

“The Threat of Woke-ism to Academic Freedom”

Professor's Talk Was Drummed Into Silence at the University of Lethbridge

By [Prof. Anthony J. Hall](#)

Global Research, February 09, 2023

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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*Concerted efforts have been made to remove **Prof. Frances Widdowson** from her faculty position at the Mount Royal University in Calgary. One view of her status is that Prof. Widdowson has been “fired” even though her tenured status has not been properly terminated according to widely-recognized university codes of conduct.*

Seeking to make way for its institution-wide program of “indigenization,” the administration of Mount Royal University sought to push aside her prominently-published critique of what she refers to as the “Aboriginal Rights Industry.” Her politically incorrect analysis extends to the legacy of Indian residential schools, federally-funded and church-run institutions that dominated Indian education in Canada until the late 1960s.

Building from this base, the prolific scholar of contemporary controversy in the academy has been widening her analytic approach to encompass the subject of “wokism,” the pedagogy presently in the ascendancy at most universities. The term, “woke” was first coined to identify the misguided extremism of many professors and their students.

In this time of Trudeau and Biden, the woke tribe is pushing forward deformed versions of their left-leaning attitudes with the support of many governments, Wall Street and numerous giant corporations. Among the goals of wokism seems to be the construction of radically transformed models of society that will undermine traditional families, national sovereignty, parliamentary institutions, religious freedom, and individual human rights including free speech, bodily autonomy and the property rights of middle class people.

There are some aspects of Prof. Widdowson's commentary on the so-called Aboriginal Rights Industry and on the legacy of Indian residential schools that I find to be overstated or, occasionally, just plain wrong. Over two decades of academic work in the antecedents of today's “Indigenous Studies” departments, I developed interpretations that sometimes run against the grain of Prof. Widdowson's analytic framework.

That being said, however, Prof. Widdowson's thoughtful reading of a wide array of pertinent

primary and secondary sources leads the prolific scholar to many conclusions that deserve consideration as the basis for deeper reflections as well as possible revisions in interpretation. Especially in these times when overemphatic zealotry so dominates public discourse, it is especially important that teachers at all levels do their utmost in their pedagogy to highlight different opinions, perspectives and voices.

I took this approach when I was in the saddle as Associate Professor of Native American Studies at the University of Lethbridge. In this capacity I sometimes invited my intellectual foe, Prof. Tom Flanagan of the University of Calgary, to address my students. Prof. Flanagan's students include former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, current Alberta Premier Danielle Smith, and Rebel News firebrand Ezra Levant. Where Prof. Flanagan's critique of a wide constitutional interpretation of "Aboriginal and Treaty Rights" came from the right-wing of politics, Prof. Widdowson's revisionism is more inspired by left-leaning thinkers.

Mob Rule at Alberta's University of Lethbridge?

See [this](#).

Prof. Widdowson was invited by Philosophy Prof. Paul Viminiz to make a presentation at the University of Lethbridge on Feb. 1. This invitation was at first embraced by the University's administration. Its President, Dr. Mike Mahon, then changed the University's position two days before the talk was scheduled to take place. Dr. Mahon was subjected to concerted pressure by some students, faculty members and Native organizations that objected to allowing space for a politically incorrect interpretation of the boarding schools' legacies.

The reversal caught the attention of the Alberta Minister of Advanced Education, Demetrios Nicolaidis, who responded to Dr. Mahon's effort at cancellation by announcing the following, "I believe it is important for our universities and colleges to foster a strong culture of free speech and diverse viewpoints, even when those viewpoints are deemed controversial, or even offensive, barring speech intended to incite hatred or violence of course."

Former Premier Rachel Notley, still the NDP Leader in Alberta. then responded. Notley will be facing off against current Premier Danielle Smith in a hotly contested provincial election in May. Notley replied to Nicolaidis as follows: "The idea of having someone come and speak at the university, to a student body that consists of many Indigenous students, about how they somehow benefited from residential schools is deeply troubling to me."

See [this](#).

Rather than submit to the dictates of the powerful interests that had decided to cancel her talk, Prof. Widdowson decided she would attend the U of L as originally planned. She would share her presentation in the public space of the U of L's Atrium. Her host, Prof. Viminiz, concurred with this decision and helped facilitate the presenter's attendance.

The University's fiddling with the on-off switch on this public presentation helped arouse polarized responses in the community. Several hundred community members attended. Students largely from the Education Faculty, The Liberal Education Faculty, and the Indigenous Studies Department played an important role in drumming and chanting to prevent Prof. Widdowson from being heard.

Another component of the attendees had come specifically to hear what the controversial

professor had to say. Then there were those who were drawn by curiosity. They wanted to listen to the presenter and her detractors to better understand what all the fuss was about.

After returning home from the event a Lethbridge colleague of mine sent me the letter of Prof. Mark Mercer, President of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship. This letter, condemning Dr. Mahon for his failure to respect and defend academic freedom, is published below.

