

# *Making McGill Mendacious*

## The Five Year Plan and Recent Attacks on Academic Freedom

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A few of you know me personally, others through my published work, still others only by way of an open letter endorsed by several student associations at McGill that was released on 19 January. Many of course, including the great majority of those ostensibly represented by that letter, do not know me at all. I am writing to my own colleagues and students especially, since I was the immediate object of the letter's attack, but also to everyone of good will in the professoriate and in the wider student body. My primary purpose is to point out that the letter belongs to a broader assault on academic freedom and to probe the possible involvement of some elements of the bureaucracy in that assault. Then to encourage everyone to defend academic freedom by rejecting the 'daily participation in deceit' (Solzhenitsyn) that the new Strategic Plan cultivates.

### *The present duress*

As you may recall, McGill's commitment to academic freedom was challenged just three months ago by another coalition of student associations in the case of an anthropology professor, Philip Salzman. Their letter attempted to see Professor Salzman stripped of emeritus status for holding publicly to a variety of opinions unpopular among them, especially regarding political cultures in the Middle East. It was met with a response in the form of a letter to the *Gazette* from academics in several fields who understood what was at stake – not so much a dispute about anthropology or politics or rhetoric, as a dispute about the freedom to hold and argue contrarian views. For the student associations had demanded 'the overhaul of McGill's statement on academic freedom', an overhaul in which they wished to have a hand, in order to prevent dissent from their own views.

The statement in question declares that 'the scholarly members of the university have the freedom to pursue research and artistic creation and to disseminate their results, without being constrained by political or disciplinary orthodoxies, monetary incentives or punitive measures as a result of their academic pursuits', and that we 'may exercise this freedom in the service of both the university and the wider society.' But the student associations complained that scholars 'have abused their right of free speech and academic freedom to defend acts of rhetorical violence against marginalized communities on campus, shielding racist, sexist, and transphobic speech behind the term "controversy."' Moreover, they objected to attempts to frame the controversy 'as an issue

of Professor Salzman's academic freedom, rather than [of] the right Muslims and People of Colour have to feel safe'. Such a framing, they charged, 'illustrates the ways in which McGill maintains structures that protect and legitimize racist and Islamophobic dialogues.'

To this the authors of the *Gazette* letter, including Professor Salzman, responded with a defence of academic freedom that situates it in its larger context:

We agree that inclusivity and diversity in teaching, research, policy, scholarship, communication and knowledge translation are the core, inalienable principles without which free inquiry, open dialogue and the pursuit of truth cannot be carried out. These principles extend far beyond the mission of the university, and define the very fabric of democracy and freedom our societies have attained through long and difficult struggles for civil rights. We note that academics and public intellectuals, through their courage to dissent and question what is taken for granted, have historically played a crucial role in the advancement of such freedoms and civil rights. But we insist that inclusivity must begin with a commitment to a broad diversity of thought, methods, opinions, theoretical interests and political views, as well as an openness to tolerate dissent, disagreements and debate.

We have observed that allegations of harm, hate, racism and sexism directed at certain groups or individuals are often leveraged to justify silencing, retraction of published works, official sanctions and defamation campaigns. Costly reputational damage is being done to those perceived to dissent from simplistic views of "inclusivity." [...] We encourage students who disagree with views expressed in their professors' publications to engage with these views through scholarly debate. We also support our students' freedom to critique the material they are being taught in class. Handing over the very definition and implementation of academic freedom to student pressure groups, however, violates the mandate of a university and undermines its *raison d'être*.

Their persuasive defence of academic freedom elicited from the Provost a reaffirmation of McGill's academic freedom policy.

Similar scenarios have been playing out at colleges and universities around the western world, from venerable establishments such as Oxford and Cambridge to a host of lesser known institutions. Needless to say, the results are not always the same. Despite some important victories, attempts to overcome traditional commitments to academic freedom persist and indeed proliferate – so much so that Premier Legault last week weighed in on the subject, calling for a more robust defence of academic freedom in Quebec.

Here at McGill, as far as I can tell, the main threat to academic freedom comes from the EDI team that, acting in concert with student associations, is attempting a full court press to bring everyone into line with equity, diversity, and inclusion dogma. Its two unelaborated references to academic freedom notwithstanding, the newest Five Year Plan charts a course of complete dominance for officially approved EDI ideologies, which are incapable of tolerating, never mind affirming, a robust vision of academic freedom.

