

Friday » September
28 » 2007

Whither the campus radical?

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If you planned to attend the Conference on Academic Freedom and Research Integrity on Monday at Edmonton's Shaw Convention Centre, take note: It has been cancelled. The reason? Several academics, apparently, did not approve of the subject matter.

The forum was organized by Carl Phillips, a University of Alberta professor with a deeply personal interest in the issue. That's because he studies something many of his colleagues hate: tobacco - specifically, the health benefits of smokers switching to smokeless tobacco. And he's suffering for it.

In June, his faculty voted to cut off his industry research funding, though the university long ago cleared the funding as ethically clean. Shortly after, Prof. Phillips says he received a letter. Since he no longer had funding, his department said, he was being terminated.

"Despite the fact there was no actual evidence the money was running out," he says, noting that the vote was unofficial and probably non-binding without administration's consent. "Not to mention there are all kinds of other sources I could have gotten money from."

Since then, the Harvard PhD says he's been subject to repeated and intrusive audits, been charged by colleagues with ethical violations and has had research projects cancelled for what he says are the flimsiest of excuses. "Even with Holocaust deniers, or when someone says the Taliban are wonderful, even in those cases, they get the sufficient respect that somebody stands up and points out that these people don't know what they're talking about. But nobody's ever said I'm wrong. Nobody has actually challenged the premise of my research. They basically just tried to shut the whole thing down without having to address the substance of it."

So, he and a handful of sympathetic colleagues arranged to air the issue of exactly how much freedom scientists have on campus these days. The conference would feature several professors who had faced similar problems. And it was planned for the Edmonton conference centre, at the same time and just down the hall from an international anti-tobacco conference "so that we could have sessions where we invited people from that conference over to make case for their attempts to suppress academic freedom," Prof. Phillips explains. But organizers of the National Conference on Tobacco or Health, he says, threatened to break their contract with the centre after they caught wind of his plan.

"The conference facility came to me and begged us to let them out of their contract because they were being put in the middle and they were convinced that this obviously much larger, much richer conference was going to pull out if they hosted us." Since not having the anti-tobacco attendees nearby defeated the purpose anyway, Prof. Phillips regretfully obliged.

Stifling tobacco research may not be something that most Canadians would get worked up about. But it is of a piece with a broader suffocation of university research or discussion of things considered politically incorrect, argues Peter Suedfeld, a psychology

professor at the University of British Columbia.

"There's a kind of atmosphere that there are some things you shouldn't say, there are certain things your research shouldn't show and certain topics you shouldn't be doing research on anyway," he says.

Thirty-nine years ago after, sixties "yippie" Jerry Rubin, told students at that same B.C. campus "We have to destroy this university system . . . take it over," academic freedom supporters say that is just what happened: rather than being the bastions of open debate and inquiry once intended, universities have become places where only narrow varieties of debate and inquiry are tolerated.

It's strange, then, that evidence suggests ugly, public battles such as Mr. Phillips' are increasingly rare. That may be because entrenched at Canadian universities today are far more subtle forms of suppression, says John Furedy, professor emeritus at the University of Toronto's psychology department and a co-founder of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship.

You won't read much these days about incidents like that at UBC in 1995, when the president suspended admissions to the graduate programme in political science after disgruntled students accused the department, dominated by white men, of racism and sexism for failing to give appropriate credence to modish post-colonial political theories. Or like that of Allan McKinnon, of B.C.'s University College of the Cariboo, where administrators a year earlier suspended the psychology professor, without pay, ordering him barred from campus, when feminists complained that his discussions about gender differences in cognitive abilities made them "uncomfortable." The absence of such brouhahas today is not an encouraging sign for Prof. Furedy, however, but rather, a symptom of conformity.

"The velvet totalitarian regime that has been imposed on Canadian campuses," he says, "maintains a culture of comfort rather than one of free inquiry, where conflicting ideas are argued about, rather than being censored."

Jim Turk, executive director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, a group that frequently defends academic freedom, sees things differently. "I would argue that academic freedom is alive and well in Canada," he says. Cases like Prof. Phillips' sometimes do occur, he admits, and are troubling. But often, Mr. Turk says, CAUT's freedom cases - he estimates he's handling roughly 100 today - usually concern academics hassled over interpersonal conflicts, such as one current case, that of Dr. Gabrielle Horne, a top Dalhousie University cardiologist who had research privileges curtailed after declining to work with a colleague with friends in higher places.

