costs of honesty. Applied today, this means defending the right to question even the most emotionally charged assertions. It means insisting on high standards of evidence before making accusations of genocide. It means separating empathy from epistemology.

Canada does not need fewer conversations about its past; it needs better ones. The scholars and journalists who contributed to "Grave Error" and "Dead Wrong" demonstrated what such conversations require: courage without cruelty, skepticism without cynicism, and compassion anchored in evidence. In an age in which lies spread faster than truth and moral fervour often substitutes for proof, their work stands as a quiet act of resistance.

To live not by lies is not to deny suffering. It is to honour it by refusing to build reconciliation on allegations that cannot bear the weight of facts.

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