Routine notices are now distributed reminding us (in the Secretary General's words) of 'our rights and responsibilities with respect to the enjoyment of respectful, safe, and inclusive learning and working environments'. The drive is on to get unit-based affirmations of the bureaucracy's own ideas as to what this means. The last fortnight has seen, for example, the engineering of a politically correct Physics Values Statement, described by one senior colleague as 'so moralistic it could have been written by a priest'. Everyone in the department is expected to adhere to it, even if they don't agree with it. But they had better agree with it, apparently, for it specifies that anyone somehow violating it would not only need to apologize publicly but to make clear that the apology is sincere. Not exactly the stuff of academic freedom, to say nothing of any other freedoms! What, I wonder, would the courts make of an attempt to enforce it?

Ten years ago I wrote 'Making McGill Mediocre: A Response to the Final Report of the Principal's Task Force on Diversity, Excellence and Community Engagement', urging the professoriate to pay attention to the doublespeak by which the growing Social Equity and Diversity Education (SEDE) bureaucracy was directing the university down a dangerous path. A decade on, it seems more appropriate to speak of making McGill mendacious. For the 'long march' through this institution of ours is making short work of truth, denying even some of the most fundamental facts about the human species. These days, in token of our fealty, we are expected to say that what is, is not and that what is not, is.

Nor can we hope for fair and equitable treatment if we refuse to offer this token. For it is no longer just 'diversity' and 'inclusion' and 'excellence' and 'engagement' that are to be redefined in a dog-chasing-tail manner adequately exposed in Making McGill Mediocre. Equity, too, is to be redefined. 'Equity', we are now told, 'is not about sameness of treatment' but about 'equitable outcomes', which 'often require differential treatment'. (Now where have we heard that before?) Equity requires 'recognizing and addressing barriers to opportunities for all to thrive in our University environment.' But 'all' does not mean all. It means only those who affirm the revolution. As for those counter-revolutionaries who will not affirm, they must not suppose that they can take refuge in academic freedom, for academic freedom itself is recognized as a barrier – a barrier to be dismantled as far as possible through the 'safe space' doctrine.

### *A personal illustration*

The open letter directed against me is instructive in this regard, as I hope now to show. It serves the purposes both of those directing the putsch from above and of those working the student association trenches below. Of its particulars it is not necessary to say much more than what I said in my interview with *Le Délit*. I will remark further on a few matters, however, to illustrate for others the way the game is now being played. That is necessary, because more than a few people are quite innocently taken in by the mendacity, while others find themselves in some perplexity.

I pass over the simple tactic of deliberate misrepresentation, which in the present case means distortion of my views on sex and gender. That is too easy to address, since there is no shortage of places to go in search of the truth within that modest sector of my published work that deals with such topics. (See, for example, 'The Politicization of Gender' or 'The Measure of the Beast', both of which explain that at the root of today's problems lie difficulties and failures in heterosexual culture.) I pass over as well allegations about my treatment of those who see things differently than I do. Thanks to the pandemic, there are now well over one hundred hours of recordings demonstrating both the civility that prevails in my classroom and the fact that the issues so precious to my critics get barely a glance; for what I expect of my students is growing familiarity with the classical texts and perennial issues pertinent to a proper education in theology, nothing more and nothing less. What I want to focus on instead is the fact that, lip-service to academic freedom notwithstanding, the letter belongs to a concerted attempt to muffle if not eliminate my voice (and others like it) on matters theological, anthropological, moral and political, and especially on matters of sex and gender.

The letter itself testifies to this. It is not, as the casual reader might suppose, the frustrated product of failed consultations with myself and then with the School and Faculty to which I belong. None were requested before the letter's release. All was prepared quietly, as was the Senior Administration's removal on 3 February 2020 of my Pluralism, Religion and Public Policy website at the behest of certain parties to the open letter, which then began to circulate in secret.

These were not altogether new tactics. Ten years ago, a planned MAUT forum arising from Making McGill Mediocre was quietly cancelled, because (or so I was later told) a student representative claimed to feel unsafe. But quietness is just the calm before the storm. The storm broke as a very noisy protest at the Newman Centre on 2 February 2017, through which a pair of presentations by myself and a well-qualified ethicist from Toronto were rejected, a priori and unheard, by people belonging to some of the same associations that have now endorsed the letter. At that time they made their approach en masse, arriving with airhorns and chants and insults to disrupt the planned proceedings. This too is mentioned in the letter, posited without any trace of embarrassment as evidence of *my* putatively bigoted and discriminatory views.