It is the academic's nature - generally low-key, shunning the spotlight - to avoid at great cost such destructive faculty spats, says J. Philippe Rushton, the University of Western Ontario psychologist, and the man at the centre of one of Canada's most famous academic freedom cases. "Unfortunately in academia, when you're doing research, sometimes you will tend to pursue some lines of inquiry that are a little less popular," says Prof. Rushton. "And if you know that ... your colleagues will line up against you, you start training yourself not to go that way."

Not many professors would willingly experience what Prof. Rushton did. His statistical analysis of IQ differences between blacks, whites and Asians had the premier of Ontario at the time, David Peterson, demanding Western fire him. Several faculty members added push for his dismissal. Dozens of students (only a handful actually in Mr. Rushton's class) hired a lawyer to bring the teacher before a human rights tribunal. Mr. Turk points out that in the end, the researcher's rights prevailed. "Academic freedom protected Rushton's job and his career, and a decade-and-a-half later he's still doing the same research," he says. To simply survive, though, Mr. Rushton was forced to spend many thousands of dollars and roughly five years of fighting for his career.

And persecution alone can smother open-mindedness on campus with as much efficacy as firings, says Evan Coyne Maloney, the New York-based director of a new documentary aimed at examining free speech on campus, *Indoctrinate U*. "At the point in which you make it so expensive for someone to engage in speech that they have to decide, 'Am I going to say what I want to say and run the risks of spending months in a

judiciary process at my school?', that has a chilling effect," he says. "People are simply not going to say things that they want to say, because they don't want to deal with what the school is going to do to them."

Earlier this year the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship was alarmed when Vivek Goel, vice president and provost at University of Toronto, wrote in a memo to staff "some forms of expression fall short of the legal limits of hate speech, but nonetheless are harmful to identifiable members of our community. The university recognizes that harmful speech is a destructive force on our campuses and, though not prohibited by law, is repugnant to the administration."

Questionable speech, he added, would be "monitored closely." Even without explicit threat of consequence, the result, Prof. Suedfeld says, is that professors feel an implicit chill over any scholarly work that might rub one of any number of on-campus identity groups the wrong way. "They avoid doing anything that risks getting them in trouble," he says.

And that's often how many members of the public prefer it, too. Take Shiraz Dossa, the St. Francis Xavier political science professor who attended Iran's infamous Holocaust-denial conference last December. He complained that his academic freedom had been violated when his university president, following a firestorm of media and public outrage, called Prof. Dossa's participation in the anti-Semitic conference "deeply abhorrent." Though he reportedly faced no formal disciplinary action, few researchers would readily endure what Prof. Dossa did by gracing any such conference again - presumably just the way many of us would like it.

After Prof. Phillips' experience, not many epidemiologists see a future in studying tobacco. Given the minefield that is today's university campus, Mr. Maloney believes many bright graduates steer clear of academia altogether, creating a teaching environment where those who think the same way predominate. "We're a generation into this now," he says. "It's the kind of thing that's not going to regain balance anytime soon."

It is unclear how many university administrators even see a situation that needs righting at all. Most claim to defend academic freedom, but few seem prepared to go what is often a difficult distance. Concordia University's submissiveness in the face of protest was highlighted by the cancellation on two separate occasions of speeches by Israeli politicians. A few years ago, the University of Quebec at Montreal showed its disloyalty to the spirit of open-mindedness when its board declared the school's staunch opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Dalhousie this year cancelled a speech by American white nationalist, Jared Taylor, in the face of public pressure. Meanwhile, UBC, Capilano College, and Carleton University all have policies that deny official club status to anti-abortion groups.

Prof. Rushton refers to his student days, where he recalls attending regular, boisterous on-campus forums, thrashing out the thorniest of issues. "We had debates about South Africa, the ending of Apartheid, the Vietnam War, the genetics of language ... and there were speakers from different points of view. But the university made a point of insisting there should be decorum," he says. "There were protestors, but there was still debate. Much more than today."

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