

## 261. Panel discussion cancelled at McMaster University

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Halifax *Chronicle Herald*, 17 April 2018 (under the title “Unravelling of campus free-speech panel an ominous sign”)

<http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1562849-opinion-unravelling-of-campus-free-speech-panel-an-ominous-sign>

Mark Mercer  
Department of Philosophy  
Saint Mary’s University  
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3  
[mark.mercer@smu.ca](mailto:mark.mercer@smu.ca)

Freedom of expression on campus is a research interest of mine, so I was delighted to accept an invitation by a student group to come to McMaster University to participate in a panel discussion on the matter. At the discussion, I would have explained why liberal education requires that professors and students alike be free to follow whatever arguments they wish to wherever those arguments go.

Sadly, just as I was about to call a cab to take me to the Halifax airport, I received an email message informing me that the event, scheduled for Thursday 29 March, had been cancelled.

The discussion had been organized by Overcome the Gap (OTG), a student group at McMaster, the group that had brought Jordan Peterson to campus around this time last year. (Peterson was drowned out by disruptive protesters, and McMaster University president Patrick Deane originally indicated that the hoodlums were exercising their own free expression rights. Deane later changed his mind.)

There seem to be three different reasons why OTG decided to cancel it. None is flattering to the group. Each reason makes reference to another invited panelist, Rick Mehta.

Dr Mehta is the psychology professor at Acadia University, in Wolfville, NS, who has become the target of much vitriol lately for having expressed his views on the residential schools, the psychology of people who reject their birth gender, differences in taste or temperament between the sexes, rape culture, and other topics.

The first reason is that OTG had heard from people who think Rick Mehta should not be given the privilege of a platform. These people threatened to disrupt the discussion. Security being unable to guarantee the safety of people or property, OTG cancelled the event.

The second reason is that with the withdrawal of the third panelist, McMaster history professor Jaeyoon Song, OTG worried that the panel had become one-sided in favour of freedom of expression on campus. For the sake of the group’s reputation, OTG cancelled rather than sponsor an unbalanced event.

Dr Song withdrew from the panel about thirty-six hours before the discussion was to take place. Apparently, OTG had not told him earlier that Dr Mehta was to be on the panel. Dr Song

withdrew in protest over comments Dr Mehta had made supporting the freedom of expression of an alleged racist.

The third reason is that OTG saw the justice of the no-platform argument and disinvented Dr Mehta all by themselves in the only way open to them, by calling the whole thing off.

Dr Mehta, by the way, was going to be in Hamilton not to discuss residential schools or rape culture, but freedom of expression on campus. His critics frequently claim that he is unqualified to pronounce on many of the other things he likes to talk about. I don't think he is, but either way, he's certainly qualified to speak about freedom of expression on campus, having shown himself in many venues to be a keen observer of events and opinions relevant to the topic.

So it wasn't that Dr Mehta needed to be denied a platform because he was about to talk pernicious nonsense regarding things outside his field. Rather, it was because, despite what he was in town to talk about, he had at other times in other venues talked nonsense (if he had).

Or, perhaps, taking a page from the book of the apartheid-era South African police, Dr Mehta needed to be denied a platform from which to advocate for freedom of expression on campus, for if his words were to move people to try to relax restrictions, soon enough we'd all be swimming in pernicious ideas about residential schools, etc. (In the apartheid era, not only were certain topics off limits, but so also was asking why those topics were off limits.)

At the event, I was going to outline what I find to be the three most popular current arguments in favour of administrative oversight and control of campus discussion and expression, and explain where I think each goes wrong. I would then note that those who make these arguments would not be convinced by my criticisms.

I would finish by outlining the differences in the two views of the university behind the two positions on campus freedoms. Those who want a free campus value independence of thought and choosing for one's own reasons, while those who want oversight and control think instead of the university as preparing an elite to assume its place in the professions, business, society, and politics.

Dr Mehta, for his part, would have described his research on the value of view-point diversity in intellectual endeavour. Viewpoint diversity is the old idea that we learn to think for ourselves through experiencing conflict between different theories.

By cancelling the event, OTG did a great disservice to professors, students, and other members of the McMaster community, because the discussion would have been an opportunity for people to learn and, even, for the remaining panelists to discover their mistakes.

Cancelling it for the first reason, fear of disruption, has dealt a severe blow to the integrity of McMaster as an institution of education. Would-be disruptive protesters have now been encouraged to issue more threats and to engage in more thuggish behaviour. Their tactic succeeded again, just as it had a year ago at Dr Peterson's talk. And this time they didn't even have to get out their noisemakers.

The second reason also does no credit to OTG. If no third panelist could be found at short notice, a two-person panel would have been perfectly fine. Dr Mehta and I proposed to discuss objections to freedom of expression on campus and, anyway, we were ready to respond to questions and criticism during the long discussion period.

While cancelling the event might have salvaged OTG's reputation in the eyes of some McMaster people, it certainly harmed it in the eyes of many others. Among the former are the thuggish no-platformers, among the latter are those who value inquiry and discussion.

The third reason for cancelling is that the organizers themselves support the idea of no-platforming people with whom they disagree (and about matters that aren't at hand). The extent

to which this reason was effective in the decision, to that extent the barbarians are no longer merely at the gates but are within the city itself, in charge of its clubs and societies, busily destroying intellectual life.