

Blaming the victims of coercion

When Golda Meir was Prime Minister of Israel, she was asked to place a curfew on women, to help end a series of rapes. Meir replied by stating, “But it is the men who are attacking the women. If there is to be a curfew, let the men stay at home.”

This logic is lost on the University of Alberta, which insists on blaming the victims for the illegal behaviour of those who silence unpopular speech on campus. Last month [Wednesday February 24], the U of A rejected the appeal of a small campus club which cannot afford to pay a \$17,500 “security fee.” The students have therefore been forced to cancel their plan to set up an anti-abortion display on campus.

When UAlberta Pro-Life set up a display last year, then-president Indira Samarasekera stated publicly that all students have the right to express their views peacefully, regardless of popularity. The University recognized that silencing others by disrupting and shutting down their events does not qualify as a legitimate form of expression. Even a kindergarten student understands the difference between making her own painting, and placing a sheet of paper on top of the painting of the girl sitting next to her.

Ignoring the University’s stated commitment to uphold free speech on campus, a mob organized on Facebook openly advertised its plans to disrupt and silence the pro-lifers’ peaceful event in 2015. The Code of Student Behaviour expressly prohibits the obstruction of university activities and functions, and also prohibits inciting or encouraging the violation of the Code. Although U of

A students publicly incited the obstruction of the pro-lifers’ function, campus security neither contacted nor warned the self-identified Code violators. Later, at the event itself, campus security stood by and watched while the unruly mob hid the display from view and shouted down any civilized debate and discussion that might have taken place. Their event having been rendered almost meaningless, the pro-life students then filed formal complaints about the Code violations, including witness statements and dozens of photographs and Facebook posts. A year later, the University still refuses to investigate or prosecute any of the students who brazenly violated the Code.

The students are left to wonder what benefits they would get from paying \$17,500 for “security.”

But even if the U of A did discipline students who violate the Code, why should the victims of illegal behaviour have to pay money for the misconduct of law-breakers?

Golda Meir understood the difference between those who engage in misconduct and those who are victimized by it. In contrast, the U of A deliberately refuses to uphold the rule of law on campus, and then holds pro-life students responsible for paying for “security concerns” that the University itself creates by not prosecuting those who violate the Code.

The U of A receives hundreds of millions of tax dollars each year, plus tens of millions in tuition fees from

students. The money which the U of A legitimately spends on campus security should be used to uphold the rule of law on campus, including the basic freedom of all students to express their opinions (popular or not) in a peaceful manner. Providing a forum for the expression and debate of ideas is, after all, the very purpose of the university.

Residents of a neighbourhood would not agree to pay extra money for policing each time that police are called in to solve – or prevent – the commission of a crime. Nor would municipal politicians dare to blame the victim by imposing additional taxes on those who happen to live in high-crime areas of the city.

The U of A is correct in asserting that, in 2016, a pro-life display is more likely to engender ideological opposition than, say, the annual Campus Pride Parade. But universities should not be in the business of demanding protection money. The University’s extortion of “security fees” from students who wish only to express their opinions on campus sends a clear and frightening message: “If you disagree with another’s opinion, don’t engage in debate, but form a mob and threaten to silence ideas you dislike. The resulting security fee will then force your opponents to cancel their event.”

Calgary lawyer John Carpay is president of the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms (JCCF.ca), which acts for University of Alberta students in defence of their free expression rights.