Clearly Dr. Mahon was not interested in dealing with such a critique. Instead he congratulated those who drowned out the words of their nemesis with loud drumming, chants and also by amplifying a discordant electric guitar playing heavy metal. After the event the outgoing U of L President justified his cancellation of Prof. Widdowson's talk by indicating "It is clear that the harm associated with this talk is an impediment to meaningful reconciliation." In the words of the *Toronto Sun* editorialist, Lorne Gunther, Dr. Mahon "totally and cravenly reversed himself." He gave into the "pitchforks-and-torches brigade" as he "cowered behind political correctness and victimhood bafflegab."

See [this](#).

After the event Dr. Mahon praised the event as "a reflection of the values of the University of Lethbridge." He added, "I would like to express my sincere appreciation to our community members for conducting themselves in such a peaceful and powerful manner."

See [this](#).

Many of those I talked to in attendance profoundly disagreed that the militant drumming down of legitimate public discourse was a peaceful strategy and a honourable display of university values. Many remarked on the irony of hearing the phrase, "no room for hate" emanating from such emotionally-charged zealots intent on drowning out the basis for any public discourse at all.

In spite of it all Prof. Widdowson moved from the Atrium space into a long wide hallway where she did manage some short exchanges with a few interested parties who had come to the U of L to hear her talk on how Wokism is destroying academic freedom.

After about 90 minutes of chaotic activity the head of the University's security division announced from a podium that the situation had become so dangerous that the event would have to be shut down. He did so after securing an agreement from Prof. Widdowson that she would leave the building via an underground passageway while accompanied by a squad of protective security guards.

Open Response from the President of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

"Cancelling Dr Widdowson's talk is an outrage that will stain the University of Lethbridge for years."

31 January 2023
Michael J. Mahon PhD
President and Vice-Chancellor
The University of Lethbridge
4401 University Drive

Lethbridge, AB T1L 3M4

Dear President Mahon,

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and the merit principle in higher education.

Your statement on Monday 26 January 2023, "Statement from the President - - Controversial Guest Speaker Appearance," violated the important principle of institutional neutrality by describing Frances Widdowson's view as "in conflict with a number of values held by the University" and by (falsely) suggesting that Dr. Widdowson "seeks to minimize the significant and detrimental impact of Canada's residential schools system." A university performs its social mission by enabling competing interpretations and views to be heard and debated. When the university itself states a position on a matter of controversy, it renders itself inhospitable to robust and candid debate. The university must remain neutral so that scholars, students and all other interested parties can discuss matters freely and openly in their search for truth.

Nonetheless, in your 26 January statement, you properly and firmly rejected calls to cancel Dr Widdowson's talk, "How 'Wokeism' Threatens Academic Freedom," a talk organized by University of Lethbridge philosophy professor Paul Viminiz. In that statement, you affirmed the "commitment" of the University of Lethbridge "to protect free inquiry and scholarship [and] facilitate access to scholarly resources." You added the "Guest speakers ... are afforded the same commitment to freedom of expression as members of our campus community."

Those who object to Dr Widdowson's views may voice their disagreement, "but they may not obstruct or interfere with others' freedom of expression. Debate or deliberation on campus may not be suppressed because the ideas put forward are thought by some, or even most, to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or misguided."

Despite the violation of the principle of institutional neutrality in the 26 January statement, you and the University of Lethbridge would have acted well and commendably were that the end of the matter. In ensuring that Dr. Widdowson may speak on campus and explaining the University of Lethbridge's commitment to academic values and its academic mission, you would have performed your duties as a university president well.

Unfortunately, on 30 January, you updated your statement by retracting it and cancelling Dr. Widdowson's scheduled talk.

In doing so, you have expressed disdain for discussion and debate and violated Dr. Viminiz's right, as a professor at the University of Lethbridge, to fair use of university resources. (Both Dr Widdowson and Dr Viminiz are on the Board of Directors of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship. They have recused themselves from SAFS' involvement in this case.)

Nothing that you mention in your 30 January statement justifies your action. That some members of the University of Lethbridge community were upset that Dr Widdowson was

scheduled to speak should have been held by you to be irrelevant to the university's mission to promote inquiry and discussion. You noted in your 26 January statement that the university may restrict "expression that violates the law, defames an individual, or constitutes a threat or harassment. Dr Widdowson's talk would have done none of these and in your 30 January statement you give no reason for thinking it would.

As a professor at Lethbridge, Dr Viminitz may invite speakers to campus and organize public talks featuring guests of the university. Cancelling Dr Widdowson's talk is tantamount to violating Dr. Viminitz's academic freedom. It is also to deny the many members of the university community who wished to hear Dr. Widdowson speak on campus the opportunity to do so.

You mention "harm associated with this talk," harm independent of defamation, threat or harassment. In doing so you stretch the concept of harm so thin and wide that just about anything is covered by it. Anyone who wishes to shut down a talk in the future need only mention harm and you will be unable to find a principle to which to allow the talk to proceed.

That, as you claim, "this talk is an impediment to meaningful reconciliation" is not only false but dangerous, for it militates against openness and candor in discussions of reconciliation.

Reconciliation, which, admirable as it may be, is not an academic value, must respect freedom of expression and academic freedom if it is to be mutual and lasting.

Cancelling Dr Widdowson's talk is an outrage that will stain the University of Lethbridge for years.

We respectfully request that you respond to our letter. With your permission, we will post your response along with this letter on our website.

Sincerely,

Mark Mercer, PhD.

President, Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS)

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