

Why professors and students at Saint Mary's should be very, very worried

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Saint Mary's University President Colin Dodds says that he and the Saint Mary's administration "have a role to oversee and guide student leaders." The quotation is from Dr Dodds's response to the child-rape chant heard during SMU orientation last week.

Dr Dodds also intends to convene a President's Council "mandated to provide recommendations to foster a cultural change that prevents sexual violence, inspires respectful behaviour and a safe learning environment within the Saint Mary's community." That quotation is from the press release announcing that Wayne MacKay, a former Executive Director of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission, will lead the council.

As a result of the President's Council, we at Saint Mary's can expect to see more restrictions on the peaceful expression of opinion or emotion on campus, as well as restrictions on association and on whom we might bring to campus for lectures and discussions. We might also find ourselves waving goodbye to at least a little of our privacy.

The restrictions to come will certainly apply to students and to casual professors, those who teach outside the protection of the Saint Mary's University Faculty Association. They might end up applying even to tenured professors; it depends on the strength of the union's commitment to academic freedom.

Well, is that such a bad thing? If restrictions have the effect of preventing sexual violence, then why not welcome them? Indeed, if they have the effect simply of preventing members of the campus community from fouling the air with child-rape chants, shouldn't we be willing to accept them?

The restrictions I'm anticipating will indeed be a bad thing, but only for those of us who cherish universities as places of liberal education.

Liberal education, when it succeeds, creates a person willing and able to turn her beliefs into objects, objects of examination and evaluation. Not just her beliefs, but also her desires and even her emotions.

To render the subjective objective, and to look at it dispassionately, is not something easy for people to do. Our human tendency is toward belief as comfort and justification. We take our subjective states as central to our identity, and the protection of our identity as central to our well being and dignity. (I take the image of making the subjective objective from the philosopher William Bartley III.)

An educated person is keen to put at risk even central parts of her identity. That's what it is to want to think for oneself.

An institution in which people are encouraged and helped to detach themselves from their beliefs and commitments would have to be place of open discussion and criticism. It would have

to be a place where people are subject to no pressures except those of evidence and argument, but to those pressures they would have to be subjected intensely and regularly. For that reason, a place of liberal education would have to honour freedom of expression and the other civil liberties.

People at an institution of liberal education would still have beliefs, emotions, and commitments, of course, though among them would be commitments to dispassionate analysis and to trying to see things as they are. Members of the community would be committed not only to each member's believing truly, but to each member's believing for his or her own reasons.

Restrictions and the intimidations of punishment undercut the ability of an institution to be a place of education, for restrictions and intimidation sever our beliefs from whatever good reasons we might have for holding them.

If Saint Mary's is to be an institution of education, it must remain a place where we are free to chant celebrations of child rape (and to criticise those who would). Only that way can the absence of our chanting such celebrations be the result of our free choice not to. (On the other hand, it's anyone's guess why students returning from re-education camps won't be chanting them.)

But does Saint Mary's aspire to be a place of education? There is plenty of evidence that it doesn't, including President Dodds's mandating sensitivity training and convening a council to foster a safe learning environment at Saint Mary's.

What, then, is the mission of Saint Mary's, if it isn't liberal education?

Its mission would seem to be to help prepare an élite to take its place in the worlds of business, industry, and law. That requires helping students to acquire knowledge and skills, of course, but it doesn't require helping them to become independent thinkers. Indeed, it can't, for properly prepared graduates must have a sense of their identity as members of an élite, and a commitment to that identity.

They need, that is, as well as knowledge and skills, socialization or enculturation, if not indoctrination, into the right attitudes. They need to acquire the habits of feeling that will both help them in their careers and (this is the noble side) help them to promote social justice.

Now, if that élite is to include people from groups that have been historically oppressed or marginalized in Canada, the thinking here runs, these people need to be safe from what they might perceive as attacks on their identity or dignity, or they will leave the institution.

The impulse behind the idea of a safe university, then, is to bring students into attitudes both useful in their careers and approved socially.

Educating individuals or training an élite? With Dr Dodds's announcement, Saint Mary's has stated its choice.