



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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26 June 2019

Penny Bryden, President
Canadian Historical Association
#1912, 130 Albert Street
Ottawa, ON K1P 5G4

Dear Dr Bryden,

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and the merit principle in higher education. (For further information, please see our website at www.safs.ca.)

On 29 May of this year, Adele Perry, now the past president of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA), posted on the CHA's website a statement regarding the work of Ricardo Duchesne, a professor of sociology at the University of New Brunswick (<https://cha-shc.ca/english/what-we-do/what-we-do.html/advocacy/unb-academic-freedom-and-sociology-professor-ricardo-duchesne>).

Much of what Dr Perry says in her statement seems contrary to what academics and academic organizations typically understand academic freedom to protect. Indeed, it is natural to read Dr Perry's statement as supporting recent calls that Dr Duchesne's academic freedom be violated.

Does Dr Perry's statement reflect current CHA views and policy on academic freedom in research and the dissemination of research?

Dr Perry writes that the CHA "distinguish(es) between the important principle of academic freedom and indefensible and potentially dangerous arguments." Academic freedom, though, protects individuals from institutional sanction and censure when they make arguments colleagues and others judge indefensible or dangerous. Academic freedom, that is, enables academics to make whatever arguments they wish without fear of sanction, and it enables others to criticize those arguments. In doing so, it helps deeper understandings of the matter in question to emerge.

Dr Perry cites the Canadian Association of University Teachers' definition of academic freedom as the right "to teach, study, learn, and publish free of orthodoxy or threat of reprisal and discrimination." But she adds that "Academic freedom does not mean that people should

not be held accountable for their arguments or their impact on students, co-workers, and communities.” Academics should *not* be held accountable, given the CAUT definition, if being held accountable means being a target for administrative or institutional reprisal. People should, of course, critically discuss an academic’s views and the quality of their scholarship or the effects of their work on students and others. (Indeed, academic freedom protects people who denounce scholars or express criticism of their work.) Scholars may not, though, not within the spirit of academic freedom, seek to sanction or punish the academic they criticize.

Dr Perry mentions the letter of 23 May signed by colleagues of Dr Duchesne at the University of New Brunswick, a letter that alleges, in the words of the statement, that Dr Duchesne’s “ideas on immigration and multiculturalism have not been published in peer-reviewed or otherwise rigorous publications.” Even if this is true, it is not a criticism Dr Duchesne’s views or scholarship. It is hard to see what of substance follows from this allegation. In any case, academic freedom protects public statements, as the CAUT clearly maintains, and not only contentions made in peer-reviewed publications.

Neither the colleagues’ letter nor Dr Perry’s statement actually engages the views Dr Duchesne expresses in his work or the evidence and arguments he marshals in their support. If Dr Duchesne’s views are false or poorly argued, then it would be more helpful to criticize those views or the arguments he offers in their support.

One effect of Dr Perry’s statement on the CHA website could well be to discourage scholars from investigating sensitive matters in culture and immigration or to encourage them to keep their views to themselves. Having seen the president of a professional organization apparently deny that academics are protected by academic freedom when they speak certain views on these matters, scholars may decide it is not in their best interests to pursue those topics or to broach them in the classroom.

Another effect could be to undermine public trust in university research. Should people come to believe that researchers are required by professional organizations to avoid certain conclusions, they will suspect that researchers are not attempting simply to understand things as those things in fact are.

We respectfully request that you respond to our letter. With your permission, we will post your response along with this letter on our website.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark Mercer", with a stylized, cursive script.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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Cc: Adele Perry, Past President, Canadian Historical Association

Michel Duquet, Executive Director, Canadian Historical Association

Ricardo Duchesne, Social Science (retired), University of New Brunswick