

## **Tom Flanagan had no reason to apologize**

Ottawa *Citizen*, Friday 1 March 2013

<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/opinion/op-ed/Flanagan+reason+apologize/8035348/story.html>

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<http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/871538-academic-freedom-is-needed-now-more-than-ever>

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The current furor over remarks made by University of Calgary professor Tom Flanagan reminds us again how very important academic freedom is to the life of our nation. Unfortunately, it also reminds us how shallow the commitment to it is of even our universities.

Flanagan, in response to a question during a presentation at the University of Lethbridge Wednesday evening, restated his doubt that those who view child pornography should go to prison. For this, he was dismissed as a commentator on the CBC program *Power and Politics*, he was dumped by Alberta's Wild Rose party, and the president of the University of Calgary, speaking in her role as president, asserted that "Child pornography is not a victimless crime" (not something Flanagan denied, by the way).

Strangely, Flanagan later apologized "to all who were offended by my statement." "Strangely," because he had nothing to apologize for. He was doing what a professor should be doing—raising and commenting on a matter of public concern—and for that he deserves to be commended.

In Canada, people who are convicted of viewing child pornography often go to jail. It is entirely in the public interest, then, to ask whether they should go to jail. It is entirely in the public interest, moreover, for people with opinions on the matter to state those opinions. How else will we inquire into the matter? If anything is a matter of public importance requiring investigation and debate, matters of punishment and incarceration are.

The true job of a professor is to raise questions and to foster inquiry into them. I say the "true" job, because in many universities the professor's actual job is becoming more and more that of the instructor who simply leads her charges to competence in some established field. Science instructors train young people to be scientists so that they may take their place in an industrial laboratory, business instructors train young people to take their place in the world of business. A true professor, on the other hand, liberates her students from authority and convention so that they can investigate the world for themselves and come to their own conclusions about it.

To ask whether people convicted of viewing child pornography should be sent to jail is to raise a fundamental question that requires us to investigate what, precisely, is the harm caused by viewing child pornography, whether it is a harm that merits punishment, whether punishing it diminishes us in some way, and whether prison rather than some other penalty serves the goals

of punishment and deterrence. A true professor teaches her charges to respond to these questions with evidence and calm deliberation, and that is not an easy thing to do.

Those who think Professor Flanagan mistaken in suspecting that viewing child pornography shouldn't be punished with jail time should thank him for raising the question, for now they have an excellent opportunity to explain why jail is appropriate. So far as I can tell, though, they seem more interested in attacking Flanagan rather than in answering him. "I'm disgusted," no matter how strongly stated, is not an argument.

Academic freedom is, in part, the freedom to raise offensive questions and to state disgusting answers without thereby putting one's career or livelihood in jeopardy. Those who enjoy academic freedom, then, can enquire boldly without having to be personally courageous. But why is it so important to Canadian society that some people, at least, enjoy this freedom?

Well, people on the CBC had better not raise certain issues or float certain ideas, or they will lose their venue. If you work at a bank or at a clothing store, even (sadly) if you teach at a high school, you put your job at risk if you even raise certain questions. Without academic freedom, then, there would be few if any venues for the free and fearless investigations many of us wish to make, and on which the prosperity and nobility of a society depends.

Those upset that Flanagan would express his leanings toward an unpopular position prefer a nation of enforced conformity in views and values, whether the views are true or false or the values sound or unsound.

If I had my way, educators at all levels would enjoy academic freedom. It would be written into their contracts, just as it is for university professors. Journalists would enjoy it, too. Even bank tellers (why not?). But the tide is turning the other way. The task right now, unfortunately, isn't to extend to others the freedom to raise questions and to offer opinions without putting their jobs at risk. The task, rather, is to protect academic freedom at home.

The University of Calgary does not have a good reputation for freedom of expression on campus. The U of C has, in the past, had anti-abortion demonstrators removed and has punished students who criticized teachers. Now, instead of defending Flanagan's prerogative to raise questions and offer opinions, as it should, the U of C is giving Flanagan the cold shoulder. Even worse, it is, through its president, expressing an opinion on the matter Flanagan raised. That's bad, because the university is not expressing that opinion as a move in a debate. Quite the contrary. It is expressing an opinion in order to close debate.