

316. No More Loud Discussions of Private Matters, the Cabal Decrees

Newsletter of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

Number 101, April 2025, pp. 6 – 8

<https://safs.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/nl101-1.pdf>

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The historian and novelist Robert Conquest (1917 – 2015) is best known for his books on Stalin and the Soviet Union, but he’s also known, perhaps erroneously, for three humorous but instructive laws of politics. The second (in some tellings, the third) is: The simplest way to explain the behavior of an organization’s bureaucracy is to assume that the bureaucracy is controlled by a cabal of the organization’s enemies.

The law applies to institutions that either have a publicly available charter or mission statement or have been so successful historically that a man on the street could say what their purpose is supposed to be. The goal of the cabal is to turn the institution away from its charter, mission or purpose. Some political scientists and others have criticized the law on the grounds that not always is the controlling cabal secret in either its ends or its means.

In universities, it’s certainly no secret either what the cabal intends or what it is doing to empty the institution of its academic values, ways and mission. The goal at the institutional level is to create a system of sinecures for particular identity groups. Curation would replace critical inquiry in such a university, as I seek to explain in “[Herodotus over Thucydides](#).” The larger goal is to reproduce this system at broader levels in the surrounding society.

The means used by those seeking to reach these ends include brutality—and, indeed, the means centrally include intimidation by threat of brutality. Those administrators who are part of the cabal, drawn both from the university’s professoriate and its human resources personnel, who might be deans, vice-presidents, union executives, heads of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) offices or members of the academic senate, come up with plans and policies, create systems of oversight and adjudication, and signal their willingness to attack anyone who steps out of line. The best way to signal this willingness is simply to attack someone, whether he’s stepped out of line or not.

The university with which I am associated, Saint Mary’s University, in Halifax, has recently reorganized and consolidated its EDI offices. We have a Director of Diversity, Inclusion and Wellness, an Accessibility Lead, a Respectful Workplace Advisor, a Sexual Violence Advisor, and a couple of ethnicity-coded student advisors; soon we will also have an EDI Training Specialist. The consolidation consists in connecting these people and offices more closely to our Department of People and Culture, a (non-academic) department led by an associate vice-president of the university. None of the people in the EDI mix are academics, although that doesn’t matter, given that the academics who serve as deans and as union executives have agitated for and installed all this. (Years ago, Len Finlay wondered whether academics who become administrators simply put

their commitment to academic values on hold or were ripe for administration because they'd never had any such commitment.)

I should mention that Saint Mary's University is broke. We have no money. The situation is dire enough that the university is dropping most per-course instructors and will cancel courses in which enrolment is low, even upper-level courses necessary for honours programs. Some academic departments have had their complement of permanent members reduced. Philosophy, History and other academic departments will offer fewer courses than they used to and pack more students into the ones remaining. Course options for majors and honours students are minimal.

Well, sacrifices have to be made in the interest of long-term viability. But no sacrifices at the expense of EDI, of course; not even at the expense of the growth of EDI.

I must also note that, as with most Canadian and other universities, Saint Mary's is neither overtly nor systemically racist, sexist, anti-indigenous or transphobic. Of course, even were a university infected by an oppressive colonialist ideology that soured its research, teaching and atmosphere, the solution would lie in stimulating a commitment to academic values and to the institution's academic mission, not in bringing in EDI values and goals. In any case, there is nothing here for EDI to fix.

Yet, in order to fix what, from an academic perspective, is not broken, the Associate Vice-President, People and Culture, has just announced the "[Respectful & Inclusive Workplace Policy](#)" and the "[University Code of Conduct](#)," two new policies that build on the "[Saint Mary's University Declaration of Respect](#)," a document concocted after the 2013 Saint Mary's rape-chant incident, a document that administrators have a history of abusing. (We also have a [snitch line](#).)

To say that the Policy and the Code (and their forebear, the Declaration) are bad solutions to non-existent problems is not, of course, to say that no one ever acts badly at Saint Mary's. I'm sure there's as much incivility and rudeness here as elsewhere, even when it is not in the service of colonialism or white supremacy. (Happily, the Policy intends to crack down on "loudly having private discussions in public spaces" (p. 2), while the Code aims to end, finally, the practice of interrupting people when they're speaking (p. 3).)

Bad behaviour, though, is to be addressed through discussion, or at least that's how it's to be addressed at an academic university. Those given to insulting others can be taken aside and talked with. ("Bob, if you're going to insult your colleagues, at least try to do it with some wit.") Through discussion, a miscreant might well come to see how a change in his attitudes and behaviour would promote goals that he himself values. The problem with using rules and penalties is that they create only a veneer of collegiality; they can do nothing to foster sincere good will or warm relations. Our Declaration, Policy and Code are, in fact, instruments of oversight and control that discourage true respect.

Our culture at Saint Mary's is an anti-academic one, as these documents reveal. All three are about respect, but none concerns respect as an academic value. What is it that a person must respect in interpersonal relations, if he or she is to engage rewardingly in the academic endeavour? And what is it that these documents mandate people at Saint Mary's to respect?

Academics come together in community at universities in order to think hard about difficult matters. Each values his own ability to think and value for himself, and each values the ability of others to think and value for themselves. That is, no academic wants to think or value under any pressures save those of evidence and argument, and each is concerned not to apply pressures on others apart from those of evidence and argument. Academics want to create and contemplate understandings of how things are, and they don't want those understandings to result from their hopes or fears. People are terribly sensitive to the fear of being excluded and to the hope of being included. Institutions like academic freedom serve to minimize those fears so that one's understandings might respond only to evidence and argument.

The concept of respect in the three documents, though, is not the concept of respect for the ability and willingness of members of the university community to think and value for themselves. It is, rather, the concept of respect for feelings and identities. It is feelings and identities that the documents demand we take into account in our interpersonal relationships. We are to treat others with compassion and empathy (though failure to do so certainly won't be treated with compassion). We are to "acknowledge and [be] sensitive to others' feelings and experiences" (Code, p. 3).

To treat people with respect for their ability and desire to think and value for themselves is to engage them in critical discussion and to be open, honest and candid with them. In a critical discussion, sincerity can easily hurt feelings. As academics, we are committed to taking aspects of our identity, values we treasure, and holding them apart from ourselves so that others, strangers, might investigate and criticize them along with us. We ask others we don't even know to show us where we are wrong about things that matter deeply to us. We learn to live with psychic scars because there is no other way to conduct oneself as an academic.

Thus, to treat someone with respect for their ability and desire to think and value for themselves is always potentially to treat them disrespectfully—disrespectfully, that is, according to the concept of respect that we find in the Declaration, Policy and Code. To treat people with respect for their feelings or identity is to be prepared to avoid certain topics or positions, to honour the taboos they honour, to defer to what they tell you is their experience, to dissimulate, and to exclude them from one's serious academic projects.

The Declaration of Respect, the Respectful & Inclusive Workplace Policy, and the University Code of Conduct seek to remove what little academic oxygen is currently present in our atmosphere and to transform Saint Mary's University into a post-academic institution. And these documents clearly mean to do so through brutality and threats of brutality. Maybe our duty as academics in this situation is to hope the university goes financially bankrupt before it destroys its soul.

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