

## Poster controversy: Censorship would deny voters information

Letter to the Editor

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Holly Taylor, the Coordinator of the Saint Mary's University Women's Centre, says that the Saint Mary's University Students' Association (SMUSA) should not have allowed an offensive campaign poster to be displayed on campus ("Joe Dirty for prez," 28 February 2007). Leah Bilodeau, the Vice-President Finance and Operations of SMUSA, tells us that SMUSA is reviewing its authorization process for campaign posters in the hope that offensive posters won't make it onto campus walls in the future ("Poster controversy: SMUSA responds," 21 March 2007).

In their letters, Taylor and Bilodeau explain why they were offended by SMUSA-hopeful Joe Doherty's poster, but neither explains why SMUSA should have refused to authorize it. The SOC 448.0 class ("Feminism: School thyself," 14 March) hints at an argument why SMUSA should have kept it off the walls, as do both Pam Stewart ("Holly Taylor right to address poster," 14 March) and Jennifer Crawford ("*The Journal* and sexism," 14 March): the presence of the poster on the walls might perpetuate false and pernicious attitudes toward women.

Should SMUSA have refused to authorize the poster? Should it have removed the poster once it was up? Should SMUSA now have in place standards that would prevent similar posters from appearing on the walls? There are two good reasons for answering no to each of these questions.

One is that fairness requires that all candidates be able to get out their message, whatever that message is and however they see fit to get it out. A censor who rules against a candidate's message or means denies that candidate a fair run at the office she seeks.

Another is that voters cannot make an informed choice unless they have whatever information they deem relevant to their decision. Students at Saint Mary's would like to know just what a candidate's attitudes towards women are. A censor who rejects a poster as sexist denies voters information important to them.

Taylor, Bilodeau, and Crawford would respond to an offensive and, perhaps, dangerous campaign poster with rules and regulations and censorship. It is sad that they look instinctively to authority and force to solve a problem—a problem that was solved, in the end, by the good sense of students who saw the poster and knew for whom not to vote. I commend all the letter writers I've mentioned for their analysis and criticism of the poster, though I would very much like that the instincts of those who recommend suppression and increased oversight were different.

Still, even people who don't mind using rules, regulations, censorship, authority, and force in service of a good end might not want to be unfair to political candidates or to deny

voters information they need. So I hope Taylor, Bilodeau, and Crawford will agree with me both that it was best that the poster remained on the walls and that it would be a mistake for SMUSA to tighten its authorization procedures.