PETITIONS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM: THE CASE OF DR. SHIRAZ DOSSA

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Suppose that you and others at your university are upset and embarrassed by a colleague's bad behaviour. Why not sign a petition expressing that embarrassment?

"We, the undersigned faculty members at St. Francis Xavier University, while adamantly defending the academic freedom of our colleague, Dr. Shiraz Dossa, to espouse any views that he pleases, are nevertheless profoundly embarrassed by his participation in the Holocaust-denial conference held in Tehran, a gathering whose premise has been condemned by the governments of Canada, Germany, France and Britain among others, as well as by the Vatican."

This particular petition can be criticised on three grounds. 1) There's little evidence to justify the description "Holocaust-denial conference," though indeed some Holocaust deniers were present at it. 2) The petition is about Dr. Dossa's attending the conference, not about anything he said there, and yet it contains the phrase "to espouse any views that he pleases." One might hear in this phrase the suggestion that Dr. Dossa himself denies that the Holocaust occurred, which is false. 3) The petition gives no reason for thinking Dr. Dossa should not have attended the conference nor does it give any justification for anyone's being upset or embarrassed that he did, except to say that the premise of the gathering has been condemned by various governments and the Vatican. If we are ever right to be embarrassed by what a colleague does, we are right to be embarrassed by a colleague's indifference to justification or, worse, by her blandly citing authority (poor authority, in this case).

I mention these grounds of criticism merely to set them aside. I want, rather, to explain why academics should never sign a petition to express their displeasure or embarrassment at what a person says or does. Of course we are free to write petitions and to participate in petition drives, whichever ones we like. Had an official at St. FX stepped in to halt the drive, he would have violated the academic freedom of those involved in the petition. The petition drive itself, however distasteful it was, did not violate Shiraz Dossa's academic freedom. *And yet signing the petition is entirely contrary to respect for academic freedom or, rather, to respect for the ideals of the university on which academic freedom rests.*

Ideally, a university is a place at which people pursue inquiry seeking to determine how things are. It is also a place at which people communicate to others, as clearly and directly as they can, their thoughts about how things are. And it's a place at which people teach others, as effectively as they can, how to

inquire so as to determine how things are. Inquiry that aims at uncovering how things are is inquiry guided by and answerable to evidence and argument, and answerable to evidence and argument alone. A central purpose of academic freedom, then, is to remove or, at least, to limit whatever pressures apart from evidence and argument might come to bear on inquiry, communication, and teaching.

The point of a petition drive, though, is precisely to put social or political pressure on people. Even if, unlike the one at St. FX, a petition contains evidence or argument, it is still an instrument of social or political pressure, for whatever work it does as a petition it does in virtue of the number or the importance of the people who signed it. The work it does, of course, is to create a climate of intimidation and fear. Having witnessed the petition drive against Dr. Dossa, professors or students at St. FX wondering whether to participate in this or that conference might now think twice--not about whether participating in it will serve inquiry, communication, or teaching, but whether participating in it will bring scorn and hostility to them personally.

A person committed to minimizing those pressures on inquiry, communication, or teaching that are not pressures of evidence or argument would not sign a petition criticising a person for using this or that venue to express his or her views. She would understand that such a petition is a political instrument the point of which is to cow her colleagues and students to toe some preferred line.

Colleagues of Dr. Dossa upset or embarrassed because of his participation in the Tehran conference may certainly state their anger or embarrassment--and, as academics, they should be concerned to explain, and to explain well, why Dr. Dossa should not have gone to Tehran. *So, why should Dr. Dossa not have gone to Tehran? The petition itself does not say, but from what the president of St. Francis Xavier has written and from newspaper commentary, I find two lines of argument.* The first is that by attending a conference featuring Holocaust deniers, Dr. Dossa has potentially legitimized Holocaust-denial. The second is that Dr. Dossa's attendance hurt St. FX's reputation.

That neither line is at all well developed by those who offer it is a scandal; that this scandal isn't recognized as such is a second scandal. (I'm reminded of those who criticised Saint Mary's University philosophy professor Peter March for posting the Danish cartoons; they also cared neither to present arguments nor to respond to criticism with arguments.)

Clearly, though, neither line of argument why Dr. Dossa should not have gone to Tehran, however it is to be developed, has to do with what Dr. Dossa said at the conference, either during his presentation or at any other time. Neither line of argument has to do with the quality of Dr. Dossa's research or the quality of his discussion of either his research or the research of others. Whatever part of St. FX's reputation is in the mind of Dr. Dossa's critics, it isn't St. FX's reputation

as a place of research, dissemination of research, or teaching, for that reputation can be sullied only by poor research, ineffective communication, or bad teaching.

This fact is disturbing, for it reveals that the many critics of Dr. Dossa's trip, and over one hundred members of the faculty at St. FX signed the petition, hold to a different ideal of the university than the one I sketched above. On this different ideal, the university is to serve one or another social good directly, and not only indirectly by being the best place of research, dissemination, and teaching that it can be. On this ideal, professors and students are to ask not only whether their learning is good as learning, but whether it fits well with one or another preferred value. We are right to apply to colleagues and students pressures apart from the pressures of evidence and argument, then, those who signed the petition must say, for doing so is an effective way of pursuing those values.

This other ideal of the university, and the sense of the mission and purpose of the university that it generates, is, I think, behind many of the assaults on academic freedom we have recently seen in Canada and elsewhere. The thought is that there are things more important than research and teaching and the life of the mind, and, so, when they might interfere with our pursuit of these things, research, teaching, and the life of the mind are to be suppressed or abandoned. Now one question here is whether protest marches, candlelight vigils, petitions, boycotts and the rest do in fact serve whatever political or social ends they are enlisted to serve. It's difficult to see that they do, at least if their ends are other than merely to proclaim to the world that one and one's crowd stand on the side of justice and light. But a more central question is what these things more important than research, teaching, and the life of the mind are. They cannot be the good liberal values of honesty, tolerance, reason, respect for persons as individuals, and democracy, for research, teaching, and the life of the mind cannot threaten these values--on the contrary.

The optimistic view of the petition drive at St. Francis Xavier is that the professors who signed the petition expressing embarrassment over Dr. Dossa's trip to Tehran didn't really know what they were doing. The ugliness of Holocaust-denial so clouded their minds that they failed to see that to sign the petition was to express contempt for academic freedom. The pessimistic view is that many of them knew exactly what they were doing. They saw in the petition an opportunity to align themselves publicly with values they wish their university to embody, values, I've argued, that must be at odds with the ideal of the university as a place where people live the life of the mind.

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