The cancel culture was now in full swing. What in their language was indeed a safe space – a Catholic house for student life and learning – became the site of an invasion. And my refusal to capitulate to the invaders' demands made the letter more or less inevitable. New alliances were struck with parties in the theology program who shared the protesters' aims and eventually the letter appeared, making demands based on the following claims:

According to the definition of academic freedom of McGill and many other academic institutions, Dr. Farrow has the right to express and publish any views that he may hold. That said, no one's freedoms, academic or otherwise, should encroach on another's. As such,

having Dr. Farrow teach courses that are mandatory for B.Th. students, such as theological ethics, forces students into an environment that denies the dignity of their identity and personhood, thus making the SRS inaccessible and unsafe to the many LGBTQ+ students in the SRS. In other words, just as Dr. Farrow has the right to freedom of speech, students have the right to a safe and inclusive learning environment.

Notice that what is acknowledged under the rubric of academic freedom is merely an *existing definition* that permits the right to express and publish views I may hold. And that this is immediately balanced with what is called ‘the right to a safe and inclusive learning environment’. Just as in the November letter against Professor Salzman, here again the one is set over against the other in dialectical opposition, so that the redefiners and rebalancers can get down to work.

Now, it would be interesting to enquire into the authorship of this passage, which sounds strikingly similar to things I have heard in committee from people who are not students. Indeed, it would be interesting to enquire how much, if anything, has changed tactically since the Newman affair, of which some in the SEDE offices had advance knowledge that they neglected (though liaising with protesters) to pass on to the speakers. But I rehearse all this to make a relatively simple point. We were not then, and we are not now, dealing with a good-faith venture in balancing two genuine rights in a judicious fashion. So what are we dealing with? We are dealing with a zero-sum game between a legitimate right and a manufactured right, by which the legitimate right is to be trumped. For if students have a right to ‘feel safe’, they have a right not to be confronted with ideas that make them ‘feel unsafe’. At which point a university is an entirely pointless institution and we have no need for a professoriate, or for a bureaucracy either.

### *Well-coordinated assaults*

Doubtless there are those who would prefer to dismiss one or both open letters as a tempest in a teapot. Middle East politics? Theology? Aren’t they linked somehow? Best to steer clear of both. Stick to something, well, safer – like physics, say, or chemistry. But nothing *is* safe any more, even in that sense. No surprise, really. For when we seek to make a public space a space safe for feelings, we seek a safe space *from* reason rather than for reason. And from the results of that process no discipline can hope to be exempt.

As everyone knows, STEM is a major objective in the present phase of the revolution. I was in an international Zoom consultation on this topic last term, during which a highly qualified and well placed STEM researcher (an agnostic, if that matters) informed us that in his own field some of the best people were deserting Western universities because it was becoming difficult to get on with their work, or to hire able colleagues qualified to help them get on with their work, or to gain access to the funding necessary for their work. Diversity statements demonstrating EDI fealty had become a prerequisite for all that. Non-conforming candidates were being weeded out by EDI bureaucrats before the

committees could even get started. Too many university resources were being eaten up the burgeoning EDI industry itself. To paraphrase him in Solzhenitsyn's terms, people in the field were getting tired of living by lies and the consequences of lies.

All this is a problem, not just for faculty members, but also for students, both for professional reasons and for personal reasons, since the ideas and assignments, images and linguistic forms, 'values' statements and ethos, etc., that make one student feel safe make another feel unsafe. The aforementioned letter to the *Gazette* concludes with the very pertinent observation that

the climate of censorship that prompts many of our colleagues to fear for their reputation, the integrity of their scholarship and pedagogy, and job security also extends to a great number of students who feel intimidated and alienated. Student unions and associations, like their professional counterparts, do not represent all their members or peers equally well, and may even be found to be exercising the very kind of coercion to which they vociferously object. This, too, is a matter of grave concern.

Needless to say, it is becoming a matter of grave concerns for unit heads as well, not only where recruitment and retention are concerned, but also in teaching assignments. Perhaps it can be stipulated, as the January letter demands, that, if not all courses, then at least required courses be taught by 'safe' professors whose party loyalty is not in question? Where will that lead? Required courses, especially at the upper levels, are normally taught by tenured professors. Is 'safety' to be factored into tenure considerations? Truth be told, it is already being factored in. Yet it is not at all evident, now that (like an over-sensitive COVID test) we are measuring in 'microaggressions' the tiniest traces, living or dead, of offending substances, whether anyone can be deemed fit for classroom duty. So what's a unit head to do?

