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### ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND ITS LIMITS: WHEN FACULTY BEHAVE BADLY

*Glen Williams*

The several arguments for defending free expression in universities are well known to readers of this newsletter. Many, perhaps most, of these defences are drawn from the work of John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth century's most illustrious liberal thinker, and are regularly deployed here to check administrative overreach against nonconformist faculty members.

But there is another side that merits consideration - what are the responsibilities or obligations of individual faculty members in respect to nurturing academic freedom within their institutions? Mill considered freedom of expression as a social benefit with obligations for its promotion falling equally on the shoulders of individuals, their governors, and society at large. For example, in *On Liberty* he writes "the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing

what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner."

Mill's view was the received gospel among scholars in Canada's liberal universities when my academic career began more than half a century ago. As undergraduates we were taught, mostly without prejudice, all the predominant approaches in our fields along with their historical antecedents. A commonly held notion was that the open and pluralist system of higher education in western countries produced flexible and creative problem-solvers who could more readily adapt to changing external circumstances than those in the soviet bloc who were indoctrinated in the rigid dogmatic truths of "scientific socialism." Academic freedom was the bedrock on which pluralist liberal universities stood.

My discipline is political science. When enrolled as a student in Ed Broadbent's third year modern political thought

course in late 1967, I first bumped into the idea that faculty members might have social responsibilities and obligations in exercising their academic freedom.

During the course, it was whispered among his students that Broadbent would soon be running for parliament as the NDP candidate in Oshawa. However, my recollection is that he never discussed his candidacy or the NDP election platform in class except perhaps to confirm that he would be running. Everyone, including Professor Broadbent, operated on the unspoken understanding that his ongoing partisan activism was a private activity which was not fully compatible with his teaching role as a university instructor. I remember being deeply impressed by his professionalism and restraint in the circumstances and by the fair and balanced way he treated with equal enthusiasm the socialist, liberal, and conservative thinkers he had placed on our syllabus.

Broadbent's clearly demarcated line of division between his public teaching duties in the classroom and his private pursuit of partisan politics outside the university was unremarkable for his time. And, I employed it as my point of reference through my own full time teaching career at Carleton University only rarely encountering colleagues who would openly challenge it.

Carleton's collective agreement with its faculty union defines academic freedom as "freedom in carrying out teaching and in discussing their subject." The plain sense wording of this clause makes it clear that the freedom of professors "to discuss" is circumscribed by its direct relevance to the subject matter they have been assigned to teach - that which is openly published in the written form of a course outline/contract for students and departmental colleagues. Of course, academic freedom goes beyond classroom teaching; it also includes communication in an academic setting of the professional, scholarly research findings of a professor.

During my nearly four decades of teaching, it was always my understanding that a professor's personal opinions on world events, religious affiliation, voting preferences, NHL hockey teams, laundry soaps etc. etc. were not covered by academic freedom because the protections offered by academic freedom were never designed to extend far outside one's field(s) of professional expertise. (In my own case, and in keeping with the liberal view that university students should be given the opportunity to consider "every variety of opinion," I always promised in the first lecture of my undergraduate courses that by the end of the course they would absolutely not know my personal opinion of the several different approaches to the subject that would be reviewed in the weeks to follow.)

Let's be clear - freedom of speech is not the same as academic freedom. Academics can claim the same rights to freedom of speech as any other private citizen when they

speak outside of the classroom on political or social issues. But one ceases to be a "private" citizen when one trades on their institutional affiliation to add legitimacy/special weight to the expression of their private political opinions - i.e. opinions not flowing directly from their professional, scholarly research agenda - either inside or outside the classroom. And so, academic freedom in a professional setting and a private citizen's right to freedom of speech (and politick) should never be conflated. Nor should it be possible for academics to shelter their non-academic politicking by claiming to enjoy a special set of rights absolutely not available to employees of other corporate or state enterprises in society, namely academic freedom.

But increasingly academic freedom and freedom of speech have been conflated in academic life. This conflation has been a feature of the woke Cultural Revolution that swept through campuses in the decades after the Cold War.

Woke thinking shattered the value consensus that supported the norms and institutional conventions surrounding academic freedom. In fact, wokeism is hostile to the very existence of a liberal university in a liberal democratic polity. Its views have little or nothing in common with the defences of free expression that flow from the liberalism of Locke, Madison and John Stuart Mill. Wokism is instead grounded in the authoritarianism of Rousseau, who invited the educated in society to "force" the masses "to be free" and the totalitarianism of Lenin who prescribed dictatorship by an enlightened, revolutionary "vanguard party" since the working class by itself could never transcend trade union reformism.

The woke turned the liberal university's normative foundations upside down. Rejected as oppressive was the liberal view of the university as a community of individual scholars where merit is determined solely by scholarly accomplishments. Instead, the woke imagined the university as a battleground for group power struggles - organized primarily around biological markers such as sex, skin colour, and ethnocultural origin - between the oppressed/marginalized and the "privileged" who are their historic oppressors. The woke history of the west is an account of the continuing theft by European colonialists and their descendents of the land and possessions of non-European 'victims' of colonization.

