



Sheltering law students from outrage not a step forward

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At various times in history, and in various places, the authorities have sought to crush anti-slavery speech, anti-Communist speech, and a multitude of political and religious doctrines deemed to be heretical.

Censorship always stems from the same impulse: the authorities are firmly convinced they have the absolute truth, and are therefore entitled to suppress what they deem to be false.

A recent display of this censorship impulse occurred at the University of Alberta Law Faculty. In November 2016, a number of law students claimed to have been traumatized by an article in their students' newspaper, *Canons of Construction*. Titled "Desperate Drunk Girl Finds Self at Hal-LAW-ween," the satirical story describes a drunk law student "who has been single a little too long" making advances on other law students at a party, then bumping her head and falling down. The column concludes: "The very next day, she quit drinking, put on a chastity belt, dropped out of law school and enrolled at a yoga academy. She finally learned that she don't need no man to make her happy, and that praising the virtues of fair-trade, organic and environmentally sustainable armpit wax to yuppie moms in her trainee yoga instructor classes is way better than catching gonorrhoea for the sixth time."

Some students were outraged, claiming that this article perpetuates "dangerous" stereotypes about

women, promotes "rape culture" and misogyny, creates "an unsafe environment for all women in law school," degrades women as a "marginalized group," and perpetuates sexual assault.

How a fictional story about one promiscuous drunk woman can constitute "overt sexism," "misogyny", or "stereotyping" has not been explained.

Should a fictional story about a drunk, promiscuous gay black male be banned as an attack on blacks, or as an attack on men, or as an attack on gays? Or as an attack on all three groups? The very notion of "stereotyping" casts a dangerous chill on healthy discussion of social, moral and cultural issues. To prohibit "stereotyping" is to destroy our freedom to think, speak and write about any person — real or fictitious — who might qualify for membership in a so-called victim group, i.e., female, gay, aboriginal, black, etc.

Canons of Construction apologized to those who felt offended. The author explained that "satire is a vehicle for dialogue; for people to take a deep, hard look, internally and externally, at some of the nastier things that permeate around us." The editors then published the complaints they received (with permission from the writers) in the December issue of *Canons of Construction*.

A good newspaper will publish criticisms and rebuttals.

Unfortunately, this U of A story did not end with *Canons of Construction* publishing the rebuttals and criticisms of outraged law students.

Instead, the Law Faculty administration chose to intervene by hosting a "Town Hall" meeting to soothe the aggrieved and comfort the offended. Dean Paul Paton delivered a speech in support of "equity," "diversity," and "inclusivity." While the satire's author has not faced formal disciplinary proceedings, the dean's message is very clear: you are not truly free to express your opinions, unless they are the ideologically "correct" ones.

Sadly, the dean is not helping his students prepare for the practice of law, which requires debating your opponents, thinking through arguments, and presenting better ideas. Lawyers can feel upset by opposing counsel's arguments, but there is no way to silence opposing counsel, nor should there be.

Dean Paton treats law students as fragile snowflakes, who will melt away when confronted by the heat of an idea they object to. This is no way to prepare students for the practice of law — let alone for adulthood and good citizenship.

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