The whole business begs some rather obvious questions. Who gets to decide what is offensive? The most politically active students, working in league with EDI bureaucrats? And are we confident that concessions in the matter of required courses will pour sufficient oil on troubled waters, that it will all stop there? The same letter calls for removal of certain 'homophobic and transphobic works from the display cases in the Birks lobby'. But surely it is a very small step from trying to exclude books from the lobby to trying to exclude persons from the lobby. We know where this is headed.

I remind the reader, at this juncture, of what is said in the Strategic Plan (Consultation Draft) on whose first anniversary I am writing this. The plan is aimed, it says, at 'transforming our campus'. Indeed. It will achieve that by promoting a culture in which Health & Safety (a.k.a Wellness) is always the first priority, and in which the controlling definitions are themselves controlled by the Wellness bureaucracy. Under the rubric of Student Experience it includes the following steps in the transformation, some of which

I have bolded for your convenience, while eliding for brevity the carefully designed reporting mechanisms that will help to ensure that goals are met.

2. **Promote student wellness**, success, and support, especially for those from underrepresented groups. Measures for progress:

- Track and analyze information on student retention and time to graduation using demographic data. Develop and implement plans to address differential outcomes identified through data analysis.
- **Develop a survey instrument and survey cycle through which to measure student wellness and students' experiences and perspectives on respect and inclusion.** As required, develop plans to address areas of concern identified through this exercise, paying particular attention to student populations who may be especially susceptible to alienation or isolation (e.g., students with disabilities, racialized students, international students).
- **Build capacity of student wellness staff to address the concerns and needs of those who self-identify as members of underrepresented groups and work to enhance the representativeness of this staff.**
- Meet target for increasing student aid set in SAP: 30% of total net tuition revenues.
- **Create and support opportunities for students from underrepresented groups to come together in shared social and networking spaces.**
- Review McGill policies that establish accommodations for students with disabilities and observing holy days to ensure, insofar as possible, equity in academic assessments.
- Increase food options on campus that promote the University's commitment to sustainability while also recognizing the diversity of McGill's student body and the religious dietary observances of some members of the University community.

3. **Raise student awareness about discrimination, oppression, and their effects.** Measures for progress:

- **Develop equity education modules** delivered via multiple formats (e.g., in-person, online, podcasts) drawing, where appropriate, on existing programs in Student Services and Teaching and Learning Services.

4. **Enhance capacity of teaching staff and Student Services to create and maintain respectful, accessible, and inclusive student life and learning settings.** Measures for progress:

- **Develop and deliver modules, in consultation with student groups and associations, on topics such as equity, implicit bias, cultural safety, accessibility and universal design to support teaching and front-line Student Services staff.** Undertake ongoing assessments to ensure the effectiveness of this training.
- **Develop training and supports for teaching staff, particularly those who engage with difficult and sensitive topics in the classroom, on balancing our commitments to freedom of expression, academic freedom, respect and inclusion.** Undertake ongoing assessments to ensure the effectiveness of these measures.

- **Promote the adoption of universal design for learning practices in program structures, course materials, pedagogical approaches, and academic assessments to reduce the demand and need for accommodations and enhance the educational experience of all students.**

5. **Ensure University policies establish prompt, effective, and confidential channels to address EDI concerns and complaints.** Measures for progress:

- **Analyze reporting rates under: Policy on Harassment & Discrimination** Prohibited by Law; and Policy against Sexual Violence.
- **Obtain and analyze feedback on experiences of reporting** from various sources to evaluate perceptions within the campus community of reporting processes and resources, including: Senior Equity & Inclusion Advisor; Office for Sexual Violence Response, Support & Education; Ombudsperson; Dean of Students and Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies; **Student associations**; Special Investigator (Sexual Violence)
- **Raise awareness about relevant University reporting channels and resources.**

It is worth noting, in passing, that there is no parallel call to track experiences of *being* reported, though I for one (having some small experience) volunteered help with that. My point, however, is that the two open letters, which began to appear in draft form about the same time the Consultation Draft itself appeared, map very nicely onto the strategies for which it calls. That suggests that the letters are not only politicized at the student association level, as one might expect them to be, but are politicized already at the level of the university's own bureaucracy, which appears to be inviting and encouraging them, perhaps even coordinating them.