To summarize, wokeism does not understand academic freedom in the same manner that liberals might because wokesters have little or no regard for the natural rights of individuals. While they might appropriate the language surrounding academic freedom, they employ it to further their political agenda through weaponizing it to protect their own speech while denying its protection to those whose speech they find offensive.

The ugly anti-Jewish turmoil on Canadian campuses that followed in the wake of Hamas' brutal October 7, 2023

terror attack on Israel is, unfortunately, rich in illustrations of how wokeism has been assailing the conventional norms and institutions that underpin those of us who seek to defend traditional liberal academic freedom. Jews on campuses have faced the double whammy of guilt by association with the woke-demonized “settler-colonial” state of Israel along with an accompanying resurgence of the many garden-varieties of age-old anti-semitism.

On such example - Natalie Knight, Langara College - is already familiar to readers of this Newsletter from Issue 97, February 2024. Knight, an English instructor, gave an off-campus speech in which she praised Hamas’ terror attack on Israeli civilians as an “amazing, brilliant offensive” and then, following the lifting of her brief suspension by the College, participated in a march on Langara campus to encourage like-minded supporters to “know that you can have the right to speak out, and you can face repression, and still win...They made it seem like I did something wrong,” Knight opined.” (*Langara Voice*)

By her own account, Knight believed she was entitled to shelter her activism and political incitement to others on campus under the academic freedom umbrella that protects scholarly research and teaching. In deciding to dismiss Knight, the College referenced its duty to “support a safe, respectful, and inclusive learning and working environment” - in short, it sought to protect academic freedom on its campus from an incendiary and divisive activist attack.

It was not just pro-Hamas individuals like Knight behaving badly; groups of professors, claiming the shelter of academic freedom, also banded together to lend their on-campus megaphone to broadcast pro-Hamas talking points. In April 2024, a “Palestine Solidarity Committee,” created by York University’s Politics Department, submitted its recommendations after being mandated to “develop departmental policy/protocol to define and address anti-Palestinian, Islamophobic, and anti-Arab racism to ensure the protection of students and faculty to speak about, teach about, and support Palestine freely and without fear of reprisal.”

In its nine page report, the Committee declared that on-campus supporters of Israel were racists - guilty of “anti-Palestinian racism.” “Zionism is a settler colonial project and ethno-religious ideology in service of a system of Western imperialism that upholds global white supremacy,” the report proclaimed. And, disagreement with their opinions would be racist because “anti-Palestinian racism also includes censoring those standing in solidarity with Palestine and Palestinians.”

No surprise, their direct attack on freedom of expression in the academy is grounded in the language of academic freedom. But academic freedom is placed in the context of “upholding and strengthening York University’s commit-

ment to decolonization, equity, diversity and inclusion,” and we are later told that “academic freedom does not require neutrality.” Academic freedom is portrayed as overlapping activist political speech - “the Department of Politics is resolute in its support of all members – faculty, staff and students included – who speak up about the current war in Palestine and Israel and who bring their expertise and experience to bear on public conversations.”

Even long-established professional associations for the promotion of scholarly research have fallen under the sway of the woke at the cost of free expression and academic freedom in the academy. Take, for example, the Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) which was founded in the early twentieth century to further the professional, academic study of politics in Canada. Its Articles of Incorporation contain an unambiguous declaration of institutional neutrality obviously designed to guard against the possibility of the organization being hijacked at any point in its future by political activists or partisans – “The Association as such, will not assume a position upon any question of public policy not directly related to the discipline of political science or commit its members to any position thereupon.”

Even so, that’s exactly what happened at its Learned Society meetings at McGill University in June 2024. The CPSA Executive moved its sessions off campus in solidarity with the pro-Hamas campers then “occupying” McGill property. “The violence committed by Israel’s government and military against innocent Palestinians must stop,” declared an Executive authored email which went on to glorify the protesters “courageously speaking truth to power” and incorporated weblinks to contribute financially to their cause.

Stripping a professional scholarly organization of the neutrality needed to serve all its members in equal measure through the promotion of free and open expression, the CPSA Executive abused their fiduciary trust and unmasked themselves as crude political activists. Letters protesting their activist email were left unanswered or, sometimes, a short reply would be generated containing the dismissive, patronizing phrase “while I don’t propose to engage with the substance of your remarks.” Academic freedom cannot survive where scholarly institutions lose their neutrality and determine that academics who dissent from woke orthodoxy must be “forced to be free.” Academic freedom requires an environment where persuasion trumps coercion. Authoritarian minds, convinced of their own moral superiority, default to coercion.

*Glen Williams, is an Emeritus Professor of Political Science at Carleton University. Williams is the author of Blood Must Tell: Debating Race and Identity in the Canadian House of Commons, 1880-1925 and Not For Export: The International Competitiveness of Canadian Manufacturing, 1879-1994 (Third Edition).*