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[Home](#) / [News](#) / [Niagara News](#)

NIAGARA NEWS

Professors express concern over Palestine panel hosted by Brock presidential committee

A panel on the Mideast conflict hosted by Brock University president's advisory committee on human rights, equity and decolonization goes against a time-honoured tradition of universities staying neutral in political and social issues, says a group of professors

By **Victoria Nicolaou** Reporter

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A panel on Palestine held at Brock University last month has a group of professors concerned about university neutrality. Julie Jocsak/Torstar file photo

A group of Brock University professors are voicing concern about the neutrality of the post-secondary institution after the university's presidential advisory committee on human rights, equity and decolonization hosted a panel on Palestine last month.

The event, "A Panel on Palestine: Decolonization, International Law, Gender, Media and Solidarity," was held at Brock on Nov. 27.

While similar to panels taking place at institutions around Canada, the United States and Europe, the involvement of the presidential committee at Brock crossed a "line," said the professors.

Professors John Bonnett, Murray Miles and Ron Thomson wrote a letter discussing their concerns to Brock president Lesley Rigg, requesting she dissociate the institution from the event.

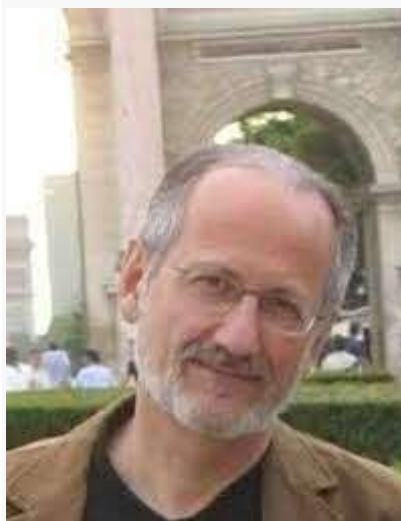
Each professor is part of the Canadian non-profit organization, Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, founded in 1992 to promote academic freedom and institutional neutrality.

Essentially, faculty and students are welcome to voice opinions about social issues and politics — such as a political party — but the institution may not, say the professors.

"We're not contesting the right of faculty to organize an event," said Bonnett, professor in the department of history.

"We are protesting against Rigg's involvement or the involvement of her office in the event planning and in the event organization. That is something that runs counter to a time-honoured tradition in that universities do not have opinions — universities stay neutral."

The panel was described as a discussion with a commitment to decolonization, presenting experts working in a variety of areas to analyze the roots of the current conflict in Gaza, between Israel and Palestinians.



Brock University department of philosophy Prof. Murray Miles.
File photo

“I wouldn’t say it was anti-Israel except that all four of the panelists either suggested or asserted outright that Israel was perpetrating genocide, so a very one-sided panel which is well within the sphere of academic freedom,” said Miles, professor in the department of philosophy.

Bonnett and Miles said there were a number of departments, research institutions and faculty-related groups that could have hosted the event. Having a committee closely associated with the president do so — Miles said the name gives the panel automatic “institutional backing” — was a “bridge too far.”

The president's advisory committee was formed in 2018 in response to the Human Rights Task Force and is tasked with advising the university president on its recommendations.

“If an institution takes a side on a question, that can impinge on the freedom of faculty members who feel differently and would under other circumstances say something else,” said Bonnett, an intellectual and digital historian.

“It is a danger to their academic freedom, there is a danger the university may censure a person who is not speaking in line with the university’s talking points and for the health of higher education, that is just not a good thing to have happen.”

In a statement to The Standard about the concerns raised by its professors, Brock said it’s committed to upholding freedom of expression and respecting the academic freedom of its faculty members.

“Universities are places for learning where respectful, reasoned discussions on current issues is essential. In permitting members of the university community to hold events of this nature, the university does not endorse the views or statements of the speakers at the event,” it said.

When asked if the presidential committee hosting the event might lead people to believe otherwise, Brock did not respond by publication time.

The statement was a different response than what Bonnett and Miles received to their letter to Rigg. It received what they called a cursory email which “brushed off our letter pretending that the issue has been academic freedom” which was not in question.

“She turned a deaf ear to that distinction and replied to a question that we never raised,” said Miles, who has been a professor at Brock for 40 years. “It is very disconcerting that the president wouldn’t enter into a discussion of the real issue.”

He also expressed concern as to what that might mean to students and faculty at the university who may not align with the thoughts of the panel, in this case Jewish members of its community.

“The message that the university’s endorsement of that view sends to Jewish students is I think a chilling one,” said Miles.

Bonnett said there are numerous challenges facing institutions whether it be geopolitical, technological or social and universities need to “work in the way they ought — a place

where ideas are generated and then scholars duke it out to determine what makes sense and what doesn't."

To do that successfully, it cannot have universities taking sides.

"The only argument the university should be making is that its members have a right to academic freedom and it should defend them in the exercise of that academic freedom," said Bonnett.

VN

Victoria Nicolaou

is a reporter with the St. Catharines Standard.