This should be investigated, for it raises – indeed, the material quoted raises even in the abstract – enormous questions about conflict of interest. As I have pointed out to the Administration in writing on more than one occasion, the same offices and officers are responsible for proposing policies in this area, fine-tuning and administering the procedures, and sitting in judgment on the results. Moreover, their stated plan is to work with student associations to achieve the desired ends. Student associations, of course, can do what the bureaucrats cannot. They can go outside established consultative channels and administrative processes through open letters, then step back into the field of play by ‘raising awareness about relevant University reporting channels and resources’ (viz., invite and proliferate formal complaints), just as the January letter so pointedly did. Procedural and extra-procedural means thus seem to be ordained to common ends.

### *A contest of worldviews*

These are murky waters, and too deep for a mere theologian to fathom. But here is something I can fathom. We are engaged in a contest of worldviews, a very serious contest of worldviews, as I think I demonstrated already in Making McGill Mediocre.

Now, such contests are just the sort of thing academic freedom is meant to protect. The advocates of one of these worldviews, however, are trying to remove academic freedom from its role as ring referee, with responsibility to prevent opponents from clutching and grabbing or delivering low blows. They are nudging it into the other worldview's corner as a contestant or opponent.

I illustrate once more from the January letter, though the November letter would do as well. The former quotes me quoting Genesis, as if that alone were proof enough of my bigotry, a bigotry I must not be allowed 'to justify under the guise of free speech'. (Note the ominous slippage from academic freedom to free speech, which betrays the fact that Charter rights are next up on the fight bill.) To its authors, academic freedom is itself an opponent just because it permits the worldview grounded in Genesis a place in the ring.

Otherwise put, it is an opponent because it acknowledges my right to think with Moses and Jesus, something my discipline actually demands. It recognizes that worldviews require linguistic vehicles, and that forcing me to use EDI-certified language is forcing me to forfeit the fight before it has even begun. It permits common-sense arguments and appeals to biological basics, such as the existence of the sexes.

I will agree with my opponents thus far: Academic freedom arose, like the university itself, out of the worldview to which I adhere, and cannot long survive its suppression. But it arose in such a way as to allow such contests as we are engaged in, precisely because on this worldview one ought always to be in search of the truth – in search of public truth, not merely private truth, as I remarked in 'The Right to be Yourself'. On this worldview one is invited to reckon with things that are, as they really are. One therefore need have no fear of error, but only of the lack of courage to confront error. And for recognizing and confronting error, academic freedom is essential in the university.

It is those who don't believe in truth, who have despaired of *logos* and prefer only many arbitrarily chosen *logoi* – who multiply distinctions or categories only to destroy all categorization and hence all argument – who also fear academic freedom. It is those who prefer to find in the university a 'safe space' for feelings, rather than for reason, who would happily sacrifice academic freedom and who really must do so.

Because they do not believe in objective truth, they do not believe in the university either. But is the university now to take their side? Is McGill to join forces with them? It seems it already has. Its bloated EDI bureaucracy *is* bloated only because the Administration has invested in it. The Administration has also faithfully repeated most everything that bureaucracy has told it to say, and done a great deal of what it has told it to do.

This came up in a meeting not long ago about policies and procedures. A colleague, when gently challenged about it, replied that this is just how we do things now. No other

justification needed, apparently. Let the alchemists perform their alchemy, let the transformation take place, let the revolution roll on. There's no contest, no spectacle, nothing to see here, folks.

Really? The demise of academic freedom will be something of a spectacle, I should think. And, after that, what? Truth will not founder, but the search for truth and the courage to speak the truth will. Collegiality will founder, for with truth goes trust. The academy itself, by then a thoroughly mendacious McGill, will likewise founder.

What is required of us, if all that is to be prevented, is just what Solzhenitsyn said was required. We are not each called 'to step out onto the square and shout the truth', but we are each called to a '*personal non-participation in lies*'; to a refusal, at the very least, 'to say what we *do not* think'. That is the key to our liberation, he insisted, for lies, like parasites, 'can only survive when attached to a person'. So let the drift into mendacity stop here. Let it stop with you and me.

\* \* \*

*Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's exhortation, 'Live Not by Lies!', is dated 12 February 1974, the day he was arrested by the Secret Police and deported from Moscow to West Germany. It can be read in just a few minutes, a few minutes far better spent than the time already devoted to reading the present poor epistle. You will find it here:*  
<https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/live-not-by-lies>

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